

National Regional, Rural, Remote and Very Remote Community Legal Network

<https://clcs.org.au/4rs-network/>



Committee Secretariat
Legislative Scrutiny Committee
Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory
GPO Box 3721
Darwin NT 0801

By email: LSC@nt.gov.au

22 May 2026

Dear Chair and Committee Members,

Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026

1. This submission by the National Regional, Rural, Remote and Very Remote Community Legal Network ('**4Rs Network**') endorses the concerns about the Bill raised by non-profit community based legal services in the NT outlined in the release by the North Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Service on 15 May 2026 (at **Attachment 1**).
2. These concerns have been elaborated by different participating organisations and are consistent with concerns expressed by numerous Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations and networks in the NT and nationally.
3. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and Australia's Children's Commissioners do not support the Bill. Neither does the National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, Sue-Anne Hunter (referred to further below).
4. The Prime Minister is quoted in the media today indicating that the Commonwealth will work constructively with the NT:

"But they [the NT Government] also need to work respectfully with the local community, with the family and need to make sure they involve First Nations people as well in this local community to work through these issues in the most constructive way possible"

5. The *Every Child Matters Bill* was [introduced by the NT Government in the Legislative Assembly on 13 May 2026](#) and was referred to the Scrutiny Committee on the same day.
6. Kumanjayi Little Baby was abducted in Alice Springs on 25 April 2026 after being put to bed at night. Kumanjayi was found deceased on 30 April 2026 following a major police and community search.
7. The introduction of this Bill at a time when family, community, and indeed the nation, are grieving is extremely regrettable.
8. Additionally, the Bill is seriously premature.
9. The Bill was not preceded by community consultation, and no consultation plan has been announced.
10. The Bill was not co-designed with Aboriginal people even though the overwhelming impact of the legislation, if passed, will relate to Aboriginal children, families and communities.
11. Aboriginal people in the regions, and in remote and very remote communities have not been consulted, nor have their organisations and services, or the service sectors concerned. All are likely to be impacted, including disproportionately impacted.
12. Seven business days have been allowed for submissions to the Security Committee. The closing date today is before [the scheduled public briefing](#) about the Bill Department Officers on 27 May 2026. That briefing is being provided at the Litchfield Room, Level 3, Parliament House, for 30 minutes. There is no indication of other public briefings at other locations. Directly following on 27 May, in the Litchfield Room, the Attorney-General's Department is providing 30-minute public briefing on the Attorney-General Legislation Amendment (Boards, Committees and Statutory Offices) Bill 2026.
13. The incommensurate nature of Government's process relating to the *Every Child Matters Bill* and what is at stake for Aboriginal children in the NT and the NT, is mirrored by the dissonance in the Government providing same public briefing arrangements for the *Every Child Matters Bill* and the *Boards Bill*.

14. The *Every Child Matters Bill* is not accompanied by impact assessments.

There is no:

- Cultural impact assessment
- Health and well-being assessment
- Domestic, family and sexual violence impact assessment
- Geographic impact assessment including in remote and very remote Aboriginal communities
- Human rights impact assessment
- Access to justice impact assessment
- Financial impact assessment

15. The Government argues that the Bill is better for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, their protection, safety and wellbeing. However, the Government's proposals are not accompanied by rigorous problem analysis, data, research or by a preponderance of expert opinion. The Bill would reduce consideration of cultural connections for Aboriginal children by asserting a false dichotomy between cultural connections and safety.

16. Bill would increase costs in multiple ways, including access to justice and legal representation. In this and many other ways, the Bill appears to be financially unimplementable.

17. The illogicality of the Bill, and refusal of expert First Nations and other input, puts the Bill on a path to cause moral injury to Departmental Child Protection workers. This means the Bill is likely to further jeopardise Departmental Child Protection operations and capabilities especially in regions and areas with greatest workforce gaps.

18. We respectfully endorse the following recommendations [in the submission to the Committee by National Commissioner Hunter](#):

“Recommendation 1: The Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026 not be passed.

Recommendation 2: The Northern Territory Government undertake genuine consultation with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations on any future legislative reform.

Recommendation 3: Any future reform retain the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) as a binding legislative requirement, applied to the standard of active efforts.

Recommendation 4: The current threshold for removal — that a child may be removed only where there is an unacceptable risk of harm — be retained.

Recommendation 5: Reunification timeframes not be reduced in the absence of clear evidence that the Department of Children and Families has the capacity to safely reunify children within shorter timeframes.

Recommendation 6: Family Responsibility Agreements and Family Responsibility Orders not be introduced.”

About the 4Rs Network

The National Regional, Rural, Remote and Very Remote Community Legal Network (**‘4Rs Network’**) promotes access to justice in regional, rural, remote and very remote (**‘4Rs’**) areas. The Network’s vision of **Justice where we live. Every community. Every person. Everywhere** - reflects that solutions must be present to ensure equality, wellbeing and rights wherever people are in Australia.

The Network consists of over 200 individuals directly reflecting about 95 community-based legal assistance services, networks and peaks in all jurisdictions including the NT. Most of the participating services provide legal and related assistance in or to 4Rs areas.

The backdrop in many 4Rs areas, and particularly the NT, includes:

- Vastly inadequate resources for access to legal assistance, especially culturally safe legal assistance for First Nations people.
- Major gaps in safety nets across many areas include food security, housing, energy security, poverty, health, housing, education and transport.
- High legal needs with insufficient access to preventative support and early intervention across many domains including safety from domestic and family violence, safety from risks of abuse and neglect, and disproportionate levels of criminal justice contact.
- Duty bearers directly or indirectly claiming that lack of access to essential services and supports in 4Rs areas is due to 4Rs location - especially remote and very remote location – rather than to their responses to the need for safety nets in many of these locations.

ATTACHMENT 1

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15 May, 2026

Serious concerns raised about proposed NT child removal reforms

Proposed laws that increase government intervention into family life do not address underlying issues placing families under pressure and should be scrapped, a coalition of Northern Territory legal services warns.

They are also replications of models that other jurisdictions have stepped away from because they didn't work, pointing to a poorly designed, under-resourced, set-up-to-fail Bill that will only serve to increase harm and waste taxpayer dollars.

North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA), the North Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Services (NAAFLS), Central Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Service (CAAFLU), Legal Aid NT (LANT), Top End Women's Legal Service (TEWLS), Katherine Women's Information and Legal Service (KWILS), Central Australian Women's Legal Service (CAWLS) and the Darwin Community Legal Centre (DCLS) say **ALL Territory families should be worried** about the proposed laws and the effects they will have on them at home, school and in society.

The Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026 was tabled in parliament this week and represents one of the most substantial and dangerous changes to the NT's child protection system.

The Bill proposes major reforms including:

- new "family responsibility agreements" and "family responsibility orders";
- broader powers for the Department of Children and Families to intervene earlier in family life;
- tighter timeframes for reunification after child removal;
- stronger emphasis on permanency and long-term care orders;
- increased links between child protection, housing, policing and w

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The services say they are particularly concerned that the proposed laws make it easier for the Government to intervene in family life.

Under the Bill, involvement may occur where there are concerns about a child's "wellbeing", anti-social behaviour, school attendance or family circumstances that may contribute to adverse outcomes.

The coalition says these concepts are broad and risk drawing vulnerable families into coercive systems before meaningful support has been provided.

Quote attributable to NAAJA CEO, Ben Grimes:

"All children deserve safety and stability. Our concern is that these laws expand the state's intervention powers without ensuring families can actually access the supports they need to safely care for their children. These reforms will affect all Territory families. When it becomes easier for the Government to step into family life without clear concerns about immediate harm, every parent should understand how significant these changes are."

Housing concerns

DCLS said stable housing is fundamental to child safety and reunification.

Quote attributable to DCLS CEO, Rachel Bowker:

"Families are unable to reunify with their children if there isn't safe and stable housing available. We are particularly concerned about how these reforms will impact families already experiencing the pressures of years'-long housing wait lists, a tight rental market and rising cost of living pressures. The Bill also links child protection with public housing rules, which could have serious consequences for families already struggling."

Domestic and family violence concerns

Quote attributable to TEWLS CEO and Principal Lawyer Caitlin Weatherby-Fell:

"The Bill recognises domestic and family violence as a risk factor, but it does not clearly distinguish between people using violence and victim-survivors experiencing violence, and the recent budget has in fact reduced the capacity of the Domestic and Family Violence system."

Quote attributable to KWILS CEO, Hannah George:

"We are specifically worried about how these laws may impact women attempting to leave violence, particularly where systems responses continue to fail to properly recognise coercive control, misidentification and the realities facing non-offending parents."

Quote attributable to CAWLS CEO, Anna Ryan:

"Systems that increase surveillance and compliance obligations can increase risk for victim-survivors if they are not carefully designed and properly

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supported.”

Concerns about permanency and long-term removal

The coalition also raised concerns about the Bill’s increased focus on permanency and long-term care orders.

Under the proposed reforms, the Court’s ability to make repeated short-term parental responsibility orders will be significantly limited. The legislation creates strong pressure toward long-term orders where reunification is not achieved within strict timeframes.

The services say this planned approach risks decisions being driven by timelines rather than the individual circumstances and the best interests of each child which is what the current system prioritises.

Quote attributable to NAAFLS CEO, Cindy Torrens

“Every child and every family is different. Decisions about whether a child can safely return home should be based on that child’s individual circumstances, relationships, culture and support needs – not an arbitrary clock. We are concerned these reforms will result in more children being permanently separated from their families and culture before families have had a genuine opportunity to access the support needed to safely reunify.”

The coalition noted the Victorian Government is currently repealing a substantially similar permanency model after evidence it was too rigid, reduced reunification opportunities and did not adequately support the best interests of children.

The services say the Northern Territory risks repeating mistakes that other jurisdictions are now moving away from.

The coalition acknowledged the importance of protecting children from harm but said child safety outcomes are strongest when families can access stable housing, therapeutic support, culturally safe services and early intervention before crises escalate.

Experts from across the legal and community sectors are calling on the Northern Territory Government to scrap the Bill.

The coalition says that with no genuine consultation with Aboriginal organisations, legal services, family violence experts and community-controlled sectors to develop reforms that keep children safe, and no investment in the services required, the Bill will hurt Territory families and children.

Ends.

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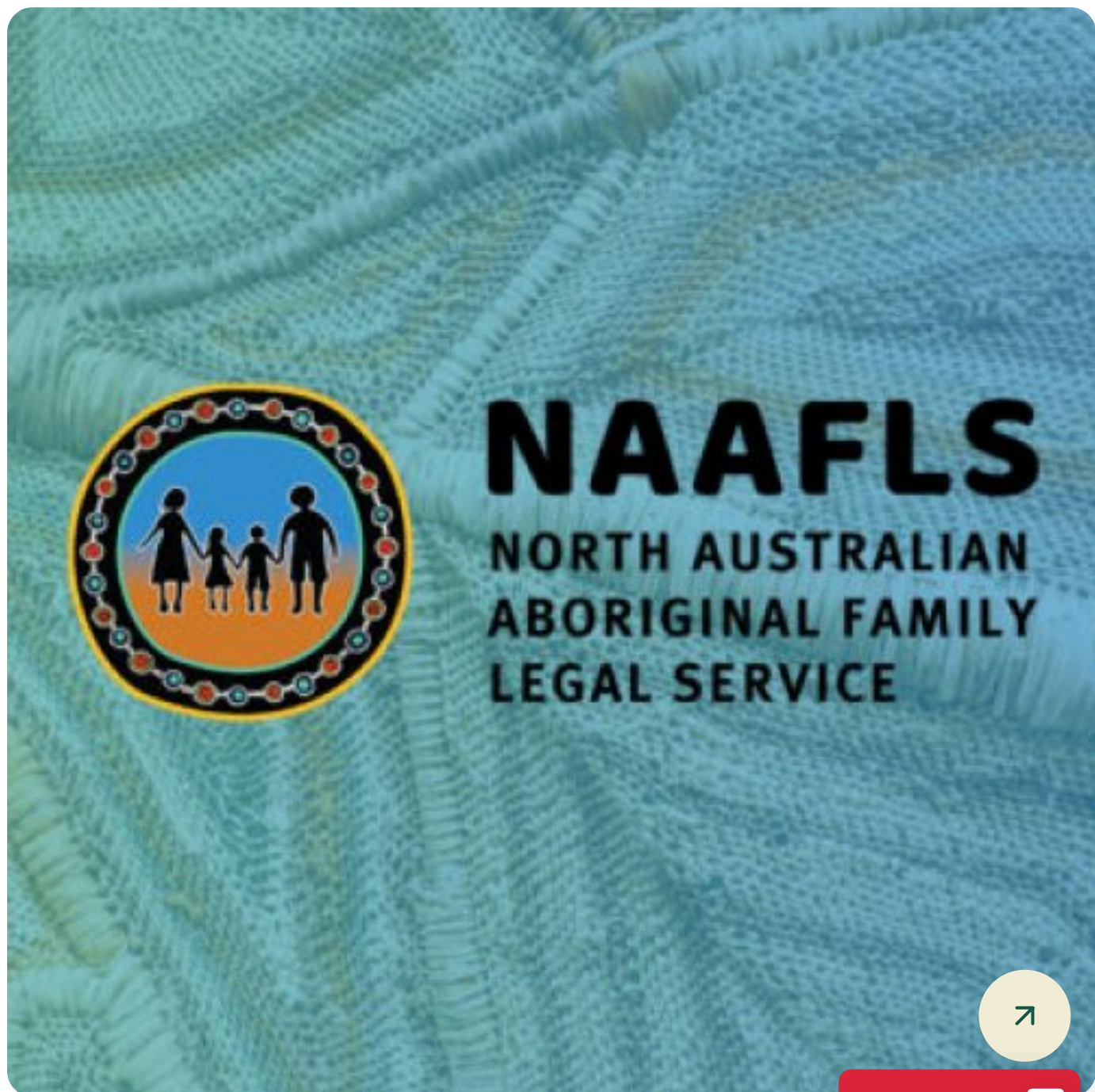
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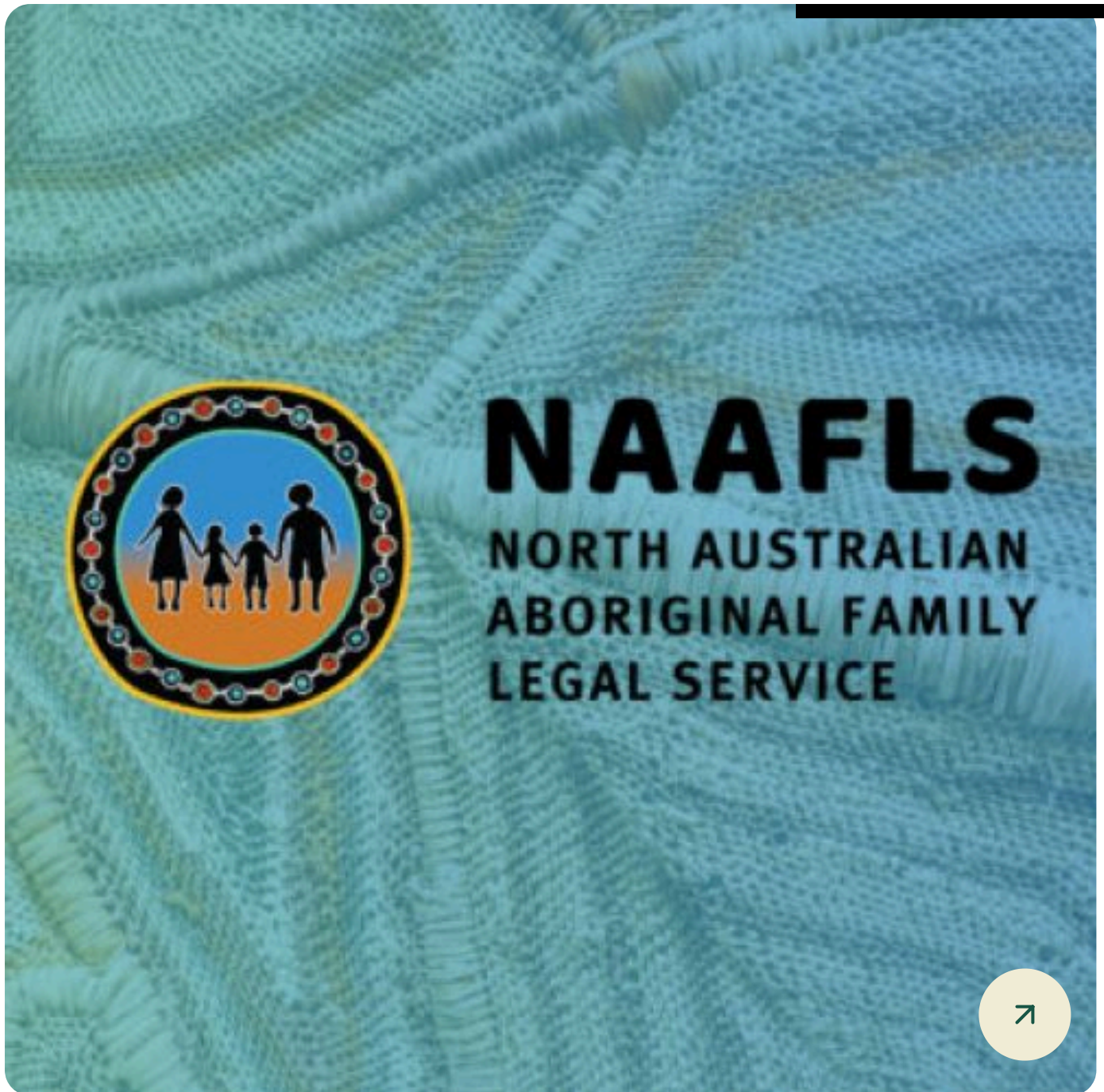
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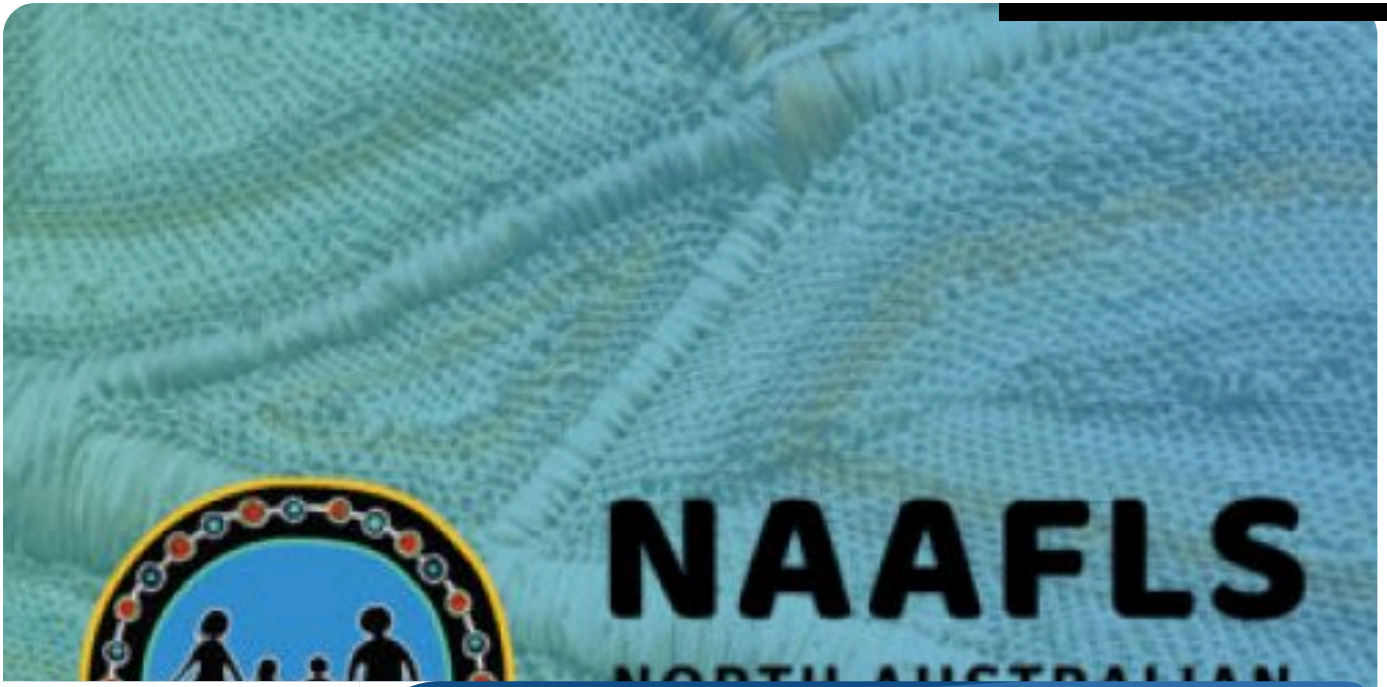
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Joint Statement: Care and Protection of Children Bill will not make ou



Recent publication of Child Protection material breaches Northern Territory law

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NAAFLS
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We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the land and waters on which we live, work and learn. We honour and respect Elders past and present. Always was, always will be.

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