



Via email: LSC@nt.gov.au

Submission from the Catholic Church of the Diocese of Darwin

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

The Catholic Church of the Diocese of Darwin (the Diocese) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the *Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026*.

The Diocese recognises the very significant responsibility carried by the Northern Territory Government in protecting children and supporting vulnerable families. We acknowledge the intention behind these proposed reforms and the desire to improve outcomes for children across the Territory. We also recognise the growing concern within the community regarding the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children, particularly those experiencing neglect, instability and intergenerational disadvantage.

At the same time, the Diocese offers these reflections with a high degree of caution and concern arising from our long experience of walking alongside children, families and communities across the Northern Territory.

Through our parishes, schools, ministries and agencies, including CatholicCare NT and Catholic Education NT, we work closely with families every day, particularly in remote and vulnerable communities. We see firsthand the pressures many families are carrying - overcrowded housing, poverty, addiction, trauma, domestic and family violence, mental health concerns, disengagement from education, and limited access to practical support services.

In our experience, many child protection concerns do not arise from a single incident, but from accumulated disadvantages and ongoing neglect linked to broader social pressures. Families can become overwhelmed long before statutory intervention occurs. For this reason, the Diocese strongly believes that earlier intervention is essential. However, early intervention must primarily be culturally appropriate, relational, practical and supportive in nature if it is to succeed.

The Diocese is concerned that aspects of the proposed reforms may increase intervention and compliance measures without sufficient assurance that the necessary support and services are genuinely available to families, particularly in remote Aboriginal communities where services remain limited, inconsistent or difficult to access.

Families cannot reasonably be expected to meet increasingly complex expectations where stable housing, rehabilitation programs, counselling services, disability support, parenting programs and mental health services are either unavailable or significantly stretched.

Stable and safe housing in particular remains closely connected to child wellbeing, family stability and successful reunification. Families cannot create safe and stable environments for children without secure housing and practical wraparound support. Without significant investment in these foundational supports, there is a real risk that reforms intended to protect children may unintentionally deepen the difficulties already experienced by vulnerable families.

The Diocese acknowledges the Bill's emphasis on permanency and stability for children. Children do need safety, stability and enduring relationships. However, we respectfully caution against approaches that may become overly rigid in practice or place excessive emphasis on timelines without sufficient regard to the individual circumstances of children and families.

This concern is particularly significant in relation to Aboriginal children and families.

For Aboriginal children especially, connection to family, kinship, language, culture, country and community should not be seen as secondary considerations, but as significantly important elements of long-term wellbeing, identity and healing. In the context of Northern Territory, these relationships are central to who a child is and where they belong.

While a child's safety must always remain paramount, the Diocese is concerned that aspects of the proposed reforms may unintentionally weaken opportunities for reunification and cultural connection if flexibility and adequate support are not maintained. Timely decision making is important, but each child and family situation is different and often complex. Responses must retain sufficient flexibility to reflect



the realities facing many Aboriginal families and communities, including intergenerational trauma, housing instability, disability, family violence and the limited availability of support services.

The Diocese also encourages careful consideration regarding the proposed family responsibility agreements and orders. We recognise the intention to strengthen parental responsibility and encourage earlier engagement with services. However, there is concern that measures experienced primarily as compliance-driven or punitive may unintentionally increase disengagement and distrust among already vulnerable families.

Particular care should be taken to ensure that victim survivors of domestic and family violence, people living with disability, and families experiencing complex disadvantage are not further burdened by systems they may already struggle to navigate.

The Diocese also notes positively reforms that strengthen information sharing arrangements between jurisdictions where this contributes to improved safeguarding oversight and child safety outcomes. Given the movement of workers and volunteers across jurisdictions, particularly within national organisations and churches, consistent and timely information sharing is important.

Similarly, the Diocese recognises the value of nationally consistent safeguarding approaches, including reportable conduct frameworks and strengthened worker screening arrangements. Greater consistency across Australian jurisdictions assists organisations operating across state and territory boundaries and contributes to clearer and stronger child protection standards nationally.

At the same time, reforms of this significance require deep and genuine consultation. The Diocese respectfully encourages continued engagement with Aboriginal organisations and leaders, community-controlled organisations, legal services, churches, social service providers, educators, health professionals, frontline workers, and importantly, children and families with lived experience of the system.

Across the Northern Territory there is deep wisdom and practical knowledge held within communities and among those who work directly with children and families each day. Lasting reform is far more likely to succeed when it is shaped in partnership with those communities and grounded in the practical realities they face.

The Catholic Diocese of Darwin remains committed to working constructively with Government, Aboriginal communities and service providers to support children and families across the Territory.

The Diocese notes that these reflections have been informed by conversations with Aboriginal Catholics and others with lived experience of the realities facing children and families across the Territory. We are grateful for their honesty, wisdom and guidance.

Ultimately, the Diocese believes the success of any reform will depend not only on legislative powers or compliance mechanisms, but on whether families are genuinely supported before crisis occurs. Earlier intervention, stable housing, culturally grounded support, healing, practical assistance, strong relationships and genuine partnership will all be essential if children are to be safer and families stronger into the future.

Yours faithfully



+ Bishop Charles Gauci DD

Bishop of Darwin

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