

Statement from the Australian First Nations Children's Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates – 10 and 11 January 2023

Australian First Nations Children's Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates met for the first time in Brisbane on 10 and 11 January 2023.

As First Nations Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates we have a responsibility to *show up* for our children. Our strength is our ongoing connection to family, community, and culture. This drives our priorities and actions.

Australia has seven First Nations Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates. This bolsters our ability to advocate nationally on shared priorities to improve the lives of our children, young people, and families.

In this first meeting, we identified the following advocacy priorities:

1. Advocate for, and support the introduction of, a **National Commissioner** to advance the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children across Australia, in collaboration with jurisdictional first nations Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates. Promote the need for consistency of independence, powers and commensurate resourcing for **dedicated Commissioners and Guardians for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in each jurisdiction**.
2. Lend our authority in the implementation of the **Uluru Statement from the Heart** including discussions about a **Voice to Parliament** and make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's voice heard.
3. **Influence the *Closing the Gap* agenda** at a national and jurisdictional level on relevant targets concerning children, young people, and families; ensuring that we lend our legislative powers to leverage systemic change for better outcomes.
4. Support a strengthening of the national **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector** that is equitably resourced to design and lead child protection and youth justice responses for our children and families, and develop culturally appropriate models to improve family-led decision making at the community level.

5. Implement a nationally consistent approach to **monitoring over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection and youth justice systems**, applying Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles.
6. Committed to ongoing advocacy to **raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years nationally** highlighting detention in youth and adult facilities or watchhouses is harmful and re-traumatising to children, can increase criminogenic behaviours, is inhumane, and deprives children of their basic rights.
7. Advocate to **end harmful and inhumane practices that violate the human rights of children and young people detained**, including solitary confinement, the use of spit hoods and detention in adult facilities.
8. Monitor the interpretation and application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, with a particular focus on consistency of approach on a national basis. Primacy must be placed on the **preservation and reunification of families** to prevent children being removed, including babies taken from hospital and birthing units, and being placed with non-Indigenous carers and in residential care facilities.
9. Raise the **visibility of missing children**, including those who are self-selecting or self-placing from child protection systems and advocate for a national consistent approach in how we identify and publicly report on these children.
10. Promote the difference between poverty and wilful neglect, highlighting that poor families love their children too. **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families experiencing poverty** are reluctant to seek help when the consequence is often removal of their children.
11. Advocate for greater investment in support services for vulnerable and impoverished families, highlighting that structural disadvantage, prejudice, systemic discrimination and diminished support services exacerbate the marginalisation of impoverished families leading to the greatest levels of removal.

A First Nations caucus of Australian Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates will meet quarterly and collaboratively advocate through joint submissions on these key priority areas.

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