

Second Action Plans under Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031

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Health Justice Australia

Health Justice Australia is the national organisation for health justice partnership approaches, supporting stronger collaboration across health, legal and social services to improve health, justice and wellbeing outcomes. We connect evidence, practice and policy to strengthen partnerships and help services work better together through:

- Knowledge and evidence translation: translating evidence into practical resources that support practitioners, policymakers, service leaders and funders to help turn evidence into action.
- Building workforce capability: supporting practitioners and services to work collaboratively through shared learning and partnership development skills, strengthening capability across sectors.
- Driving systems change: connecting the experience of people coming through health justice partnerships, and their practitioners, with opportunities for lasting systems change through reforms to policy settings, service design and funding that strengthens collaboration and improves outcomes.

Our goal is to help services work better together, so people and families receive the support they need earlier, more easily and through services they already trust.

Introduction

Health Justice Australia (HJA) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to inform the development of the Second National Action Plan and Second Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan under Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 (Safe and Supported Second Action Plan). This submission builds on HJA's contribution to consultations on the [Second Action Plan](#) under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032 (National Plan).

Several of the priorities identified for the Safe and Supported Second Action Plan¹ echo issues that have emerged across several key government strategies² and consultations, concerning the need for:

- stronger integration and collaboration across service systems to make it easier for families to access the support they need, when they need it
- greater workforce capability to partner across sectors
- more effective use of evidence to inform practice, policy and investment.

The consensus on these priorities is broadly understood and accepted. The key challenge now is how these priorities are translated into practice. Effective integration does not occur automatically. It is a system capability that must be built, supported and sustained over time. Effective implementation of these priorities depends on addressing a critical implementation gap: **national infrastructure that builds and sustains system-wide capability for integrated service delivery.**

¹ The proposed priorities are outlined in the [Discussion Paper: Identifying priorities for the Safe and Supported](#) (Safe and Supported Discussion Paper).

² For example, the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032; Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Plan to End Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence 2026–2036; the Early Years Strategy 2024–2034; the National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030; The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the National Access to Justice Partnership 2025–30.

Over the past decade, HJA has supported the development of health justice partnerships (HJPs), an established approach that embeds legal assistance within services that support health and wellbeing. Through this work, HJA has developed practical insights into the conditions required for effective cross-sector service integration, including the mechanisms, relationships, processes and supports needed to sustain collaboration over time.

The Safe and Supported Second Action Plan presents an important opportunity to learn from and scale existing partnership approaches that support children and families **and** build and sustain system-wide capability for integrated service delivery, to achieve the objectives of the reform agenda to improve the lives of Australia's children.

Recommendations

The recommendations below outline practical actions to establish national infrastructure to support effective cross-sector collaboration, enabling integrated service delivery and better outcomes for children and families.

1. Commit to long-term investment of HJP approaches as an evidence-based approach that delivers on the objectives outlined in *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031* (the Safe and Supported Framework).
2. Recognise legal assistance as a core component of integrated child and family support, particularly in settings where families already access services, including those funded by government.
3. Resource the national infrastructure needed to build system-wide capability for cross-sector service integration, providing the mechanisms, relationships, processes and supports needed to connect and coordinate different parts of the service system.

Cross-sector integration in practice: lessons from HJPs

As referenced in the *Safe and Supported Discussion Paper*, existing place-based and integrated approaches provide practical insights for strengthening support for children and families. HJPs are a well-established integrated service delivery approach that demonstrate how coordinated legal, health and social support can improve outcomes for children and families. There are now more than 154 HJP approaches operating nationally,³ where legal, health and social service professionals collaborate to respond to issues that affect families and children, including family and domestic violence, mental ill health, housing instability and child protection involvement.

HJPs work to support children and families by:

- improving access to legal assistance through trusted and familiar service settings, including Child and Family Hubs, maternal and child health services, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and community health services
- connecting families with coordinated legal, health and social support
- identifying and addressing issues early, before they escalate to crisis
- strengthening pathways to housing, family violence, disability, alcohol and other drug, and financial support services.⁴

³ Health Justice Australia (2026) *National Health Justice Landscape Snapshot as of June 2026*. Health Justice Australia, Sydney. Retrieved from: [National Health Justice Landscape Snapshot as of June 2026](#).

⁴ Chia, J. (2023) *Health justice partnership as early support for children and their families*. Health Justice Australia, Sydney.

Case study: Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Maternal Health and Preventing Infant Removals⁵

The Institute for Urban Indigenous Health community legal service and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service Brisbane are leading a pilot program, where expectant mothers receive timely legal, social and family support to strengthen family wellbeing and address child protection concerns before birth. By addressing issues early and in culturally safe settings, the partnership seeks to reduce at-birth removals and support families to remain safely together.

HJPs also demonstrate how integrated approaches can strengthen workforce capability by supporting practitioners to identify interconnected issues, work across professional boundaries and coordinate responses more effectively.⁶ This aligns closely with the workforce capability priority identified in the *Safe and Supported Discussion Paper*. An evaluation of the *Health Justice Support for Families* partnership⁷ illustrates this in practice, highlighting community legal education and secondary consultation as contributing to increased confidence in identifying legal need and responding more effectively.

At a systems level, HJPs provide practical lessons for policy development, service design and commissioning. They offer a mechanism for testing, refining and scaling integrated service delivery approaches while building evidence about what works for children and families with interconnected legal, social and health needs. These lessons are directly relevant to implementation of the Safe and Supported Second Action Plan, particularly in relation to strengthening workforce capability and supporting effective cross-sector collaboration.

Existing child and family service investments already demonstrate how integrated approaches can support the priorities through the Safe and Supported Second Action Plan. The new Children and Family Support Program (CaFS) funds some services that have already established HJPs as a part of their service mix. For example, Gateway Health delivers a range of government funded child and family services, including counselling and community and family support programs, and partners with Hume Riverina Community Legal Service through the Holistic Assistance and Legal Outreach HJP. This enables practitioners working on the government funded programs to access timely legal expertise to better understand and respond to issues affecting the children and families they support. This partnership has evolved through HJA's support to develop the relationships and trust needed for effective cross-sector collaboration. Reflecting on this experience, partners noted:

"With [HJA's] support, we have been able to build and agree upon shared goals. Through the unpredictability and uncertainty of natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, we have sustained and grown our investment in engagement, joint accountability, and responsive service design. And at the frontline of service delivery, we're working hard to invest in what it takes for diverse disciplines to come together with openness and humility to put the needs of the people we're here to help front and centre."

This example highlights the opportunity for the Safe and Supported Second Action Plan to prioritise learning from, and scaling, the lessons from existing collaborative partnerships across the child and family service system. Creating the conditions that enable effective integration is critical to effective service

⁵ Griffith University (n.d.) Health Justice Partnership: Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander maternal health and preventing infant removals. Griffith University, available at: [Health Justice Partnership Program](#)

⁶ Drabarek, D., Forell, S., Turner, L., Randall, K., Cunich, M. and Ward, L. (2025) *The attributes of health justice partnership: a conceptual framework*. Health Justice Australia, Sydney.

⁷ Feuerring, C., Sooknandan, N. and Flint, S. (2024) *Health Justice Support for Families evaluation report: July 2022-June 2024*. Westjustice, Melbourne.

delivery and workforce collaboration. Strengthening these foundations would help maximise the impact of existing investments, reduce fragmentation and improve outcomes for children and families.

Legal assistance as part of the ecosystem of support for children and families

Evidence from HJPs demonstrates that legal assistance can play a critical role in responding to the interconnected needs of children and families. While the priorities outlined in the *Safe and Supported Discussion Paper* refer to the importance of the social determinants of health and cross-sectoral collaborative service delivery, legal assistance is not explicitly recognised.

Legal issues are often both a consequence and a driver of the social determinants that shape child and family wellbeing. They intersect with many of the circumstances that contribute to childhood adversity, including family violence, discrimination, tenancy issues, fines and debts.⁸ People experiencing adversity are more likely to have increased legal needs and face significant barriers to accessing legal assistance.⁹ There is growing evidence that adverse childhood experiences can have lifelong impacts on health, development and wellbeing.¹⁰ Therefore, addressing legal issues as part of early support for parents can contribute to family stability and support better long-term outcomes for children.¹¹

The findings from the Barriers Experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families Accessing Legal Supports: Scoping Study¹² further reinforce the importance of addressing unmet legal need in the Safe and Supported Second Action Plan. The study highlights the scale and impact of unmet legal need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and its connection to child protection involvement and family wellbeing.

The Safe and Supported Second Action Plan provides an opportunity to recognise legal assistance as an essential component of integrated child and family support. Recognising legal assistance as part of the child and family support ecosystem would strengthen prevention and early intervention efforts by ensuring families can access coordinated responses to interconnected legal, social and health needs.

The integration and collaboration capability gap identified through practice

The heightened interest in collaboration and partnership across systems has consistently emerged through a range of consultations and validation processes. It is explicitly reflected in the proposed priorities for the Safe and Supported Second Action Plan, which include 'cross-system-coordination' and the 'design and delivery of practical products resources and implementation supports'.

While there is a broader commitment to integrated service reform, far less attention has been paid to understanding the conditions that are needed to enable this way of working. Through our work with HJPs, HJA has found that effective collaboration requires more than policy settings, funding arrangements, co-location and organisational goodwill. **Integration is a system capability** that must be intentionally built, supported and sustained. This includes investing in the infrastructure, the mechanisms, relationships, processes and supports, needed to enable consistent and sustainable collaboration over time.

⁸ Mirrlees-Black, C. and Davies, K. (2025) *Child Protection*. Justice Insights No. 34, Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales, Sydney.

⁹ Centre for Research Excellence in Childhood Adversity and Mental Health (2024) *Health Justice Partnership as early intervention in child and family service settings*. Policy Brief No. 3, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Parkville, Victoria.

¹⁰ Australian Human Rights Commission (2024) *'Help way earlier!': How Australia can transform child justice to improve safety and wellbeing*. Australian Human Rights Commission, Sydney.

¹¹ Loveday, S., Forell, S., Bosward, R., Chen, L., Constable, L.N., Ebbett, W., Kabir, A., Liu, H., Preddey, A., White, N. and Hiscock, H. (2025) 'Health Justice Partnership: An Opportunity to Respond to Childhood Adversity', *International Journal of Integrated Care*, 25(1), Article 13, pp. 1-13.

¹² SNAICC and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (2024) *Barriers Experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families Accessing Legal Supports: Scoping Study*. SNAICC and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services.

Supporting better outcomes through national infrastructure to support integration

Practice-based evidence from HJP approaches provides valuable insights into the conditions that enable effective collaboration, the benefits of this approach for children, families and practitioners, and the challenges that must be addressed to support coordinated and integrated responses at scale. **National infrastructure is the practical mechanism through which integration can be implemented and sustained.** It supports coordination, workforce capability development, evidence and knowledge translation and shared outcomes. This reduces reliance on individual relationships, local champions and short-term resourcing, helping to create greater consistency, shared resources and tools and stronger evidence translation across services and settings.

Resourcing national infrastructure would maximise the impact of existing investments by reducing fragmentation and strengthening coordination across multiple reform agendas. Rather than creating new services, it would help existing services to work together more effectively through scalable approaches that can be applied across disciplines, sectors and jurisdictions. It leverages existing sector networks, including peak bodies, alliances and communities of practice, while strengthening local collaboration and workforce capability to support integration in place-based settings.

National infrastructure can support collaboration through activities that:

- generate and translate cross-sector partnership evidence
- identify where integrated responses are most needed
- provide practical frameworks, tools and guidance
- build workforce capability for integration
- capture and share lessons from practice
- inform service design, commissioning and policy.

National infrastructure in action: capability building, partnership brokerage and implementation support

The [Centre for Research Excellence Strengths-based Tiered Access to Resources and Supports](#) (STAR-CRE) is addressing inequity and improving child and family outcomes for populations that align with the priority groups identified in Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031.

Through STAR-CRE, partners established a new Child and Family Hub (Hub) in south-west Sydney. As a project partner, HJA identified the legal needs of families likely to access the Hub, assessed workforce legal capability, and examined barriers to legal assistance. HJA then used this evidence to broker a new HJP between the Hub and a local community legal service, supported by tailored support to strengthen and maintain the partnership.

This example demonstrates that effective collaboration does not occur by chance. It requires deliberate investment in capability, partnership development and ongoing support.

How national infrastructure works in practice

Drawing on practice-based evidence from HJPs, national infrastructure can build the capability, connections and practical supports needed to strengthen collaboration, reduce fragmentation and improve access to services.

This would include:

- System-level mapping: identify how and where systems and services currently interact and where coordination is most needed.
- Development and consolidation of shared frameworks and tools: support consistent approaches to cross-sector integrated practice, which could cover collaborative governance, risk identification, consent, information sharing, referral pathways, secondary consultation and coordinated care.
- Workforce capability building: training to develop confidence and skills in identifying and responding to intersecting legal, social and health needs while working across professional boundaries.
- Coordination functions: facilitation, brokerage and governance, to support alignment, collaboration and ongoing coordination.
- Shared measurement, learning and evidence translation: capture what is working and ensure learning informs policy development, commissioning and system design.

Summary

There has been significant progress made through the First Action Plan for Safe and Supported. The proposed priorities for the Second Action Plan, particularly the focus on cross-sector collaboration, highlights the ongoing interest in integrated approaches as a policy solution. Practice-based evidence from HJP approaches shows that integration does not happen by intention alone. Effective collaboration requires sustained investment in the capability, resources, processes and evidence that enable services to work together safely, consistently and at scale.

Alongside the implementation of the Second Action Plan for the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children, the development of the Safe and Supported Second Action Plan is an important opportunity to move towards understanding integration as a system capability, and a key priority in achieving the underlying objectives of the Safe and Supported Framework. Investment in both integrated service approaches, and the infrastructure that supports consistent and sustained collaboration, will strengthen implementation of the Safe and Supported Framework and improve outcomes for children and families.



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