



Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth

Working together to enhance the wellbeing and life chances of children and young people.

COMMON APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT, REFERRAL AND SUPPORT (CAARS) OCTOBER UPDATE

1. Consultation workshops

Firstly, thank you to all Taskforce members who disseminated information about the workshops to your networks, and to those who attended one or more workshops themselves. Around 220 people attended the 24 workshops.

Each capital city hosted three workshops to engage the views of people from government and non-government representatives of universal, targeted and statutory services providing support to children and families. We encouraged attendance from non-capital cities and were pleased to welcome participants from Townsville, Alice Springs and Arnhem Land as well as the outer metropolitan regions of several cities.

The workshops were organised and facilitated by CAARS consultants the Allen Consulting Group with contributions from ARACY staff in six locations.

Feedback from the workshops indicates a positive response to the concept of a 'common approach' for identifying and responding to the needs of children and families before problems escalate into crises, where such an approach focuses on strengths, not deficits, and can be supported by a comprehensive network of accessible support services on the ground. With this *preventive* or 'early warning, early action' approach in mind, workshop participants considered:

- what universal services (such as those in health, education, childcare and other community services) might be best positioned/most receptive to using a common needs-identification approach;
- what targeted services (such as mental health, drug and alcohol, homelessness and other support services) would be needed to support such an approach;
- what the impacts on the statutory child protection services might be; and
- the importance of working with children and families themselves to determine needs and assist with gaining confidence and skills to engage with support services as well as building informal networks of support.

Issues discussed included the benefits and challenges of a 'common approach', the form a common approach might take and its key design elements, related requirements for optimal information sharing and referral such as consent, confidentiality and case management, potential impacts on organisational culture and implementation challenges.

Taskforce members were present at Sydney, Canberra, Hobart and Perth workshops – here are some observations:

Andrew McCallum ('targeted services' workshop, Sydney):

The value of some form of common assessment framework was viewed positively, but if it is to form part of our diversionary armoury, a comprehensive network of accessible support services on the ground will be imperative. Cynicism mounts when expectations are raised but not fulfilled. It was also emphasised that this cannot be a "cut and paste" exercise from other jurisdictions but truly reflect the needs on the ground in Australia. There will be many challenges.

Libby Lloyd, (all three workshops, Canberra):

There was lively discussion about terminology e.g. 'risk assessment' versus 'needs identification' and the importance of identifying strengths of a family - not just the problems; and there was little disagreement that more effective communication between agencies is critical.

Participants reflected on whether a universal tool can be responsive enough. The extreme complexity and broad range of the issues involved makes it difficult to narrow down enough to ensure that individuals, agencies or institutions that are in contact are 'empowered' to take action in the early stages where there is some concern about the well-being of a child. This will require significant change to the way we do business in this area at present.

Lesley Fraser, ('universal services' workshop, Hobart):

Participants noted that any 'tool' which is used as an identification method would have to cater for different stages of development, as one tool may not be suitable for every child/young person. All agreed that some kind of instrument would be helpful, for ensuring 'early warning signs' are not missed, and to enable a common language and consistent approach to referral. Ideas included a 'flow chart' for making decisions on a case by case basis, accompanied by guiding questions (and relevant training/education) to help practitioners make decisions about referrals.

'Information sharing' considerations included the benefits and challenges of using electronic data, and the possibility of using smart cards to record information so that clients don't have to tell their story each time they see a professional.

Additional consultations are being arranged with groups of stakeholders who were unable to participate in the workshops, including general practitioners (who will be consulted by teleconference) and Indigenous and CALD representatives. Based on advice from the Taskforce's Consultation Working Group and Children's Commissioners/Guardians, consultations with children are now planned for the 'refining/testing stage of the project, in early 2010, after the Taskforce has agreed on 'common approach' options to be further developed.

2. Technical and Information Sharing Working Group

The Technical and Information Sharing Working Group (TISWG) has been providing advice to the consultants on technical aspects of common assessment tools and approaches. TISWG members are:

From CAARS Taskforce: Associate Professor Kelsey Hegarty (RACGP)
Dr Jenny Proimos (Paediatrics and Child Health, RACP)
Professor Ian Hickie (Brain & Mind Institute)
Professor Lyn Littlefield (Australian Psychological Society)
Dr Luke Rumbold (FRSA and Upper Murray Family Care)

Co-opted: Associate Professor Maria Harries AM, University of WA
Dr Fiona McCrimmon (University of Otago and University of Auckland)
Ms Sue Sarlos (Department of Community Services, NSW)
Dr Adam Tomison (Australian Institute of Criminology)
Dr Gail Winkworth (Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU)

Ex Officio: Tracy Feeney (FaHCSIA)
Sue Ludwig, Geoff Holloway, Jaya Negi (ARACY)

Members of the Group met with the consultants by teleconference in mid-August to advise on:

- the language and terminology used in the consultation workshop discussion paper;
- the scope of the desktop review (see (3) below); and
- current research and/or practice relating to common assessment and information sharing mechanisms that might be worthy of investigation

The Group will reconvene before the next Taskforce meeting to assist the process of determining workable common assessment, information sharing and referral options in the Australian context and to advise on technical aspects related to further development of a range of options.

3. Desk Top Research

Project consultants the Allen Consulting Group have been undertaking comprehensive desk top research in parallel with the national consultations.

In accordance with the work plan developed in consultation with the Taskforce's Consultation Working group, the research spans up to 23 international jurisdictions in five countries and the 8 Australian jurisdictions, in order to:

- Scan literature on common assessment tools and information sharing mechanisms, identifying definitions, characteristics and gaps;
- Capture this information in matrix form;
- Provide additional detail on up to viable 8 options for a common assessment approach and related information sharing and referral mechanisms (as agreed with the Technical and Information Sharing Working Group, see (2) above); and
- Provide additional information on up to two selected approaches in the form of a theoretical case study.

4. Analysis

The Allen Consulting Group will then review desk top research and consultation findings, together with advice from the Technical and Information Sharing Working Group, in order to analyse the two key project objectives:

- Mechanisms to improve information sharing; and
- A pool of viable options for a common assessment approach.

The analysis will provide the basis of an interim report for consideration by the CAARS Taskforce in November 2009 will include recommendations on which options should be developed during the 'refining and testing' stage of the project (early 2010).

5. Culture Change Working Group

One of the challenges in developing – and implementing – a common assessment approach is to support organisational/culture change.

At its June 2009 meeting the CAARS taskforce agreed to establish a 'Culture Change Working Group' to consider the challenges of organisational culture change and to provide expert advice to the consultant once the implementation context of a proposed common assessment approach becomes clearer.

The following Taskforce members indicated interest in this work at the June meeting:

Ms Libby Lloyd (Violence Against Women Advisory Group)
Dr David Thomas (AMA)
Ms Maree Faulkner (NAPCAN)
Dr Jenny Proimos (Paediatrics and Child Health, RACP)
Mr Paul Mason (Tasmanian Commissioner for Children and Young people)

Other (non-taskforce) members with particular expertise in this area will also be approached, or have already expressed interest during the consultation process. Terms of Reference for the Culture Change Working Group are currently being finalised and we anticipate an initial teleconference will be held towards the end of this year.

6. Next steps

By the end of November the scoping phase of the project will be complete. The next steps are:

1. Taskforce Meeting 30 November 2009:

9.30am-3.30pm, Centra Plaza, Bowes Street, Woden, ACT

The taskforce will consider the interim report to be provided by the consultants, including recommendations for common assessment options to be further developed, refined and tested. The agreed interim report will be presented to federal Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Hon Jenny Macklin and ARACY Chair Professor Fiona Stanley AC.

2. Refining and testing phase (January-June 2009), to:

- Further develop and refine agreed options;
- Undertake a testing exercise, focusing on the practical application of the options presented;
- Develop a 'blueprint' for a common approach to assessment, referral and support, including proposed mechanisms for information sharing; and
- Develop a high-level implementation plan addressing three phases of implantation: trial, pilot, and program commencement, with due consideration given to guidance and training, promotion and awareness raising and phases of service roll-out.

NOTE: actual trialling of the implementation of an agreed approach is out of scope for this project.

3. Final reporting:

A final report will be presented to the taskforce and its co-convenors, federal Families Minister Jenny Macklin and ARACY Chair Professor Fiona Stanley AC, in June 2010 (date TBA).

Other information

NAPCAN national campaign to bring child abuse into the open

On 6 September NAPCAN launched a two-month campaign to engage the whole of the Australian community in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. This is another project under the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*.

The 'Help break Down the Walls' Survey has been designed with the assistance of leading researchers from across the country to gather information which will help in the planning of effective strategies to prevent child abuse and neglect. You can participate in this largest ever survey of community attitudes by completing the survey online: www.preventingchildabuse.com.au.

CAARS updates and ARACY contact details

Regular updates about the CAARS project are posted on the ARACY [website](#) and included in [current](#) and [archived](#) ARACY newsletters. Thanks again for your ongoing support for the project, including disseminating CAARS information through your own networks, web sites and newsletters. Please don't hesitate to contact ARACY if you have any questions or would like any additional information.

Sue Ludwig | Programs Manager

Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth

Phone: (02) 62 32 4503 | Fax: (02) 6232 5798

Email: sue.ludwig@aracy.org.au | Web: www.aracy.org.au