



Annual Report 2015-2016

Families ACT was established in May 2006 as the first independent peak body representing organisations working with children, young people and families in the ACT and surrounding area.

The Peak's origins were in the Family Support and Parenting Network (FSPN).

Foreword from the President

Over the past year Families ACT's profile has continued to grow as a voice for children, young people and families and the sector which supports them. As a result we are receiving more requests to contribute to policy development by ACT Government. The decision the Board made in February 2015 to invest in a Communication and Research Officer position has been pivotal in achieving this.

In February we released our Domestic and Family Violence Research Briefing Paper. Feedback from a range of stakeholders confirmed the value of the paper as a summary of recent research into domestic and family violence at a national and jurisdictional level. The project has also led to the development of good working relationships with the Women's Centre for Health Matters and the Domestic Violence Prevention Council.

This year we expanded our promotion of the Practice Framework, delivering introductory training to social housing providers. As a member of the CYFSP Workforce Development Sub-Committee we play an active role in recommending sector development initiatives and are delighted that the Community Services Directorate has funded the Action Learning for Leaders initiative we put forward as a sector leadership succession planning measure.

Having just celebrated our tenth birthday, we are very conscious that we could not have reached this point without the support of our members, the hard work of our Management Committee, Board and Advisory Council and, over the last 5 years, increased funding from ACT Government.

We recently welcomed Riyana (Mira) Miranti to the Board. Mira is a Senior Research Fellow at The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) at the University of Canberra. We approached Mira after the Board decided Families ACT's research and policy work would benefit from closer links with one of Canberra's tertiary institutions.

The Advisory Council has seen the departure of Penny Coulter; her contribution will be missed. However we are delighted that Suella Jarvis from YWCA, Cara Jacobs from Marymead, and Marianne Ibrahim from Relationships Australia have joined the Council and will bring their insight and experience to inform Families ACT's future direction.

The results of our 2015-16 member survey reinforced that our membership is satisfied with what we do. Almost 70% of those who replied to the survey were very satisfied with our policy work. However the survey reflects that this policy work may not necessarily achieve the change that we are seeking. While this is often not within our control, the challenge is to become better influencers of change. To this end we have been working with ACTCOSS in the lead up to the coming ACT election, developing a shared platform, so that the Territory peaks can work together towards achieving common goals.

Fiona MacGregor

President

Foreword from Executive Officer

This year Fiona MacGregor is stepping down from the Board. Fiona's commitment to Families ACT is a long standing one. She joined the Management Committee in January 2008 as the Marymead representative and was a member of our first skills based Board. Fiona's contribution to Families ACT has been substantial, including developing the Practice Framework, a two year term as president and most recently, promoting our advocacy agenda around education.

I want to thank Fiona for the great support she given me since I joined Families ACT in 2011. Happily Fiona has agreed to continue in an ex-officio role as our adviser on education matters.

Will Mollison

Executive Officer

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Our Mission

Families ACT is a territory peak, not-for-profit, organisation, which takes a broad view of what constitutes a family. We strive to improve the wellbeing of all families in the ACT and surrounding region.

Our Objectives

- Promote a policy environment which addresses the needs and interests of children, young people and families in the ACT and surrounding region, with a focus on those who are marginalised or vulnerable.
- Work with government to develop strategic policy which impacts positively on children, young people and families.
- Advocate for member organisations providing social services to children, young people and families.
- Build the capacity of the sectors providing services to children, young people and families.
- Collaborate with member and other interest groups to work on common policy issues affecting children, young people and families.
- Encourage and promote best practice and collaborative service delivery among all family support services within the sector.

We Celebrate our Tenth Birthday

Families ACT celebrated its tenth birthday in May. The anniversary provided a great opportunity to reflect on the commitment of all those who have helped us reach this point, particularly our Management Committee, Board and Advisory Council members. In organising the celebration we contacted as many of the original Management Committee as possible, inviting them to attend. This included Dawson Ruhl, Families ACT's first President, who is now CEO of Child Australia and based in Western Australia. While unable to attend, Dawson was delighted that the organisation had survived and grown and sent his best wishes.

The birthday event on 10th May was a great success. Special guests included Aunty Agnes Shea, Yvette Berry, Minister for Community Services, Nicole Lawder, Shadow Minister for Community Services, Brian Babbington, CEO of Families Australia, Sue Chapman, Deputy Director General of the Community Services Directorate as well as a number of Board members past and present including two of the original Committee: Chris Redmond and Sandi McGowan. However it was the Turner Primary School choir who stole the show. Our thanks again to Turner Primary and their music teacher Giselle Nathan.

Families ACT also received a letter from Natalie Howson, Director General of the Community Services Directorate, congratulating us on our 10th birthday and acknowledging the benefits to CSD of our work in sector development, research and promoting partnerships and collaboration.

Advocacy

Families ACT's principal purpose is to advocate for the best interests of children, young people and families and the sector that supports them.

Advocacy Strategy

The Board and Advisory Council have recognised that to develop an effective advocacy voice we need to dedicate resources to media and communications. Since October last year, Families ACT has employed a part-time Communication and Research Officer. Although our resources limit this position to one day per week, we have benefitted greatly from Kate Stevens' work in the role. Kate has worked closely with Judith Tokley, our Communications specialist on the Board, to develop our profile and enhance our advocacy. Sadly Kate has recently accepted another job offer, but her work on the website and our Facebook page mean our communication infrastructure has been strengthened significantly. We have already recruited to fill the position and expect to appoint a new Communications Officer in the very near future.

ACT Election 2016

A significant part of our work early in 2016 was to develop a policy platform leading into the Territory election in October. We have chosen to focus on four areas: education, domestic and family violence, housing /homelessness and the importance of parenting programs to support families. The themes of prevention and early intervention underpin all of our work in this area. We continue to argue to ACT Government that, given the financial pressures on the ACT Budget, the case for early intervention and prevention approaches is stronger than ever.

Education

Families ACT supports the Youth Coalition and ACTCOSS's concerns about inequity in the ACT education system as outlined in their paper on Educational Inequity. We believe that this inequity not only mitigates against the Government's "central goal to help every person reach their full potential as a member of our diverse, inclusive and creative community", but also perpetuates intergenerational disadvantage.

We acknowledge the complexity of the problem, largely hidden by the relatively high educational outcomes for many young people in the ACT, and with disadvantage spread across the Territory rather than being concentrated in a few schools. This undoubtedly poses a challenge for schools in responding and providing appropriate supports for small numbers of students experiencing disadvantage. We accept it may prove challenging to modify the curriculum for just a few students, but this issue is of critical importance in terms of the longer term cost to community of resulting disadvantage.

Families ACT wants to see a range of individual flexible learning options with a clear focus on improving outcomes especially in literacy and numeracy. Undoubtedly quality of teaching is paramount and while greater autonomy of schools within the ACT can provide an opportunity for community sector organisations to work together with schools to improve equity within the

system, leadership at a Directorate level is essential in ensuring that the issue of equity is at the top of the agenda for all schools in the Territory.

In January Families ACT wrote to Shane Rattenbury, ACT Minister for Education, in response to the Schools for All report of the expert panel looking into the needs of Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviours.

Following a meeting with the Minister, we were invited to attend a ministerial round table on counselling supports in schools with a broad range of key stakeholders. There was substantial support for our emphasis on working not just with the student, but with the family as a whole. The Minister's feedback was that he "appreciated [the] discussion about the complexity of the needs of students and about how those needs might be able to be met in a number of different ways and by different service providers". He added that he "heard [our] concerns that there could be better collaboration between the directorate and external service providers, and that some services are better placed to work with a student's whole family outside the school setting".

At the second ministerial round table, the Minister revealed the Schools for All initiative which will receive \$22m over 3 years to implement the recommendations of the expert panel. We were particularly pleased to see the inclusion of a measure for which we had advocated – the appointment of social workers to promote case management and collaborative work with providers outside the Education and Training Directorate (ETD).

Families ACT has been involved in recent planning work with ETD to prioritise the recommendations of the Expert Panel and determine where energy should best be focused to achieve the desired changes. We have also consulted with the Student Resource Allocation branch around equity for Aboriginal students.

Domestic and Family Violence

Our key piece of research over the past twelve months has been into domestic and family violence. Because of this and our subsequent work supporting key messages about domestic and family violence, Families ACT was invited to contribute to the Inquiry into System Level Responses to Family Violence (the Glanville Inquiry). The Inquiry was a response to the tragic death in 2015 of an eight year old boy, allegedly at the hands of his father. The inquiry's brief was to review the efficacy and effectiveness of the processes and procedures employed by the Community Services Directorate.

The findings of the Glanville report reflect many of our concerns, particularly ACT Government's underfunding of prevention and early intervention measures. As a result of the report, a Child Safety Unit is being established in the new Human Services Gateway. The unit's responsibility will be to identify children who are at risk because they live in environments of domestic and family violence.

In our ACT budget submission in October 2015 we acknowledged ACT Government's stated intention to prevent domestic violence, but stressed that prevention is a long term goal which will necessitate substantial community education over time. We argued that this educative process

will result in increased reporting of domestic violence as victims feel able to come forward and seek assistance.

We urged the Government to recognise that this increased demand is a collateral cost of a successful prevention strategy and to ensure that any additional allocation of funding to domestic violence services is ongoing to cope with this increase in demand. We were pleased subsequently to see the budget address the issue of funding, introducing the Safer Families levy. The range of Safer Families initiatives worth \$21.4m over 4 years were equally welcome.

Housing and homelessness

Housing and homelessness continue to be key concerns for Families ACT. In such a prosperous city it is unacceptable that we have such a high rate of homelessness. While we acknowledge the Government's commitment to improving social housing through its public housing renewal program, demand for this accommodation will continue to outstrip supply and we need to ensure that people have access to a range of housing options.

In our budget submission we argued that early intervention and prevention services, like the Supportive Tenancy Service (STS), have great value in supporting community members who are experiencing housing stress to maintain their tenancies and to prevent them becoming homeless. Importantly, programs like these also assist community members to establish tenancies. We urged the Government to maintain its funding for STS. The service has subsequently received ongoing funding.

Parenting Programs

Families ACT strongly supports funding for parenting programs as we believe they represent sound value for money and an investment in the wellbeing of our children.

In May 2015 we launched our report into Parenting Programs in the ACT. The report reinforces the need for a range of both universal (whole of population) and targeted (at risk populations) programs. We are pleased that the Community Services Directorate has found our report valuable and trust they will continue to use it to inform their service planning. We have urged the government to maintain the current level of funding for parenting programs.

Sector Development

Families ACT is actively involved in sector development. Our recent work has had two areas of focus:

- Development of Practice Framework training
- A continuing partnership with CSD to improve training through the Workforce Development Sub-Committee.

Practice Framework

The Practice Framework, developed and piloted by Families ACT between 2011 and 2013, is a valuable tool for working with vulnerable children, young people and families. Key features of the Framework include promoting collaboration between government and non-government organisations, promoting reflection and embedding a culture of evidence-based practice.

There is still much to be done however to embed the Framework's use in agencies. As one measure to address this, we have developed a new training module; an "Introduction to the Practice Framework" to raise awareness of the Framework and its value as a support for practice.

This module was delivered first for CYFSP and other member organisations. Subsequently we elicited significant interest from Specialist Homelessness service providers and ran a session for both their managers and practitioners in early August. Evaluation feedback from participants of all sessions has been very positive. Our longer term aim is to introduce other sectors to the Framework.

Workforce Development Sub-Committee

An important part of our partnership with CSD is the work we are involved in as part of the Workforce Development Sub-Committee. As a result we have been well positioned to make recommendations about training gaps and initiatives we believe will be of value to the sector. Over the past year we have been delighted that the Community Services Directorate has funded the Action Learning for Leaders initiative that we put forward as a sector leadership succession planning measure.

Research and Policy Development

Families ACT aims to conduct one major piece of policy work each year. The intention is to support the development of evidence-based practice and add to a body of policy work covering issues of importance to children, young people and families.

Domestic Violence Research Briefing Paper

Our major project over the past year has been the development of a briefing paper summarising some of the research being done into domestic and family violence both at a national and jurisdictional level. The work, conducted by Kate Butler, has revealed that there has been significant investment in research into domestic violence and a large number of local projects have either been recently completed or currently in progress.

In addressing domestic violence, Families ACT urges the Government to fully utilise the significant body of research already undertaken into domestic violence both nationally and locally. For example the Domestic Violence Prevention Council's (DVPC) Report on Domestic and Family Violence including Sexual Assault in the Australian Capital Territory (2015) contains a number of key action priorities which highlight essential reforms.

Community Sector Industry Plan

Both the President and Executive Officer of Families ACT have attended individual interviews with KPMG to provide input into the Community Sector Industry Plan. Families ACT supports ACTCOSS's view that the plan needs to be embraced by the whole of the community sector if it is to be effective. However there are a number of key obstacles to the plan's success:

- The draft plan has the voice of government rather than the sector – understandable since the work was commissioned by the government and therefore they rather than the community sector are KPMG's employer. However unless the tone of the plan is changed there is little chance of community sector ownership.
- Government procurement processes are problematic - the recommendation of the Red Tape Reduction inquiry and the wish of the Minister of Community Services is for longer term contracts yet the CSD procurement board recently renewed CYFSP contracts for only 2 years.
- No allocation is made in funding and service agreements for evaluation of programs, despite government's insistence on the importance of program outcomes.
- Recruitment and retention problems constrain improved service delivery outcomes.

Reportable Conduct scheme

In February ACT Government invited Families ACT to attend a forum organised by the NSW Ombudsman covering that state's Reportable Conduct scheme. The scheme is designed to ensure that organisations respond appropriately to allegations of child abuse or neglect by their staff or volunteers. This was in preparation for the introduction of a similar scheme in the Territory.

In the response to the forum and a discussion paper on the introduction of Reportable Conduct Scheme for the ACT, we fully endorsed the scheme. However we noted that the NSW and ACT environments are markedly different and that legislation to introduce such a scheme in the Territory would need to be appropriately tailored to the local environment.

Partnership Activities

Families ACT seeks to support the development of collaborative approaches and partnerships with members, peak bodies, government agencies and other services.

Relationship with ACT Government

We continue to have a strong working relationship with the Territory Government, allowing us to progress our advocacy in this area on a regular, but informal basis. It is clear that the Community Services Directorate values our perspective and looks to us for advice and support - for example we are a member of the Growing Stronger Families Reference Group.

The Directorate's Early Intervention and Prevention Section is an affiliate member of Families ACT.

Domestic Violence Prevention Council

Our research briefing paper on Domestic and Family Violence was well received by the ACT Domestic Violence Prevention Council. As a result, they proposed a joint forum between DVPC and Families ACT as a National Families Week event. The symposium on the effects of Domestic and Family Violence on children drew 50 participants. Guest speakers were Dr Sue Packer (Community Paediatrician), Casandra Tinning (Clinical coordinator, CARHU) and Robyn Sirr (Team Leader, DVCS). The forum was attended by about 50 local service providers and feedback from participants was that the speakers and content were excellent.

Youth Coalition

Families ACT's co-location with the Youth Coalition of the ACT continues to offer operating efficiencies, which deliver additional funds for both organisations' work. In particular this has meant we have been able to free up the resources to employ a Communication and Research Officer one day per week.

ACTCOSS

Families ACT has joined forces with ACTCOSS to advocate on a number of issues including early intervention, equity and housing affordability and has resolved to add its voice on these matters when ACTCOSS speaks out. We are also very supportive of ACTCOSS's approach to achieving a unified approach to community sector budget submissions, in particular in relation to housing and homelessness. Families ACT is a member of the ACTCOSS and participates actively in the Peaks Forum.

Families Australia

Families ACT is a member of Families Australia and liaises with the national peak body on a range of common policy interests.

Other Work

Support to Members & Other Key Stakeholders

Apart from the training and information services that the peak provides, we also respond to a number of enquiries and provide support and mentoring to members. This includes sitting on interview panels, providing feedback and editing documents and providing advice in developing submissions.

Member input into Families ACT's Activities

In June each year we ask our members and other key stakeholders to tell us how they think we've performed over the last 12 months. This year the number of survey respondents who were very satisfied with the work of Families ACT continued to rise in most areas. In particular, the survey results show an increase in respondents who were very satisfied with Families ACT's policy development work (from 47% in 2015 to 69% in 2016). There was also an increase in respondents who felt that Families ACT's work is having a positive effect on outcomes such as enhanced skills and knowledge in the sector (57% to 62%) and improved knowledge, practices, behaviours, policies and systems due to collaborative activities (39% to 54%).

Feedback from survey respondents was very positive. Perceptions were that Families ACT:

- Does a great deal with limited resources
- Produces quality publications
- Provides a "voice [that] is trusted, well informed and evidence based".

No one area was singled out as needing improvement, but respondents identified advocacy activities and capacity building as the main priorities for Families ACT to work on.

The results of the survey suggest that most members and stakeholders are satisfied or very satisfied with Families ACT's performance. Respondent feedback continues to provide valuable guidance about future activities. It is important to recognise however that the work that members would like to see expanded on and prioritised by Families ACT currently exceeds the organisation's capacity. Families ACT's Board and Advisory Council will therefore need to make decisions on which areas to prioritise in future planning.

Membership of Forums

We have an ongoing presence at a range of forums including the Child, Youth and Family Services Program CYFSP Directors' and Practice Leaders groups, the ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS) Peaks Forum, the Community Sector Leaders Forum (CSLF).

Our Members

This year we welcomed Red Cross ACT and Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services (MARSS) as new members. As a result, we now have 27 member organisations:

- Anglicare
- Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT
- Barnardos Australia
- Belconnen Community Service
- Beryl Women Inc
- Catholic Care
- Communities@Work
- Community Services #1 Inc
- Connections ACT Inc
- Domestic Violence Crisis Service
- Doris Women's Refuge Inc
- Early Intervention and Prevention Service
- Family Relationship Services Australia
- Gugan Gulwan
- Karralika Programs Inc
- Marymead Child & Family Centre
- Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services
- Northside Community Service Inc
- Parentline
- Post and Ante Natal Depression Support and Information Inc (PANDSI)
- Relationships Australia Canberra & Region
- Red Cross, ACT
- The Smith Family
- UnitingCare Kippax
- Woden Community Service
- Youth Coalition of the ACT
- YWCA

Our Board

Fiona MacGregor (President)

Mary Pekin (Vice-President)

Judith Tokley (Public Officer)

Stephanie Males (Finance Officer)

Hugh Chalmers

Riyana (Mira) Miranti

Our Advisory Council

Gen Lai, Anglicare

Lee Maiden, Communities at Work

Kerry Fitzroy, Karralika Programs

Amanda Savle, Gugan Gulwan

Suella Jarvis, YWCA

Cara Jacobs, Marymead

Marianne Ibrahim, Relationships Australia