

National Out of Home Care Standards Review

**PeakCare's Submission to the Australian
Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) on the refresh
of the National Out-of-Home Care Standards**

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INTRODUCTION

The National Out-of-Home Care Standards were established to provide a consistent and high-quality framework for the care of children and young people across Australia. However, since their release in 2011, the evolving needs of children in care—and significant advances in our understanding of best practices—have required the need for an update in the standards of care.

In response to the AIFS call for submissions, and in partnership with SNAICC, National Voice for our Children, PeakCare is pleased to share our insights to support meaningful reform. Our goal is to secure updated standards that not only safeguard and support children in out-of-home care but also honour and strengthen the cultural and community connections vital to their wellbeing.

ABOUT PEAKCARE

PeakCare is a leading not-for-profit peak body for child and family services in Queensland, providing an independent voice representing and promoting matters of interest to the non-government sector. Across Queensland, PeakCare has more than 100 members including small, medium, and large, local, statewide, and national non-government organisations which provide prevention and early intervention, generic, targeted, and intensive family support to children, young people, families, and communities. Member organisations also provide child protection services, foster care, kinship care, and residential care for children and young people who are at risk of entry to, or who are in the statutory child protection system and youth justice systems.

A large network of associate members and supporters also subscribe to PeakCare. This includes individuals with an interest in child protection, youth justice and related services, and who are supportive of PeakCare's policy platform around the rights and entitlements of children, young people and their families to safety, wellbeing, and equitable access to life opportunities.

PEAKCARE'S SUBMISSION

Purpose of Updated National Standards

PeakCare supports the Department of Social Services' initiative to update the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care. We emphasise the importance of ensuring these standards reflect contemporary practices and address the evolving needs of children and young people in care. As community needs and best practices evolve, so too must our care standards. Regular systematic reviews and clear accountability measures are necessary to help ensure the standards remain relevant and effective.

The Existing National Out-of-Home Care Standards and Key Outcome Areas

In late 2024 PeakCare met with and spoke to member organisations across Queensland and subsequently developed a Sector Voices Report.¹ The primary focus areas of these discussions included:

¹ https://peakcare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/PeakCare-Sector-Voices-Report_Final.pdf

- **Amplifying the voices of young people.** This focus area relates to National Standard 2 - Children and young people participate in decisions that have an impact on their lives. We heard directly from the sector on the ways in which children and young people are involved in decision making, including how young people are involved in day-to-day decisions and how their views are shared with decision makers at the systemic level. Any changes to the child protection system will be more successful and achieve better outcomes if informed by the voice of those with a lived experience.²

PeakCare recommends the strengthening of National Standard 2 to include young people's voices are captured, heard and their voices included in decisions influencing the care system.

- **Strengthening the care workforce through professional development, investment, and support.** This focus area relates to National Standard 12 - Carers are assessed and receive relevant ongoing training, development, and support, to provide quality care. We know workforce is the number one challenge across the country impacting human services including the child and family sector.

PeakCare is leading the development of a workforce strategy for the residential care workforce for the Queensland Government. Improved attraction and retention initiatives for the workforce, providing flexibility and a clear pathway of opportunity, and addressing the issues around the Award requirements, are key actions currently being undertaken.

The best outcome for children and young people in care is when they are supported by consistent caring adults. Addressing the workforce issue is critical to improving outcomes for children as the research shows, healing from childhood trauma is supported by the development of trusted, long-term relationships.³

PeakCare recommends the inclusion of a new National Standard that prioritises the relationships between children and young people in care and their care workers, with flexibility being added to the systems, to maintain these relationships for as long as possible.

PeakCare's 2024 Election Commitments to the child and family sector (Queensland state election) showcased the key advocacy positions to government, including a 'housing first' approach, to providing access to affordable, sustainable, and appropriate housing for young people.⁴

We are extremely concerned that approximately 30 percent of young people who transition from care experience homelessness within the first 12 months.⁵ PeakCare highly recommends a National Standard relating to the provision of safe and stable housing for young people transitioning from care.

² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02650533.2023.2185213>

³ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6088388/>

⁴ https://peakcare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/PeakCare-Election-Commitments-2024_V1.0.pdf

⁵ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/clients-leaving-care>

Children and Young People's Rights

Upholding the rights of children and young people is paramount. The standards embed most of the rights of children and young people as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

PeakCare recommends the following considerations to further embed these rights:

- Children and young people with a care experience have shared what they need to thrive in care, which includes play, fun and joyful activities.⁶ This relates to Article 31 of the UNCRC, the right to leisure, play, and recreation. National Standard 8 - Children and young people in care are supported to participate in social and/or recreational activities of their choice, such as sporting, cultural or community activity - could be strengthened to include a stronger focus on leisure, play and fun, expanding the focus from structured activities and programs, to include the importance of play and joyful activities throughout children's lives. A recent announcement by the Queensland Government for the commencement of \$1,500 per child in care from 1 July 2025 for extra-curricular activities is a positive way to provide better access and equity for young people.⁷
- In submissions to government and parliamentary committees, PeakCare has continually supported the transfer of decision-making to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector.⁸ This relates to Article 3 of the UNDRIP – the right to self-determination.

PeakCare walks alongside the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP) in their important work alongside the Queensland Government, transferring decision-making responsibilities to the community-controlled sector through the Delegated Authority initiative.⁹ We believe National Standard 3 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities participate in decisions concerning the care and placement of their children and young people - should be amended, changing the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities from '*participating*' in decisions to '*leading*' decisions about the care and placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Priority Population Groups

PeakCare recognises there are multiple population groups over-represented in out-of-home care. It is our collective responsibility to work towards the strengthening of families and the continuous reduction of the use of the out-of-home care system - as well as the over-representation of these population groups. As Australia's first peoples and with dedicated rights under the UNDRIP, we believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people should have specific and dedicated standards, as per the current National Standards.

⁶ <https://create.org.au/create-pulse-survey-outcomes/>

⁷ https://www.families.qld.gov.au/_media/documents/foster-kinship-care/extra-curricular-act-guidelines.pdf

⁸ <https://peakcare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/PeakCare-preliminary-submission.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.qatsicpp.com.au/delegated-authority-frequently-asked-questions/>

We will support the expertise of our partners—other peak bodies with a dedicated focus on priority groups such as children with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse children, and LGBTQI+ children and young people—when contributing to the development of new standards relating to these population groups.

Principles and Values

The overarching principles of the National Standards emphasise transparency, consistency, and involvement of communities in decision-making processes. PeakCare supports these principles and advocates for their reinforcement in the updated standards. Our 2023 'Beyond a Checklist' report highlights the importance of a needs-based therapeutic environment, aligning with the principle of providing care that meets the individual needs of children and young people.¹⁰ Research supports the integration of organisational aspects, such as leadership and structure, into therapeutic models to enhance treatment outcomes.¹¹ We recommend that the updated National Standards explicitly incorporate these values to guide practice and policy.

It is recommended a strong focus on trauma-informed care practices, which support the healing process and prevent further harm are critical for children who have experienced abuse, as noted in our recent submission in response to Queensland's Child Safe Organisations Bill 2024.¹²

PeakCare supports the inclusion of trauma-informed care as an addition to the list of principles of the National Standards.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP)

The involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in decisions regarding their children is a fundamental aspect of the National Standards. PeakCare's (Queensland) Election Commitments 2024 called for First Nations family-focused and co-designed programs, emphasising the importance of self-determination and cultural safety.¹³

Studies have shown carers often face challenges in keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children connected with their community, culture, and country.¹⁴ It is recommended the updated standards strengthen the implementation of the ATSICPP, ensuring cultural connections are maintained and that placement decisions prioritise the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within their communities.

¹⁰ <https://peakcare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Beyond-a-Checklist-Report-December-2023.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.patricktomlinson.com/models-in-therapeutic-work-with-traumatized-children-parts-1-2-patrick-tomlinson-2014-revised-2021/18>

¹² <https://peakcare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/PeakCare-Submission-Child-Safe-Organisations-Bill-2024-V1.0.pdf>

¹³ https://peakcare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/PeakCare-Election-Commitments-2024_V1.0.pdf

¹⁴ <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-snapshots/identifying-strategies-better-support-foster-kinship-and-permanent>

Other Existing Policies and Frameworks

The National Standards should align with existing policies and frameworks to create a cohesive and comprehensive approach to child protection and out-of-home care.

PeakCare recommends alignment between the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations.

For example:

- The National Principles for Child Safe Organisations includes a focus on creating an environment of safety for children online. We recommend consideration for the development of a new National Standard that specifically protects children's online safety.
- The National Principles for Child Safe Organisations mandates child-friendly complaint mechanisms. We recommend a National Standard be developed, ensuring children feel safe reporting concerns.

CONCLUSION

PeakCare supports the revision of the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care and urges these reforms reflect contemporary research, prioritise the rights and voices of children and young people and align with existing policies and frameworks, to enhance the wellbeing of all children and young people in care.

Throughout this submission PeakCare has recommended additional areas for consideration, and we are available at any time to discuss these recommendations in more detail.

We appreciate the work of AIFS and SNAICC in supporting the Department of Social Services to work collaboratively with all key stakeholders—service providers, communities, and children—to create a framework that truly supports every child's best interests.

Yours sincerely,



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