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## SUBMISSION

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# Measuring What Matters

## THE TREASURY – CONSULTATION PHASE 2

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## ABOUT FRSA

As the national peak body for family and relationship services, FRSA has a critical leadership role in representing our extensive network of Member Organisations to support their interests and the children, families and communities they serve across Australia. FRSA plays a significant national role in building and analysing the knowledge and evidence base relating to child and family wellbeing, safety and resilience. We undertake research and work with government and non-government stakeholders to inform policy and shape systemic change.

### Our vision

An Australia where children, families and communities are safe strong and thriving.

### About our members

FRSA has 160 members, with 135 members in a direct service delivery role.<sup>1</sup> The range of services provided includes:

- Communities for Children Facilitating Partner
- Children and Parenting Support:
  - Children and Parenting Support
  - Budget Based Funding
  -
- Family and Relationship Services:
  - Family and Relationship Services
  - Specialised Family Violence Services
- Adult Specialist Support:
  - Find and Connect
  - Forced Adoption Support Services
- Reconnect
- Family Mental Health Support Services.
- Family Law Services:
  - Family Relationship Centres
  - Family Dispute Resolution
  - Family Law Counselling
  - Parenting Orders Program
  - Supporting Children after Separation
  - Children's Contact Services
  - Family Relationship Advice Line

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<sup>1</sup> FRSA's full members deliver family and relationship services. FRSA's associate, individual and honorary members hold policy, research and professional expertise in family law, family and relationships services and related social services.



## INTRODUCTION

FRSA supports the development of a national wellbeing framework, and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

Our approach is, when practicable, to consult with our Members on public reviews and consultations. Unfortunately, due to competing and time-critical priorities, we were unable to work directly with our members on this submission in the allocated six-week timeframe. We do note, however, that our submission is informed by the experience and wisdom of FRSA members, many of whom have been providing services to Australian children and families, for over 60 years.

## OUR FEEDBACK

Our feedback is provided in two ways:

- general observations about the consultation process and the draft policy themes and descriptions as presented in the Consultation Pack
- sector-grounded observations about what 'matters' and should be included in the framework.

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

### ***Consultation process***

FRSA understands that the Government has set itself the ambitious goal of releasing a new Measuring What Matters Statement this year. We are concerned that development of this important framework is not getting the development process it deserves, with the short consultation timeframes not allowing for robust and far-reaching consultation. For example, where is the space for children and young people's voices to contribute to the process?

### ***An anchor***

FRSA understands from the October 2022-23 Budget Papers that the purpose of the Measuring What Matters Statement is to contribute to "facilitating a more informed and inclusive policy dialogue on how to improve the quality of life of all Australians".<sup>2</sup>

Budget Paper No. 1 notes that overseas national wellbeing frameworks have:

- 'provided common understanding of objectives across levels of government
- enabled more consistent evaluation of policy against progress
- highlighted the interactions between different policy levers and how they impact people, to improve quality of life while avoiding unintended consequences.'<sup>3</sup>

While these are all desirable outcomes of a Wellbeing Framework, our view is that if we are truly to ensure good living standards for all Australians, the Measuring What Matters Statement should be directly tied to budget and policy-making processes.

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<sup>2</sup> Budget October 2022-23, Budget Strategy and Outlook: Budget Paper No. 1, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> P. 140.



To this end, we strongly support priorities outlined by the Australian Council of Social Services in its [submission](#) to phase one of the Consultation. That is:

- “The Wellbeing Framework should be a mechanism for driving policy and progress, not just for measuring it.
- The Wellbeing Framework should be embedded in the Budget policy development process.” (ACOSS Submission, p. 2.)

Our view is that the Measuring What Matters Statement needs to be anchored in a clear purpose that explicitly articulates how measuring what matters will be used to make a practical difference (for example, reducing poverty).

### **Five emerging policy themes**

The wellbeing framework could be structured in a number of different ways and include many different facets of individual and societal well-being. To this end, we support the approach of a framework that evolves over time, as articulated by the Treasurer (p. 1.) and through the Consultation Pack. An evolving approach to the New Zealand Living Standards Framework has allowed for some important changes over time to that framework such as better incorporating children's wellbeing and improving compatibility with te ao Māori and Pacific cultures.

We understand the Government's drive for simplicity; however, it is difficult to see how the proposed approach will achieve this. Unless all the complex facets of wellbeing are identified, understood and mapped, distillation to a functional simplicity cannot be achieved.

It is important that overarching themes provide logical umbrellas for more detailed descriptions of what will be measured under each theme and that the interconnected nature of those themes lends itself to measurement. In the proposed cascading model: Theme → descriptions → indicators, we are concerned that the interdependencies of different facets of wellbeing will be lost.

#### **Example 1**

Theme: Prosperous

Description:

People have access to education, knowledge and training so they have the skills to fully participate in society and the economy throughout their life.

In our view, education, knowledge and training is as much linked to individual wellbeing and to social cohesion as it is to economic prosperity. Framing education and learning within the context of this theme and using a cascading approach to developing indicators will we anticipate, lead to a prioritizing of economically based indicators. In turn, this could result in an absence of measures around, say, the importance of post-retirement learning to keep people socially and intellectually engaged. To this end, a stand-alone domain, such as ‘Education and lifelong learning’ (ACT Wellbeing Framework), or ‘knowledge and skills’ grounded in one of three themes (‘Levels’) – Our Individual and Collective Wellbeing’ (NZ Living Standards Framework) may provide a more holistic conceptual approach.



### Example 2

Theme: Healthy

Description: a society that ensures the health and development of its children.

Close relationships with family and friends, enabling healthy attachment, are critical to development in the early years. In placing the above description under the theme healthy, the critical relational aspect of child development may be minimized or lost. Of course, indicators could be included to reflect the relational aspect of child development under the theme 'Healthy' and/or the theme 'Cohesive'. This, however, lends itself to a more complex framework than that contemplated by The Treasury.

More broadly, while higher level themes (whatever they are) and aspects of wellbeing within those themes will necessarily be interconnected, our view is that the fit between some descriptions and some overarching themes is overly discretionary, indicating that the conceptual framework is not yet right. For example, the description: 'A society where people have enough time for family, friends, personal interests and their community', which currently sits under the theme 'Healthy', could equally sit under the theme 'Cohesive'. Similarly the description: 'A society that values the contributions of all regardless of health or ability', which currently sits under the theme 'Healthy' could equally sit under the theme 'Inclusive' or the theme 'Cohesive'. There is a sense that some descriptions, while important in themselves, have been arbitrarily allocated to a theme.

In short, we do not feel that the five emerging policy themes - Prosperous, Inclusive, Sustainable, Cohesive and Healthy – provide the best way for framing the many facets of wellbeing.

## SECTOR-GROUNDED OBSERVATIONS

### A focus on children and families

To our immense cost, children's safety, security, health and wellbeing have not been taken seriously as a matter of national policy.<sup>4</sup>

Our members deliver services to children, adults and families across the lifecourse with a focus on early intervention and prevention. In the early years, the focus is on parenting practices and supporting parents and carers to build healthy attachments with their little ones and provide positive emotional and physical care.

The Consultation Pack notes that "a common, recurring theme is that there should be a strong focus on children and families" and that the early years are critical to

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<sup>4</sup> Haslam D, Mathews B, Pacella R, Scott JG, Finkelhor D, Higgins DJ, Meinck F, Erskine HE, Thomas HJ, Lawrence D, Malacova E. (2023). *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report*. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology, p. 15.



a person's wellbeing over their lifetime and across generations (p. 4.). FRSA strongly supports this focus in the first Measuring What Matters Statement - and beyond.

FRSA further encourages Government to ensure that the Statement fully captures the wellbeing of children and young people, noting that childhood experiences – both positive and negative – all contribute to lifetime development, health, learning and future capabilities. The need to give greater emphasis to the wellbeing of children was a learning in the evolving NZ Living Standards Framework.<sup>5</sup>

We further point to Minister Rishworth's and Minister Aly's statement in the Foreword to the Early Years Strategy [Discussion Paper](#):

By focusing on the early years, we are safeguarding and uplifting the wellbeing and skills of the next generation. This will enable children to reach their full potential, and has broader, positive implications for our communities, the economy, and the nation across current and future generations. (p. 3.)

We encourage the Treasury to ensure that valuing children and ensuring each child has a good start in life is strongly articulated in the Measuring What Matters Statement.

Against the backdrop of the recently released findings of the [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#), which found that child maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and exposure to domestic violence) is widespread and is associated with persistent harm - e.g. mental health disorders, health risk behaviours and higher health service utilization – impacting individual and family wellbeing and imposing costs on the health and broader service system, the case for including a strong focus on children and families is compelling.

FRSA acknowledges the Australian Institute of Family Studies' (AIFS) [submission](#) to phase one of this consultation and, in particular, we support AIFS' recommendation that "an Australian wellbeing framework include indicators of the functioning and quality of family relationships" (AIFS Submission, p. 5.). AIFS has further suggested ways to ensure a strong emphasis on children's wellbeing:

- "Draw on child wellbeing frameworks when defining and selecting domains and indicators. Child centred frameworks are distinguished by a greater focus on outcomes that are meaningful to children and are framed in ways that are important to children and their experiences."
- "Include a range of children's views and experiences in the development of indicators, collection of data and reporting of results" (AIFS Submission, p. 3.).

### *Relationships*

FRSA further notes its support for measuring relationships and their impacts on wellbeing as outlined in the Relationships Australia [submission](#) to phase one of the consultation.

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<sup>5</sup> The Treasury 28 October 2021). *The Living Standards Framework 2021*, New Zealand Government, p. 7 & 20.



### *Affording life's essentials*

We further note our support for a wellbeing framework that includes strong reference to 'a society that allows all people to afford life's essentials' (as currently described in the Consultation Pack under the theme 'Inclusive'). We consider that financial and housing security is a pre-condition for children and families to be able to thrive. FRSA Members regularly tell us that clients are increasingly presenting for family and relationships services while also experiencing housing and income stress. In many cases, financial and housing stress is itself placing pressure on families and relationships, generating family conflict and breakdown. When basic needs are not met, the flow-on effects can be profound, resulting in multiple health, learning and social problems and increased need for social and health supports.

Given the current housing crisis, we recommend that the wellbeing framework includes specific reference to, and measurement of, access to secure, safe and affordable housing, to inform future policy and budget development.

### **Safety**

FRSA supports the focus on safety in all domains of life – private and public spheres, online and in person – as outlined in table 1 of the Consultation Pack. 'A society where people feel safe at home, online and in the community' is critical and it is important this is measured, and policy responses are developed accordingly. We recognize that safety is important across all spheres of life – at work, in residential settings such as aged care, in hospitals and so on – and for all people, at every stage of their lives.

We wish here to emphasise the importance of safety for children and young people. We again note the findings of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study which presents the stark reality that many children do not feel physically, emotionally or psychologically safe at home. It is, of course, important that we not only measure child safety but develop policy responses to improve the safety of our children and young people.

### **Access to justice**

The table of draft emerging policy themes and descriptions in the Consultation Pack is silent on access to justice. We refer to National Legal Aid's [submission](#) to phase one of the consultation, which expressly recommends the inclusion of access to justice measurements in an Australian Wellbeing Framework. We concur with this recommendation.

National Legal Aid states:

Access to justice and the provision of legal assistance to people experiencing disadvantage is often understood as only impacting the justice system, implementing a wellbeing measurement framework would highlight and broaden understanding of the community and individual impacts legal assistance has across a range of social policy and systems including community resilience and financial independence, ending violence against women, child protection, disability and social security. (Submission, p. 2.)



We briefly reflect on access to justice within the family law system and the impacts on wellbeing that a lack of access to justice can present. A 2014 report by the Productivity Commission estimated that around 8% of households across Australia were eligible for legal aid without having to make a contribution, whereas between 12-14% of households fell below the poverty line (using different poverty measures).<sup>6</sup>

This means a pool of litigants for whom legal costs are prohibitive but only a narrow pool of people who are eligible for legal aid. Within the context of family law, research on self-represented litigants has found that in cases involving violence related trauma, a victim/survivor's capacity to present their case in a court is impeded.<sup>7</sup> This can result in unfair and/or unsafe consent orders that may negatively impact a party's future financial prospects and/or their future safety and the safety and needs of their children.

## **Conclusion**

FRSA would be happy to discuss with the Treasury any aspects of this submission that may benefit from further explanation.

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<sup>6</sup> Productivity Commission (2014). *Access to Justice Arrangements: Inquiry Report, Appendix H*.

<sup>7</sup> Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2020). Exploring the impact and effect of self-representation by one or both parties in family law proceedings involving allegations of family violence: Key findings and future directions (Research to policy and practice, 24/2020). Sydney: ANROWS, p. 7.