

Next Steps for Our Kids 2022-2030: Learning and Accountability Framework

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which the ACT child and family system operates and pay our respects to their Elders past and present. We recognise and honour the enduring strength, resilience and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and acknowledge their continuing connection to Country, culture, kin and community.

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the Traditional Custodians of the Canberra region and recognise that the ACT is also home to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from many Nations across Australia.

We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities hold deep knowledge, strengths and cultural practices that are essential to the wellbeing of children and young people, and to the ongoing work of reform. We acknowledge the importance of self-determination and commit to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in the generation and use of evidence to strengthen outcomes for children, young people, families and communities.

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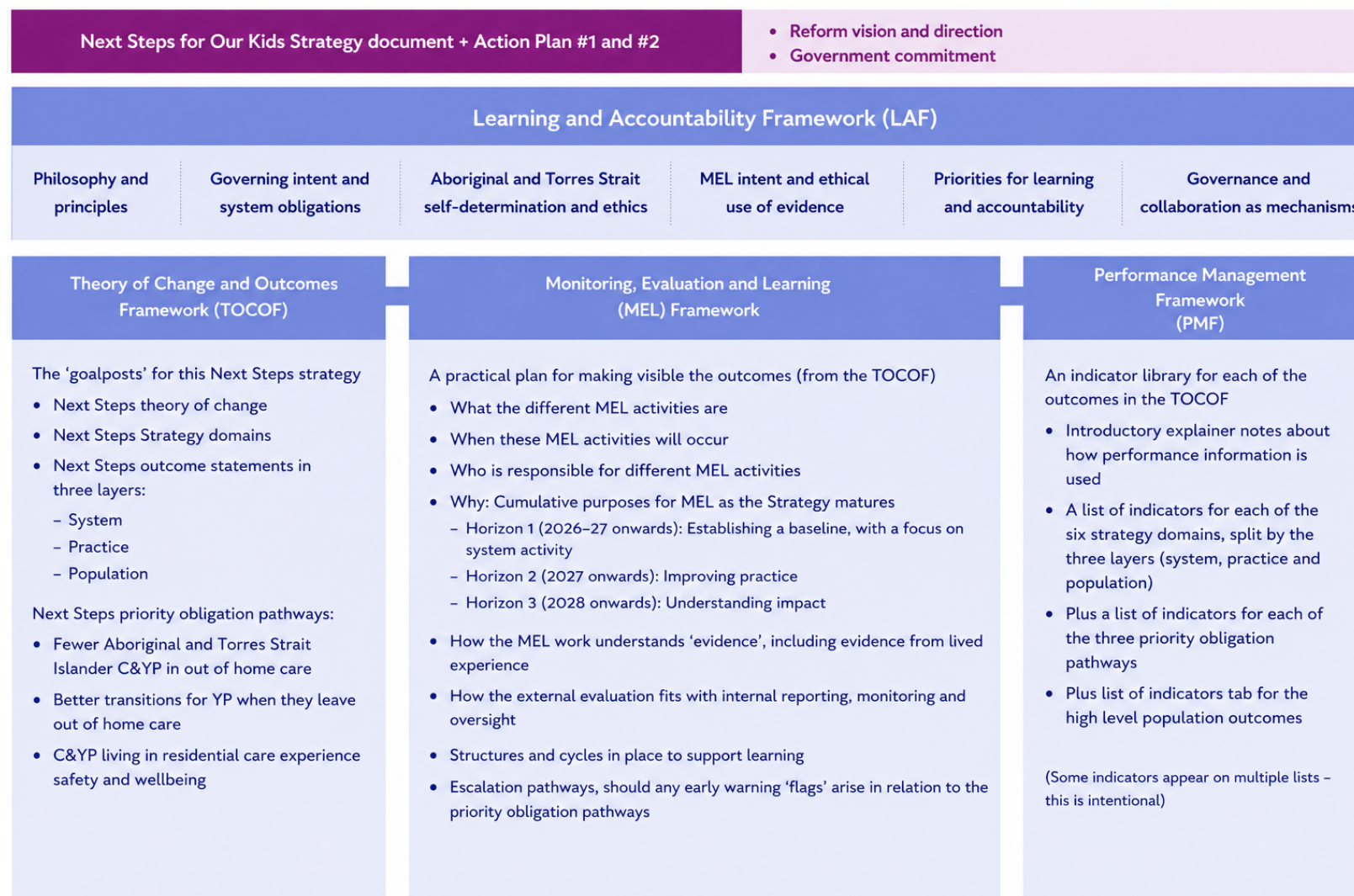
Abbreviations

ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
ICIP	Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property
IDS	Indigenous Data Sovereignty
LAF	Learning and Accountability Framework
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
OOHC	Out-of-Home Care
PMF	Performance Management Framework
ToC	Theory of Change
TOCOF	Theory of Change and Outcomes Framework

Overview

The Next Steps for Our Kids Strategy 2022-2030 (the Strategy) is a long-term reform of the ACT child and family system. It aims to shift the system toward earlier support for families, reduced reliance on statutory intervention, and create better outcomes for children and young people.

Figure 1: Overview of the Next Steps evidence suite



Executive summary

Purpose of the Framework

The *Next Steps Learning and Accountability Framework* (LAF) establishes how outcomes, evidence, learning and accountability are understood and applied across the child, youth and family system under the *Next Steps for Our Kids Strategy 2022–2030* ('Next Steps' / 'The Strategy').

The Framework provides a clear and durable foundation for outcomes, learning and accountability across the child, youth and family system. It clarifies what the system is collectively accountable for achieving, how evidence and lived experience inform decision-making, and how progress is assessed over time.

The Framework also establishes the principles, governance expectations and ethical boundaries that guide the implementation of downstream instruments, including the Theory of Change and Outcomes Framework (TOCOF); the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework; and the Performance Management Framework (PMF). The PMF encompasses performance expectations and associated contractual arrangements.

Together, these instruments enable the ACT Government to monitor progress against its commitments under Next Steps and related policy frameworks, including commitments to improving outcomes for children, young people and families, strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and improving equity across the population.

Why the Framework is needed

Improving outcomes for children, young people and families requires more than individual programs or services performing well. Evidence and lived experience consistently show that outcomes are shaped by system-wide factors including policy settings, legal frameworks, housing availability, workforce capacity, cultural safety and cross-directorate coordination.

Historically, reporting has often focused on activity, outputs or compliance rather than whether the system as a whole is achieving meaningful outcomes for children, young people and families.

The Framework addresses this gap by establishing a system-level approach to learning and accountability. It clarifies how the ACT Government stewards the system, how evidence is interpreted, and how emerging risks or unintended consequences are identified and addressed over time.

What the Framework establishes

The Framework establishes four core elements for the Next Steps reform.

- First, it defines the outcomes the system is collectively accountable for achieving for children, young people, families and communities, including safety, stability, wellbeing, cultural continuity and equity.
- Second, it articulates a system-level Theory of Change (ToC) describing how reforms in policy, governance, practice and collaboration are expected to improve outcomes over time.
- Third, it establishes a monitoring, evaluation and learning approach designed to support effective oversight and decision making. This approach focuses on testing reform assumptions, identifying emerging risks and enabling timely course correction. It also provides the basis for evaluating whether the ACT Government's commitments under Next Steps and related reform frameworks are being realised over time.
- Fourth, it establishes governance and escalation arrangements that connect learning and evidence to decision-making authority, ensuring that systemic issues can be addressed transparently and at the appropriate level.

The Framework also embeds the ACT Government's commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance in system oversight and decision-making, and the application of Indigenous Data Governance principles and practices.

What the Framework enables

By establishing a coherent and authoritative approach to outcomes, learning and accountability, the Framework strengthens the ACT Government's ability to steward the child, youth and family system.

It provides a stable basis for interpreting evidence, informing policy and investment decisions, and maintaining accountability for outcomes that matter for children, young people and families. It also enables the ACT Government to monitor progress against key reform commitments and to understand whether system changes are translating into improved outcomes over time.

The Framework also guides the implementation of the downstream instruments that operationalise these commitments while remaining consistent with the intent and boundaries set out in this document.

Together, these elements support a child-centred system that is accountable, transparent and capable of learning and adapting over the life of the reform.

1 Introduction and purpose

1.1 Purpose of the Learning and Accountability Framework

The LAF is designed to provide a clear and durable foundation for decision-making as the Next Steps reform evolves over time.

The LAF articulates the role of the ACT Government as system steward, makes explicit the purpose of the reform, the ToC that underpins it, and the outcomes for which the system is collectively accountable. It also distinguishes between system responsibilities, the contribution of service providers, and the lived experience of children, young people and families.

A core function of the LAF is to hold system accountability. It recognises that many outcomes sought under *Next Steps* depend on policy settings, thresholds, workforce, housing, courts and cross-government decisions, not solely on service delivery. The LAF therefore provides clarity about where accountability sits within ACT Government, including relevant directorates exercising responsibilities across policy, commissioning, regulation and statutory functions as system stewards, and where service providers contribute within that broader context.

1.2 Position of the LAF within the reform architecture

The LAF is deliberately positioned upstream of performance management and contracting. It sets the principles, ethical boundaries and governance expectations that have directed and guided downstream instruments, including the TOCOF, the MEL Framework, and the PMF. This sequencing ensured that performance measures and contracts reflect settled commitments and learning principles.

The LAF also gives explicit expression to the ACT Government's commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, and to Indigenous Data Governance (IDG), including Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP). These commitments are articulated as system obligations and guide all subsequent design, implementation and interpretation decisions.

By establishing a shared and authoritative approach to outcomes, learning and accountability, the LAF provides assurance that evidence and performance information will be used consistently, ethically and in line with stated intent, while still enabling learning, adaptation and continuous improvement over time.

The purpose of the LAF is to:

- establish a shared understanding of the outcomes the system is accountable for achieving
- set clear expectations for how evidence, lived experience and performance information will be used
- support learning, adaptation and improvement over time

- provide a defensible basis for assurance that decisions and actions are aligned with the stated intent.

1.3 Who the Framework is for

The LAF is used by the ACT Government, service providers, the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, oversight entities and community partners to support shared understanding of system obligations and how progress is interpreted. This includes:

- by the ACT Government, to guide stewardship of the system, inform policy and investment decisions, and support assurance and accountability
- by service providers, to understand the broader system context in which they contribute to outcomes and how performance information is interpreted
- by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance bodies, to exercise leadership in governance and decision-making, shape priorities and interpret outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families, consistent with self-determination, IDG and IDS
- by oversight entities and statutory role holders, to support independent scrutiny of system performance, uphold legislative and rights-based obligations, and provide assurance that accountability boundaries are operating as intended
- by communities and partners, to provide transparency about commitments, expectations and how progress is understood.

The LAF also provides the foundation for:

- the TOCOF, which sets out the pathways through which reform is expected to work, and the domain outcomes the system is accountable for
- the MEL Framework, which sets out how learning, evaluation and evidence use occurs
- the PMF, which translates settled outcomes and learning principles into performance expectations and contractual arrangements.

1.4 What the Framework does not do

The LAF does not set indicators, targets or operational plans. These elements are addressed through subsequent, aligned instruments developed in accordance with the intent and principles set out here.

1.5 This document within the Next Steps reform evidence architecture

The Next Steps for Our Kids Strategy is supported by a suite of complementary documents. Together, these documents establish the reform's governance, describe how change is expected to occur, define how progress will be measured, and explain how evidence will be used to support learning, accountability and continuous improvement.

Table 1: Next Steps reform evidence architecture

Document	Primary purpose	This document answers...
ACT Next Steps Strategy and Action Plans	Sets the reform vision, priorities and commitments.	<i>What is the reform seeking to achieve?</i>
Learning and Accountability Framework (LAF)	Establishes the governance, accountability, ethical principles and evidence philosophy for the reform.	<i>How will the reform be governed and how will evidence be used?</i>
Theory of Change and Outcomes Framework (TOCOF)	Describes how reform is expected to lead to improved system, practice and population outcomes.	<i>How is change expected to happen?</i>
Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework	Defines the evidence architecture, evaluation approach and learning processes that will test whether reform is working.	<i>How will we know whether change is occurring?</i>
Performance Management Framework (PMF)	Specifies the indicators and measures used to monitor implementation, system performance and outcomes.	<i>What will be measured?</i>
Performance Management Framework User Guide	Provides definitions, calculation methods and guidance for interpreting indicators and reporting performance information.	<i>How should indicators be understood and used?</i>
Learning Plan	The Learning Plan provides the practical guidance for coordinating learning activities.	<i>When and how will learning occur?</i>

This document explains how evidence will be generated, interpreted and used to support learning, adaptation and independent evaluation. It should be read alongside the other documents in the suite, each of which performs a distinct but complementary role within the Next Steps evidence and accountability architecture.

2 The reform context and case for change

2.1 Limits of the current system

Next Steps is the ACT Government's response to persistent challenges in achieving safe, stable and culturally appropriate outcomes for children and young people in, or at risk of entering, out-of-home care (OOHC) as well as care-experienced young people transitioning to adulthood and independence. Although sustained efforts have been made to improve policy, practice and service delivery, outcomes have not improved consistently or equitably, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

The current system has not consistently delivered the outcomes intended for children, young people and families:

- **Outcomes** have been uneven, with too much variability depending on circumstance, location or pathway through the system.
- **Decision-making** has often been fragmented across policy, funding, service delivery and oversight functions. As a result, reporting has frequently focused on activity or compliance rather than whether the system is achieving meaningful outcomes for children, young people and families.

These challenges point to the limits of service-by-service or program-level responses. The drivers of outcomes for children, young people and families extend beyond any single organisation or intervention and are shaped by system-wide factors, including policy thresholds, legal frameworks, housing availability, workforce capacity, cultural safety, decision-making mechanisms and cross-directorate coordination. Improving outcomes therefore requires a system-level response, with the ACT Government exercising clear stewardship over how the system functions, learns and adapts over time.

2.2 Lived experience and system impact

The case for change is reinforced by the lived experience of children, young people, families and carers. These experiences consistently point to the importance of stability, continuity, cultural connection, safe relationships and systems that respond to people with respect and consistency. They also highlight the cumulative impact of system decisions over time, particularly where children, young people and families experience multiple transitions, inconsistent decision-making or limited opportunities to influence matters affecting them.

These insights underscore the need for reform that focuses not only on individual interactions but also on how the system functions as a whole.

Next Steps responds to the needs, rights and responsibilities of a wide group of stakeholders who are directly or indirectly affected by the child, youth and family system. These include children and young people, birth families, kin, carers,

government and community sector workforces, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), oversight bodies and statutory role holders, partner services, and ministers and directorates responsible for system stewardship.

The LAF recognises that outcomes, learning and accountability must reflect shared priorities of safety, wellbeing and equity, while also recognising the distinct interests and responsibilities of different stakeholders.

2.3 Persistent inequities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

A central dimension of the reform context is the persistent over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in OOHHC, which reflects long-standing systemic inequities and reinforces the need for a system-level response. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to enter and remain in OOHHC at rates many times higher than non-Indigenous children and young people, and they are disproportionately represented relative to the overall child population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2023).

In the ACT, this over-representation has been recognised as a critical and enduring issue, with ACT Government commitments articulated through *Our Booris, Our Way* (the ACT Government Framework guiding reform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families) and subsequent implementation reporting, which emphasise the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, culturally safe decision-making and system accountability (ACT Government, 2018). These patterns underscore the reform imperative to address system structures, accountability, drivers and responses in ways that are equitable, culturally grounded and sustained over time.

2.4 Position within the ACT policy architecture

The LAF also sits within the broader policy architecture of the ACT Government, including the *ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019–2028*, which sets the overarching partnership framework between the ACT Government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community for achieving equitable outcomes across government policy and services.

The LAF is grounded in this context. It responds to the need for greater clarity about what the system is collectively accountable for, how progress is understood, and how evidence and experience are used to support learning and improvement. By setting out a coherent approach to outcomes, learning, and accountability at a system level, the LAF supports Next Steps to move toward sustained, measurable and equitable change.

3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and system obligations

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination is a foundational and non-negotiable commitment under Next Steps. It positions self-determination not as a program feature or policy preference, but as a system obligation that applies across policy, decision-making, service delivery, monitoring, evaluation and accountability.

3.1 System obligations and policy commitments

These obligations are grounded in legislative, policy and partnership commitments that shape the ACT Government's responsibilities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families.

These include the [*ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019–2028*](#), which establishes a long-term partnership between the ACT Government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body to advance self-determination and equitable outcomes across government policy, programs and services. The Agreement sets the overarching direction for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs in the ACT and commits government and community partners to work together to improve social, cultural, economic and community outcomes.

These commitments are reinforced by the [*Our Booris, Our Way*](#) reforms, which provide the ACT Government's framework for addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system. The reforms commit government to strengthening Aboriginal leadership, culturally grounded decision-making and shared accountability for outcomes, with the goal of ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are supported to grow up safely in their families, cultures and communities.

These commitments also align with national reform directions under the [*National Agreement on Closing the Gap*](#). The Agreement commits governments to structural reform that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, including formal partnerships and shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, strengthening the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, and improving the governance and use of data to support accountability and community leadership in decision-making.

Together with legislative frameworks including the *Human Rights Act 2004 (ACT)* and the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Act 2008 (ACT)*, these commitments establish a clear expectation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, cultural leadership and self-determination is embedded in how the child and family system is governed, how decisions affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families are made, and how evidence and accountability are interpreted under the Next Steps reform.

Under the LAF, outcomes and evidence relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families are interpreted in a manner consistent with these commitments and with the partnership principles established under the [*ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement*](#).

The LAF creates an obligation for the system to:

1. uphold **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination** as a core system responsibility, guiding how decisions are made across the OOHC system
2. embed **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and leadership** in system stewardship, including priority-setting, decision-making and interpretation of evidence
3. embed **Indigenous Data Governance** principles in the collection, use, storage and reporting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data, with considerations of IDS and ICIP
4. recognise that **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes are distinct** and must be understood on their own terms, not assumed from general population results
5. ensure that downstream instruments (outcomes frameworks, MEL arrangements, indicators, performance management and contracts) are **designed and applied consistently with these obligations**.

3.2 Aboriginal governance and system stewardship

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and leadership are essential to how the system functions. This leadership is required not only in program design and service delivery, but also in governance and oversight of the system. This includes shaping priorities, participating in governance arrangements, contributing to the interpretation of system evidence, and informing decisions about how the child and family system evolves over time.

Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance in this way reflects the commitments to partnership and shared decision-making established under the *ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement*, the *Our Booris, Our Way* reforms, and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It recognises that improving outcomes requires Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in how systems are designed, governed and assessed.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance is therefore embedded as part of how accountability is exercised under this framework.

3.3 Evidence, data governance and interpretation of outcomes

The LAF also embeds Indigenous Data Governance, IDS and ICIP principles as foundational.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data is recognised as relating to peoples, cultures, communities and Nations rather than simply administrative information.

Decisions about the collection, use, interpretation, storage, reporting and ownership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data must be culturally appropriate and safe, transparent, and governed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority.

Limitations in data availability do not diminish system obligations. Where data is incomplete, this is treated as a development priority rather than a reason to narrow the intent of the framework.

A clear distinction is made between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes and general population outcomes. While all children and young people are entitled to safety, stability and wellbeing, the outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families are shaped by specific historical, cultural and systemic factors, including the impacts of colonisation, historical trauma, racism and structural inequity. Outcomes therefore require dedicated attention, governance and interpretation, rather than being subsumed within population-level measures.

Progress in outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people and families cannot be inferred solely from overall system performance.

These commitments apply across the *Next Steps* reform and extend to all downstream instruments developed under this framework, including outcomes frameworks, monitoring, evaluation and learning arrangements, indicators, performance management arrangements and contractual mechanisms.

Where tensions arise between efficiency, feasibility, data availability or other operational considerations and the commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination set out in this section, those commitments guide interpretation, decision-making and resolution across the *Next Steps* reform.

4 Vision for children, young people, families and communities

The vision of *Next Steps* is a child and family system in which children and young people are safe, supported and able to thrive, families are strengthened to care for their children and young people wherever possible, and communities are partners in nurturing wellbeing, connection and belonging.

This vision reflects the ACT Government's broader commitment to wellbeing as a guiding principle for policy and decision-making. It aligns with the *ACT Wellbeing Framework*, which recognises that the wellbeing of children and young people is shaped by safety, health, identity, connection, participation and material security, and that government has a responsibility to steward the conditions that enable individuals, families and communities to flourish.

Under *Next Steps*, safety and wellbeing are understood as outcomes that emerge from stable relationships, continuity of care, cultural connection and responsive systems that support children, young people and families over time. This approach aligns with *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*, which emphasises system-wide responsibility for improving outcomes rather than reliance on individual programs or services.

For children and young people, the vision is of growing up with a sense of security, identity and voice. Children and young people are supported to maintain meaningful connections to family, culture, community and Country, and are able to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families, this vision is inseparable from self-determination, cultural continuity and community authority. It aligns with *Our Booris, Our Way*, which commits the ACT Government to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led decision-making, culturally grounded systems and accountability for outcomes for children and families.

For families, the vision is of a system that works with them: one that recognises strengths, responds proportionately to risk and provides timely, coordinated support that strengthens families' capacity to care for their children and young people.

For communities and carers, the vision is of partnership and shared responsibility. Communities are recognised as critical contributors to children's wellbeing, and carers are recognised and supported as partners in providing safe, stable and nurturing environments for the children and young people in their care.

The LAF supports this vision by establishing a clear basis for how outcomes are understood, how evidence will inform decision-making and oversight, and how learning and accountability will guide decision-making over time.

The LAF also recognises that children, young people and families experience the system differently depending on their identities, circumstances and structural conditions. Applying an intersectional lens supports a more accurate understanding of safety, wellbeing and equity across the system and strengthens the system's ability to respond to diverse experiences and needs.

5 Theory of Change (TOC)

The *Next Steps* reform is underpinned by a system-level ToC that explains how changes in policy, governance, practice and relationships are expected to lead to improved outcomes for children, young people and families over time. The ToC operates at the level of the whole system, rather than individual programs or services, reflecting the reform's intent to address structural drivers of harm and inequity.

The ToC makes explicit the causal pathways and assumptions through which reform is expected to work. Rather than claiming certainty, it provides a shared, testable account of how change is expected to occur, so that assumptions can be examined, learning can occur, and adjustments can be made as implementation unfolds.

5.1 Core causal pathways

At a system level, the ToC proposes that improved outcomes for children, young people and families occur when the child and family system operates in ways that prioritise prevention, strengthen families and maintain cultural and community connections.

This reflects the assumptions underpinning the reform – that outcomes improve when the system collectively:

- prioritises earlier, voluntary and culturally safe support for families, particularly before risks escalate to statutory intervention
- strengthens families through trauma-informed, restorative and non-stigmatising approaches that recognise family strengths and capacities
- embeds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and cultural leadership in decisions affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families
- operates as a coordinated network of services and decision-makers across the life course, rather than as fragmented programs or isolated interventions
- uses evidence, lived experience and data to inform learning, identify emerging risks and support adaptation over time.

These pathways reflect an understanding that outcomes are shaped not only by the availability of services, but also by how the system behaves, how decisions are made and how children, young people and families experience interactions with the system.

Where children and young people remain in OOHC, the system remains responsible for ensuring that care experiences are stable, culturally safe and developmentally supportive, and that pathways to permanence, belonging and wellbeing are actively pursued.

5.2 System behaviours that must change

Achieving the outcomes sought under *Next Steps* requires shifts in how the child and family system behaves. The ToC identifies several system behaviours that must change in order for the reform to succeed.

First, the system must move from predominantly crisis-driven responses toward earlier engagement with families, providing accessible and proportionate support before risks escalate.

Second, decision-making authority must be exercised closer to children, young people, families and communities. This includes strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and community-controlled leadership in decisions affecting Aboriginal children, young people and families.

Third, services and decision-making processes must operate as a coordinated continuum of support. Reducing fragmentation across policy, commissioning, service delivery and oversight functions is essential to improving continuity for children, young people and families, particularly at transition points.

Finally, trust, transparency and cultural safety must be treated as essential system conditions rather than secondary considerations. Families are more likely to engage early and sustain involvement with services when they experience the system as fair, respectful and culturally safe.

These shifts in system behaviour influence whether families seek support early, whether risks escalate into statutory intervention, and whether children and young people experience stability and connection over time.

5.3 Conditions required for success

The ToC is explicit that reform success depends on a set of enabling conditions, including:

- sufficient scale, reach and accessibility of commissioned services
- workforce capability and support consistent with trauma-responsive and restorative practice
- stable and aligned funding settings
- sustained investment in a strong, culturally grounded service sector, including strengthening ACCOs
- governance arrangements that support shared responsibility and coordination
- data systems that support learning, not just reporting.

Where these conditions are not present, the ToC anticipates that outcomes will stall or deteriorate, even where individual services perform well.

5.4 System stewardship and provider contribution

A central feature of the ToC is the clear separation between system stewardship and service provider contribution. The ACT Government, in its role as system steward, is responsible for:

- setting policy and thresholds
- governing decision-making authority and accountability
- commissioning services at appropriate scale and mix
- enabling collaboration and continuity across the system
- ensuring that evidence is used to inform adaptation and improvement.

Service providers, including ACT Government Child Youth and Family Services, contribute to outcomes through the quality, accessibility and cultural responsiveness of the services they provide, and through participation in coordinated responses. However, they cannot be held accountable for system-level outcomes that are shaped by policy, governance or resourcing decisions beyond their control.

5.5 Use of the Theory of Change over time

The ToC functions as a living framework. It provides:

- a shared narrative for understanding reform intent
- a basis for developing Strategy-level and domain-level hypotheses
- a foundation for monitoring, evaluation and learning
- a diagnostic tool to understand why outcomes are or are not improving.

By making causal assumptions explicit, the ToC enables accountability to focus on what must change in the system, rather than assigning blame when outcomes do not improve. It supports continuous learning, informed stewardship and transparent decision-making and communication over the life of the reform.

6 Outcome commitments

This section describes the outcomes the system is collectively accountable for achieving under *Next Steps*. These outcomes describe the changes that matter for children, young people, families and communities. They articulate what success looks like, while deliberately separating outcomes from the indicators, measures and performance mechanisms that will be used to understand progress over time.

The outcomes reflect commitments set out in the *Next Steps*, the *ACT Wellbeing Framework*, *Our Booris*, *Our Way*, and the national *Safe and Supported* framework. Together, these documents establish a shared direction for reform, while recognising that outcomes are shaped by system-wide decisions and conditions, not by individual services acting alone.

6.1 Outcome areas

The system is accountable for outcomes across three areas.

Children and young people

Children and young people experience safety, stability and wellbeing over time. They are supported to grow with a strong sense of identity, belonging and voice, and to maintain meaningful connections to family, culture and community and Country.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, outcomes explicitly include cultural continuity, safety and self-determination, consistent with *Our Booris*, *Our Way* and national commitments under *Safe and Supported*. Evidence consistently demonstrates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families achieve stronger and more sustainable outcomes when supported through ACCOs and Aboriginal-led models of care. The system therefore recognise and support the role of ACCOs as critical contributors to culturally grounded and self-determined outcomes.

Families

Families are supported and strengthened to care for their children and young people wherever possible. They experience the system as fair, culturally safe, proportionate and responsive, and receive timely, coordinated support that recognises family strengths and addresses needs early. Families are recognised and engaged as partners in decision-making.

System behaviour and functioning

The child, youth and family system functions as a coherent, coordinated system, rather than a collection of disconnected programs. Decision-making is transparent, culturally safe and consistent over time. The system prioritises prevention and early support, reduces unnecessary escalation, and uses evidence and lived experience to learn and adapt. The ACT Government exercises clear stewardship of policy, commissioning and governance, in line with its role as system steward.

6.2 Population-level equity

Outcomes improve equitably across the population, with particular attention to groups who experience disproportionate harm or disadvantage. This includes a clear and sustained focus on reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC, in alignment with *Our Booris, Our Way* and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Progress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families is understood on its own terms and is not inferred from general population outcomes.

6.3 Non-negotiable outcomes

Some outcomes are non-negotiable and apply across the reform. These include:

- the safety and wellbeing of children and young people
- the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to maintain connection to culture, family, community and Country
- the exercise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination in decisions affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families
- system accountability for outcomes that cannot be delegated to individual services.

These outcomes are commitments of the system as a whole. They apply regardless of implementation challenges, data limitations or changes in service arrangements.

6.4 Relationship to measurement and performance

Indicators, targets and performance expectations are specified in the TOCOF, the MEL Framework and the PMF, which operationalise the commitments set out here.

7 How we will learn, adapt and remain accountable

Monitoring, evaluation and learning supports informed system stewardship, continuous improvement and transparent accountability. In a complex system where outcomes are shaped by multiple interacting factors, monitoring, evaluation and learning help the ACT Government understand whether the reform is working as intended, why outcomes are or are not improving, and what adjustments may be required.

7.1 Balancing learning and accountability

The LAF establishes a deliberate balance between learning and accountability. Accountability ensures that the system remains responsible for its commitments to children, young people, families and communities. Learning ensures that the system can adapt in response to new evidence, evolving circumstances and the realities of implementation.

Under this framework:

- **accountability** focuses on whether the system is acting consistently with its stated intent, obligations and principles
- **learning** focuses on understanding what is working, what is not working and why, so that the system can respond appropriately.

Maintaining this balance helps avoid compliance-driven approaches that discourage openness while still providing a credible basis for assurance and oversight.

Learning under the LAF relies on collaborative interpretation of evidence across ACT Government, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance bodies, ACCOs, service providers and other partners. Considering multiple perspectives strengthens understanding of system behaviour and supports more effective responses to emerging issues.

Learning processes also apply an intersectional lens, recognising that the experiences of children, young people and families are shaped by multiple social, cultural and structural factors. Considering these intersections supports more accurate interpretation of evidence and strengthens the system's ability to identify emerging risks affecting particular groups of children and families.

7.2 Use of lived experience and qualitative evidence

Understanding how the system functions in practice requires attention to lived experience. The experiences of children, young people, families, carers and communities provide critical insight into whether system behaviours align with stated commitments and whether reforms are producing meaningful change.

Lived experience evidence:

- complements quantitative and administrative data

- helps interpret patterns in outcomes and system behaviour
- identifies unintended consequences and emerging issues that may not be visible through administrative data alone.

The use of lived experience evidence will be guided by ethical principles, including respect, consent, cultural safety and appropriate governance, consistent with IDG, including IDS and ICIP.

7.3 Early warning and escalation

A central function of monitoring, learning and evaluation under *Next Steps* is to support early identification of emerging risks.

Rather than relying solely on retrospective reporting, MEL processes aim to identify patterns or signals that may indicate system pressures, unintended consequences or risks to children and families.

This may include:

- patterns observed in administrative data
- insights from lived experience and community engagement
- workforce observations and professional judgement
- emerging issues identified through service delivery or governance forums.

Where potential risks are identified, they will be addressed proportionately and escalated through governance structures where necessary. Escalation is intended to support resolution and improvement rather than assign blame.

Escalation pathways under the LAF operate alongside, and do not replace, the independent statutory functions of the Children and Young People Commissioner and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Commissioner.

7.4 Monitoring, evaluation and learning as a living function

Monitoring, evaluation and learning under *Next Steps* are intended to support ongoing oversight and improvement rather than a periodic or one-off exercise.

The assumptions embedded in the ToC are tested over time. As evidence accumulates, the system learns from experience and adjusts policy, commissioning and practice settings accordingly.

The LAF therefore provides the foundation for subsequent monitoring, evaluation and learning arrangements, including the MEL Framework, indicators and performance mechanisms. These instruments operationalise how evidence is generated and interpreted while remaining consistent with the intent and ethical boundaries set out in this Framework.

In this way, monitoring, evaluation and learning operate as an ongoing feature of system governance, ensuring that the LAF continues to inform decision-making as the reform evolves.

8 Using evidence responsibly and ethically

This section establishes the ethical boundaries for how data, evidence and lived experience is utilised under *Next Steps*. It is intended to reinforce trust with children, young people, families, communities and service providers, and to ensure that evidence supports learning, accountability and improvement without misuse or causing harm.

8.1 Ethical use of data and evidence

Under *Next Steps*, data and evidence are used to support system stewardship, learning and accountability. Their purpose is to help the system understand patterns in outcomes, identify emerging risks and inform improvement. Evidence is interpreted with appropriate governance and respect for privacy, cultural safety and the commitments set out in this Framework.

The MEL Framework clarifies which information is publicly reported, which is shared within governance forums, and which remains internal to support learning and improvement, consistent with transparency and privacy obligations.

The LAF places clear limits on the use of data and evidence. In particular:

- data collected for learning and improvement will not be repurposed for compliance or enforcement without appropriate governance and transparency
- population-level data will not be used to infer responsibility or performance of individual actors
- gaps or limitations in data will not be used to narrow system accountability or weaken stated commitments
- evidence will be interpreted in context, recognising the complexity of the system and the limits of any single data source.

8.2 Respect for lived experience contributions

Lived experience is recognised as a critical form of evidence for understanding how the system is functioning in practice. Contributions from children, young people, families, carers, communities and ACCOs are treated with dignity, respect and care.

Under this Framework:

- lived experience input is used to inform learning and interpretation
- participation is voluntary and supported by clear information
- lived experience evidence is considered alongside quantitative and administrative data, rather than being considered in isolation.

Ethical use of lived experience evidence is essential to maintaining trust and avoiding further harm.

Safeguards for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data

The use of data relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities is governed in accordance with Indigenous Data Governance principles and the commitments set out in Section 3. These include respect for IDS and ICIP protocols.

8.3 Intersectionality in evidence and interpretation

The LAF recognises that the experiences and outcomes of children, young people and families are shaped by multiple and intersecting dimensions of identity and circumstance. These may include gender, sexuality, disability, cultural identity, migration status, socio-economic conditions and other factors that influence how individuals experience systems, services and relationships of power.

Applying an intersectional lens is consistent with the ACT Government's commitments under the *Capital of Equality Strategy 2024–2029*, which recognises that inequality and discrimination are often experienced through overlapping forms of marginalisation and requires government policies and services to respond to this complexity.

Within the LAF, intersectionality informs how system evidence is interpreted and how patterns in outcomes are understood. Monitoring, evaluation and learning processes consider how the interaction of multiple social, cultural and structural factors may shape children's experiences of safety, participation and access to support.

This approach also aligns with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, which emphasise that children's safety and wellbeing must be understood in the context of their individual identities and experiences. Applying an intersectional lens supports the system to identify risks that may disproportionately affect particular groups of children and young people and strengthens the system's ability to respond in ways that are inclusive, equitable and culturally safe.

8.4 Evidence as a means, not an end

This Framework positions evidence as a means to support better outcomes, not an end in itself. Data and analysis are valuable only to the extent that they help the system to:

- understand whether it is acting consistently with its intent
- identify emerging risks or unintended consequences
- learn from experience
- make informed decisions about what needs to change.

Using evidence responsibly and ethically is therefore fundamental to sustaining trust, supporting learning, and maintaining legitimacy over the life of the reform.

9 Framework to action: what comes next

This section explains how the commitments and intent set out in the LAF are translated into action, while maintaining clear separation between Strategy, outcomes, learning and performance. It clarifies how the LAF is to be operationalised over time without collapsing levels or allowing implementation instruments to redefine intent.

This LAF does not implement change directly. Instead, it has authorised and guided the design of downstream instruments, ensuring that operational detail is developed in a way that remains aligned with agreed outcomes, principles and obligations.

9.1 Operationalising the Learning and Accountability Framework

The LAF is operationalised through a sequenced set of instruments, including the TOCOF, the MEL Framework, and the PMF. Performance expectations and contractual arrangements reflect the commitments and principles established in this Framework.

9.2 Maintaining separation of levels

A core principle of the LAF is that intent, learning and performance are not collapsed into a single instrument. Outcomes are not defined by measures; learning is not reduced to reporting; and performance management does not substitute for system accountability.

Maintaining this separation ensures that:

- outcomes remain stable and referenceable over time
- learning is protected from becoming compliance-focused
- performance and contractual mechanisms reflect settled intent rather than shaping it by default.

Where tensions arise between implementation pressures and the commitments set out in the LAF, this document is intended to be the primary reference point for resolving those tensions.

Using the LAF over time

This Framework is designed to be durable and enabling, rather than static. It will be used to:

- guide the design and refinement of downstream frameworks and instruments
- support consistent interpretation of evidence and performance information
- inform Child Youth and Family Executives' decision-making and oversight responsibilities

- provide a reference point for assurance, review and audit.

While practical instruments may evolve in response to learning and context, changes are expected to occur within the intent and boundaries set out in the LAF, rather than through redefinition of core commitments.

9.3 Preparing the system for implementation

As the LAF is implemented, attention is given to ensuring that ACT Government, service providers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance bodies and partners understand:

- the role and status of the LAF
- how it relates to subsequent instruments
- what is expected of them at each stage of implementation.

This includes clear communication, transitional support and opportunities to clarify interpretation, particularly as reporting and performance arrangements are introduced.

Collaboration and transparency as a system mechanism

Collaboration and transparency are treated as deliberate system mechanisms under *Next Steps*. Because outcomes are shaped across policy, commissioning, service delivery and community systems, coordinated action and shared interpretation of evidence are required. Collaboration supports collective problem-solving and learning while maintaining clear roles and accountability.

Collaboration and transparency are expected to occur at multiple levels, including:

- between ACT Government directorates in exercising system stewardship
- between ACT Government, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance bodies and communities in setting priorities and interpreting evidence
- between services and sectors to support continuity and coordinated responses for children, young people and families
- through shared learning and escalation processes where system risks or unintended consequences emerge.

Collaboration does not dilute accountability. Roles and responsibilities remain clear, and performance management and contractual arrangements continue to apply where appropriate. Collaboration is intended to support collective problem-solving, learning and system adaptation, particularly where outcomes cannot be achieved by any single actor in isolation.

9.4 Governance and escalation architecture

To ensure that accountability under *Next Steps* is genuine, transparent and trusted, escalation pathways are explicitly linked to defined governance forums with decision-making authority. Escalation is structured, documented and traceable. It connects MEL processes to decision-making power, while preserving independent statutory oversight.

Escalation operates across three levels: operational resolution; shared governance; executive and statutory accountability.

Level 1 – Operational resolution

Emerging issues identified through monitoring, evaluation, lived experience, performance information or workforce feedback are addressed at operational and program level wherever possible.

This includes collaborative problem-solving between ACT Government, service providers, Aboriginal governance representatives, ACCOs and partners.

Early resolution is encouraged where it is safe and appropriate. Not all issues require executive escalation. However, operational resolution must be documented and time-limited, with clear triggers for upward escalation where risks persist or recur.

Level 2 – Shared governance escalation

Where issues indicate systemic risk, recurring patterns, cultural safety concerns, potential rights impacts, or misalignment with reform intent, they are escalated to the designated Next Steps governance forum responsible for system stewardship.

This forum will:

- include senior government representatives with decision-making authority
- include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives consistent with commitments to self-determination
- consider evidence from multiple sources, including lived experience, quantitative data and workforce insight
- assess whether issues reflect service delivery challenges, commissioning settings, policy design, or broader structural drivers
- determine whether corrective action, policy adjustment, commissioning changes, resource shifts or further investigation are required.

Shared governance at this level ensures that escalation is not solely internal to government and that system behaviour can be examined transparently and collectively.

Decisions and actions at this level are recorded, with responsibility for follow-through clearly assigned.

Level 3 – Executive and statutory accountability

Where systemic risks remain unresolved, involve legislative compliance, require significant policy or resource decisions, or raise material rights concerns, matters are escalated to the accountable executive authority within government.

This may include:

- Director-General level decision-making
- cross-Directorate Executive forums
- formal advice to the responsible Minister
- engagement with independent statutory oversight bodies, where appropriate.

At this level, government exercises its formal stewardship responsibilities. Decisions, actions and rationale are documented and subject to internal and external accountability processes.

9.5 Independent statutory Commissioners and escalation

The Children and Young People Commissioner and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Commissioner are independent statutory office holders responsible for promoting and protecting the rights, safety and wellbeing of children and young people in the ACT.

The Children and Young People Commissioner, established under the *Human Rights Commission Act 2005*, has functions including promoting children's and young people's rights, consulting with children and young people, providing advice to government and agencies, and addressing systemic issues affecting children and young people's wellbeing.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Commissioner, established under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Commissioner Act 2022*, has specific functions in relation to the rights, interests and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, including systemic inquiry, advice to government, and participation in relevant proceedings as provided for in legislation.

Escalation pathways under the LAF operate alongside, and do not replace, these independent statutory roles.

Where MEL processes identify systemic risks that have implications for children's and young people's rights, cultural safety, or legislative obligations:

- governance forums may have regard to advice, recommendations or findings issued by either Commissioner
- matters may be brought to the attention of the relevant Commissioner, where appropriate
- Commissioners retain full discretion to initiate inquiry, provide advice, or raise systemic concerns directly with accountable authorities

The Commissioners' statutory independence strengthens transparency and trust in escalation outcomes and provides an additional safeguard where systemic issues affect children and young people's rights and wellbeing.

9.6 Alignment with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations

The LAF supports the ACT Government's commitment to the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. These principles establish a national standard for creating and maintaining environments where children and young people are safe, respected and able to participate in decisions affecting them.

Under this Framework, monitoring, evaluation and learning processes contribute to system stewardship by strengthening visibility of risks affecting children and young people, supporting early identification of emerging safety concerns, and informing governance responses where system settings or practices may undermine child safety.

Consistent with the National Principles, the LAF recognises that children's experiences of safety may be shaped by their identities and circumstances, and that particular attention is required to ensure safe, inclusive and culturally responsive environments for children and young people who may face additional barriers to participation or protection.

9.7 Principles underpinning escalation

Escalation under the LAF is guided by the following principles:

1. Escalation is structured and transparent, not discretionary or informal.
2. Escalation does not default to provider blame where system settings are contributory.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance bodies have a defined role in interpreting issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
4. Independent statutory oversight functions are respected and preserved.
5. Escalation pathways protect psychological safety and support good-faith identification of risk.
6. Where trust in government institutions is fragile, accountability mechanisms must be visible, shared and procedurally fair.
7. Learning and accountability are connected to decision-making authority and corrective action.

The LAF is intended to operate as a durable reference point for whole-of-system governance and accountability under Next Steps. It should be used by governance forums and decision-makers when interpreting evidence, assessing system performance and determining whether proposed changes remain consistent with the reform's intent.

Appendices

Appendix A: Glossary of terms

This glossary defines key concepts used throughout the Next Steps evidence and accountability suite. The definitions establish a common language for governance, monitoring, evaluation, learning and performance management, and should be read consistently across all documents in the suite.

Term	Definition
Accountability	The obligation to explain and justify decisions, actions and outcomes, and to take corrective action where required.
Contribution	The extent to which the Next Steps Strategy has influenced observed changes, recognising that outcomes arise from the interaction of many system factors and cannot be attributed to a single intervention.
Cultural continuity	The maintenance and strengthening of connections to family, community, Country, culture and identity.
Early warning	Emerging evidence that indicates potential risks, unintended consequences or declining system performance requiring leadership attention or corrective action.
Escalation	The structured process for raising issues, risks or concerns to governance bodies or decision-makers with the authority to act.
Equity	The principle that outcomes should improve fairly across the population, recognising that some groups experience disproportionate disadvantage, barriers or structural inequities.
Evidence	Information used to understand progress and inform decision-making, including administrative and quantitative data, qualitative information, practice knowledge and lived experience.
Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)	The rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their cultural heritage, knowledge and cultural expressions.
Indigenous Data Governance (IDG)	The structures, principles and processes that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority over how data are collected, accessed, interpreted, stored, shared and reported.
Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS)	The right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to exercise ownership, control and authority over data relating to their peoples, communities and cultures.
Intersectionality	An approach that recognises that people's experiences and outcomes are shaped by multiple and overlapping dimensions of identity, disadvantage and structural inequality.

Learning	The structured interpretation and application of evidence to improve policy, governance, commissioning and practice over time.
Lived experience	Knowledge and insight derived from the experiences of children, young people, families, carers and communities affected by the child, youth and family system.
Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)	The coordinated processes used to monitor progress, evaluate implementation and outcomes, generate learning, and support evidence-informed adaptation over time.
Outcome	A change or condition that matters for children, young people, families and communities and that the system is collectively seeking to achieve.
Performance indicator	A quantitative or qualitative measure used to monitor progress towards intended outcomes or system performance.
Priority Obligation	A strategic reform commitment that requires evidence from multiple domains, indicators and evidence sources to understand whether the intended system change is occurring.
System	The collective legislation, policy, governance, funding, organisations, workforce, professional practice and accountability arrangements that shape how support is provided and how outcomes are experienced.
System accountability	Accountability for outcomes and system performance that cannot be delegated to individual services, programs or organisations.
System steward	The entity responsible for exercising leadership, oversight and accountability for how the child, youth and family system functions and improves over time. Under Next Steps, this role is exercised by the ACT Government.
Theory of Change (ToC)	A shared explanation of how reforms are expected to lead to improved outcomes, the assumptions that underpin those expectations, and the causal pathways through which change is expected to occur.
Triangulation	The process of interpreting multiple sources and types of evidence together to strengthen confidence in findings and support balanced evaluative judgement.

Appendix B: References

Legislation

- ACT Government (2004) Human Rights Act 2004 (ACT).
- ACT Government (2008) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Act 2008 (ACT).

ACT frameworks

- ACT Government (2018) Our Booris, Our Way.
- ACT Government (2019) ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019–2028.
- ACT Government (2020) Wellbeing Framework for the ACT.
- ACT Government (2022) Next Steps for Our Kids: 2022–2030.
- ACT Government (2024) Capital of Equality Strategy 2024–2029.

National frameworks

- Australian Government (2020) National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
- Australian Government (2021) Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031.
- Australian Human Rights Commission (2018) National Principles for Child Safe Organisations.

International

- United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child.



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