EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and purpose

The purpose of this strategic plan for community services information is to:

> outline priorities for the National Community Services Information Strategic Plan (NCSIMG) for the next 5 years

> communicate achievements over the past 5 years

> clarify the purpose and membership of the NSCIMG, and its relationship to other bodies

> clarify the purpose and scope of the National Community Services Information Agreement (NCSIA).

Purpose of NCSIMG and NCSIA

The NCSIMG is a subcommittee of the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council (CSMAC). The NCSIMG was established to manage the operations of the NCSIA.

The NCSIA is a multilateral agreement between Australian Government and the state and territory government community services departments, and statistical agencies. The agreement provides the framework for a coordinated and cooperative approach to national community services information development.

The aim of the Agreement is to facilitate the provision of reliable, timely and consistent national information to all parties and stakeholders through the establishment of necessary information infrastructure, and by initiating and enabling information projects of national significance. These projects are variously undertaken, overseen or sponsored by the committees that operate under the broad direction of the NCSIMG. In doing so, the agreement aims to contribute to the efficient provision of more appropriate and improved services and the achievement of outcomes for the Australian community.

Scope of NCSIA

The community services which are included in the NCSIA are:

> disability services

> aged care

> children's services

> child protection and adoptions

> homelessness services, including the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program

> juvenile justice

> gambling

> income support

> emergency relief services

> concessions.

Membership of NCSIMG

NCSIMG comprises representatives of Australian Government and state and territory and community services departments, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Other groups and organisations are also represented on the NCSIMG: National Disability Administrators, the Health and Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council subcommittee of HACC officials, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program Coordination and Development Committee (SAAP CAD), the Australasian Juvenile Justice Administrators, and the health information sector through the Statistical Information Management Committee.

The NCSIMG has established a subcommittee – the National Community Services Data Committee (NCSD) – to take the lead role in developing national community services definitions. The Chair of the NCSDC represents this subcommittee on the NCSIMG. The National Child Protection and Support Services (NCPASS) data group is also a subcommittee of the NCSIMG and is responsible for overseeing the national child protection data collection and undertaking data development work in this area.

Relationship of NCSIMG to other bodies

The NCSIMG is a subcommittee of CSMAC and is linked to various other bodies with responsibilities for information management in community services, health and housing assistance services (see Figures 1 and 2). The respective information agreements established in each of these sectors provide that 'consistency between definitions in the *National Community Services Data Dictionary*, the *National Health Data Dictionary* and the *National Housing Data Dictionary* will be sought wherever possible and appropriate, in order to increase data compatibility between the sectors'.

Achievements of the NCSIMG against the first National Community Services Information Development Plan (1999)

Strategy One: Strategic data development activity in the community services sectors

> new national minimum data sets (NMDSs) have been developed for juvenile justice and children's services.

> national standards for the identification of Indigenous clients have been included in all major NMDSs; a report on Indigenous data quality across selected community services has been prepared; a website has been established to facilitate further improvements in data quality; a national plan of data improvement has been prepared.

> significant progress has been made towards establishing a national unit records collection for child protection.

> a detailed scoping report on family support services has been published.

Strategy Two: Building national data infrastructure

> two further editions of the *National Community Services Data Dictionary* have been published, including the first set of data standards integrated with the health sector.

> the second revised edition of the *National Classifications of Community Services* (including 'activities' and 'service delivery settings') has been published.

> a report analysing alternative approaches to statistical linkage of community services data, including appropriate protocols, has been published.

Strategy Three: Protocols and practices that underpin data development

> guidelines for data developers have been published.

> a new electronic registry for national data standards, METeOR, has been prepared.

Strategy Four: Consultation with consumers and service providers

> regular consultation has taken place with peak bodies for service providers and consumers.

> The membership of the NCSDC including representation of individual non-government welfare organisations.

(Note: At the formation of NCSIMG in 1997, Australian Council of Social Service declined membership in favour of regular consultation).

Priorities for action

Following extensive consultation, NCSIMG has identified three key areas in which to focus its activities over the next 5 years. These areas of need are domains in which NCSIMG has a mandate for action:

1. maintain and strengthen **national data standards** infrastructure to support information activities across the community services sector

2. improve the scope and quality of **sector-specific data** and information for reporting and monitoring within program areas

3. develop **cross-sectoral data** that cross program boundaries and recognises the growing need for person-centred rather than program-centred information.

The Strategic Plan discusses key issues and challenges in each of those areas, and then sets down priorities for action (Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4). These are summarised below.

Priorities for data standards infrastructure

> Include the data specifications for all existing national minimum data set standards and those under development in the online data standards register, METeOR.

> Establish protocols for the use of METeOR by program-based community service authorities when developing and disseminating information about their dataset specifications.

> Explore the extent of the difficulties of service providers which have 'multiple reporting' responsibilities that result from inconsistent or conflicting data reporting requirements, and identify strategies for resolving or alleviating those difficulties.

> Improve coordination with state-based collections.

> Build on initiatives at national and state or territory level to help in 'connecting up' data in line with the 'connecting government' agenda (for example the Information Management Strategy Committee, Better Service Delivery Program in New South Wales and Primary Care Partnerships in Victoria).

> Include promotion of national data standards as an ongoing feature of NCSIMG's work program.

> Review existing and developing work in program areas relating to cost with a view to strengthening national data infrastructure in this area.

> Review existing definitions of outcome measures for community services with a view to promoting the development of national standards in this area.

Sector-specific priorities

Disability services

Capitalise on previous data development, and improve the quality, relevance and consistency of disability information via four main strategies (that must also adequately address privacy and consent issues).

> Advise on analysis of the 2006 census related to the disability question.

> Consider the importance of including a disability identifier(s) in all areas of community services data development to enable creation or improvement of data on access to generic services by people with a disability, including related services such as aged care.

> Support the use of national data standards where a disability identifier is required, or data relating to level of functioning and disability are to be collected.

Aged care

> Improve the national consistency of data collection on community care programs.

> Promote the development of comparable indicators of functional status across aged care data collections.

> Improve data quality and coverage, particularly in the community care sector.

> Facilitate better use and coordination of aged care data with data from other programs and sectors (through linkage and other methods) ideally this would:
>   – allow analyses based on the client rather than the program;
>   – explore movement of clients between sectors; and
>   – examine the system as a whole rather than separate sectors.

Children's services

> Develop an implementation plan for the Children Services National Minimum Data Set which incorporates appropriate consultation and facilitates the collection of consistent data on children's services, their clients and workforce.

Child protection

> Implement the unit record-based national data collection in order to further promote the consistency of the national data collection and to provide a client-centred database to facilitate more policy-relevant data analysis.

> Broaden the scope of the collection to include more information on the outcomes of the clients of the child protection system.

> Explore the development of appropriate data on foster carers.

Family support services

> Identify those areas of family support services where national consistency of data elements can be improved, and develop a strategy to implement those improvements.

> Enhance the integration of family support services data items with those of related community services collections such as child protection and crisis accommodation and support services.

Homelessness

> Refine the measurement and description of homeless people in Australia.

> Consolidate the new SAAP national data collection, including increasing the uptake of electronic data collection and reporting and developing a strategy to collect non-core data from SAAP (for example on cultural and linguistic diversity, disability).

> Develop the key performance indicators to shape the SAAP V agreement.

> Facilitate coordination (through linkage and other appropriate methods) with other relevant community services and health-related collections such as mental health, alcohol and drug treatment services, disability services, community care, and aged care.

> Develop better knowledge nationally of the homelessness service system (not just the major program response) and jurisdictional differences in the delivery of homelessness services.

Juvenile justice

> Include offence data in the national minimum data set.

> Develop key performance indicators.

> Improve coordination (including through possible linkage with other relevant collections) with national data collections on child protection, crisis accommodation and support services, alcohol and other drug treatment services, and mental health services.

> Explore the capacity to include nationally consistent data on diversion and conferencing in the next version of the NMDS.

> Review and refine the NMDS and the national annual report.

Gambling support services

> Draw on existing jurisdictional data collections, develop specifications for an NMDS and reach national agreement on its implementation.

> Use national data standards for information relating to problem gambling included in other national data collections.

Concessions

> Undertake scoping work to explore the range of existing data collections and data definitions, and assess available options to promote national consistency and assist comparability.

Cross-sector priorities

Statistical data linkage

> Ensure community confidence in statistical data linkage.

> Promote robust privacy protocols and the following of ethics committee requirements to support data linkage.

> Promote consistency in the use of statistical linkage keys in various community services collections.

> Ensure linkage with health data collections can be pursued, taking into account the need to satisfy privacy and ethical requirements in both the community services and health sectors.

> Find or improve ways of linking data sets and analytical methods to analyse linked data.

Small area data and geo-coding

> NCSIMG to provide advice regarding requirements for small area data to guide policy development and performance monitoring.

> Distil emerging intelligence about the need for and supply of small area data that would serve the needs of cross-sector policy design and evaluation.

> Collaborate with information bodies in other fields (such as health and housing) to share intelligence about geography and small area data, developments such as common geographic classifications and boundaries, geo-coding, and the storage and analysis of small area data sets.

Childhood and youth

> Establish data sets for services for children to ensure the use of consistent data items.

> Encourage continued support of Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children and development of Longitudinal Survey of Indigenous Children.

> Establish regular reporting on child and youth welfare.

> Increase communication and collaboration between the national information groups in the health, housing, community services and education sectors to improve cross-sector reporting.

Comparable measurement of level of disability and functioning

> Develop a small suite of data elements pertaining to disability, consistent with relevant national and international standards, that can be used singly or in combination to measure disability in a range of community services collections, and which are comparable across collections.

> Consider the relevance and appropriateness of this suite of data elements to housing and relevant health services during the development phase.

> Chart assessment tool developments in related fields, including disability services and aged care, and relate them to national data standards.

Domestic violence

> Meet the various policy requirements for information in relation to domestic violence (NCSIMG would need to stipulate both data requirements and resources).

Indigenous issues

> Ensure that the information development activity for each of the specific sectors (family and child services, disability services, homelessness, and so on) takes in to account the information needs of policy design and evaluation for Indigenous clients (whether they receive services through mainstream or targeted programs).

> Review the progress made towards generating the information envisaged in existing strategic documents (such as the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Information Plan*), and assess which strands of uncompleted work should have highest priority for coming years.

> Assess progress in improving Indigenous identification in community services data sets, and decide which data sets should be given highest priority in coming years.

> Identify gaps and shortcomings in the information base that might best be remedied through direct data collection (rather than or in addition to administrative byproduct data) and liaise with the relevant statistical agencies regarding the content of future survey programs.

> Cooperate with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Working Group and CSMAC to identify information gaps and necessary developments and relative priorities.

> Work with stakeholders such as the National Advisory Group on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Information and Data regarding protocols for gathering and disseminating information about Indigenous peoples, and foster the development of appropriate protocols for community services information.

Informal care

> In relation to the informal care of frail older people or people of all ages with disabilities, review existing collections with a view to making clear recommendations on ways of improving the consistency of items used and coverage across collections.

> In relation to grandparents and other relatives with primary responsibility for the care of children, undertake scoping work on the capacity of community services and income support administrative byproduct data to shape this important policy issue, including recommendations for data development work as appropriate.

Labour force

> Undertake (or commission) an inventory of current and recent inquiries and projects (including data collections) regarding community services labour force, to ascertain the policy or other purposes that the inquiries and projects are intended to serve, the segments of community services that they traverse, their jurisdictional or geographical scoping; and their basic character (for example data gathering, forecasting, model building).

> Develop a rough conceptual framework or 'mud map' of information needs relating to the community services labour force, in the light of the key policy questions, encompassing:

  – the segments of community services for which labour force information is required.

  – the major varieties of formal and informal labour.

  – other key characteristics of labour such as qualifications, age and sex.

  – the elements of a labour supply 'pipeline' (entries to the sector, stock of workers, and exits)

  – other key disaggregations such as public/private sector, geography.

> Pursue activities where the NCSIMG can add the greatest value, such as:

  – identifying gaps in publicly available information about the community services labour force that are the greatest hindrance to policy making and analysis, and encouraging statistical development activity to fill those gaps

  – Encouraging information sharing across community services labour force inquiries and projects, ensuring the information generated is as commensurable as possible and that resources available are used efficiently and effectively.

Prevention and early intervention

> Clarify the definitions and purposes associated with prevention and early intervention strategies across program areas.

Issues emerging from the consultation process

The experiences of careleavers (those people who spent a considerable period of their early lives in care) was an issue that emerged late in the consultation process. Although priority action areas have not been identified, this is recognised as an important area for development of information resources.