ENVIRONMENT

1.1 The focus of services

Community services are provided to individuals and families of widely differing ages and in widely different social and economic circumstances. They protect and support vulnerable individuals and families at key stages of their lives. Community services also contribute to the development of community infrastructure and networks that in turn promote the social, emotional, physical, psychological and economic wellbeing of individuals and families.

1.2 The providers of services

The Australian Government and the state and territory governments all have a major role in funding the provision of community services. This role is based on a mandate to ensure basic rights, an acceptable standard of living and a requirement to protect and support the vulnerable in our society. State and territory governments, and to a lesser extent the Australian Government, are also involved in direct community service provision. Local governments also fund community services and are important providers of these services.

The way community services are provided is influenced not only by the division of responsibility of the three levels of governments in Australia but also by the high level of involvement of non-government organisations (NGOs). The relative involvement of the Australian Government and the state and territory and local governments varies from program to program. The participation of NGOs is also different between programs and between states and territories. The complexity in community services arrangements has contributed to the difficulty in developing a national policy framework for community services. It has also had ongoing consequences for the development of national community services data standards.

1.3 The National Community Services Information Agreement

Under the auspices of the Standing Committee of Community Services and Income Security Administrators, now CSMAC, the National Community Services Information Agreement was developed in 1997. The agreement was between Australian Government, state and territory jurisdictions with a responsibility for community services programs, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. After contributing to development of the agreement, the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) declined to become a party to the agreement instead favouring ongoing consultation. After a major review of the agreement and a comprehensive program of negotiations with government and non-government agencies across the sector, the Agreement was revised and

re-signed in 2004 for a further 5 years. The agreement provides a framework to support the national infrastructure and decision-making processes needed to integrate, plan and coordinate the development of consistent national community services information.

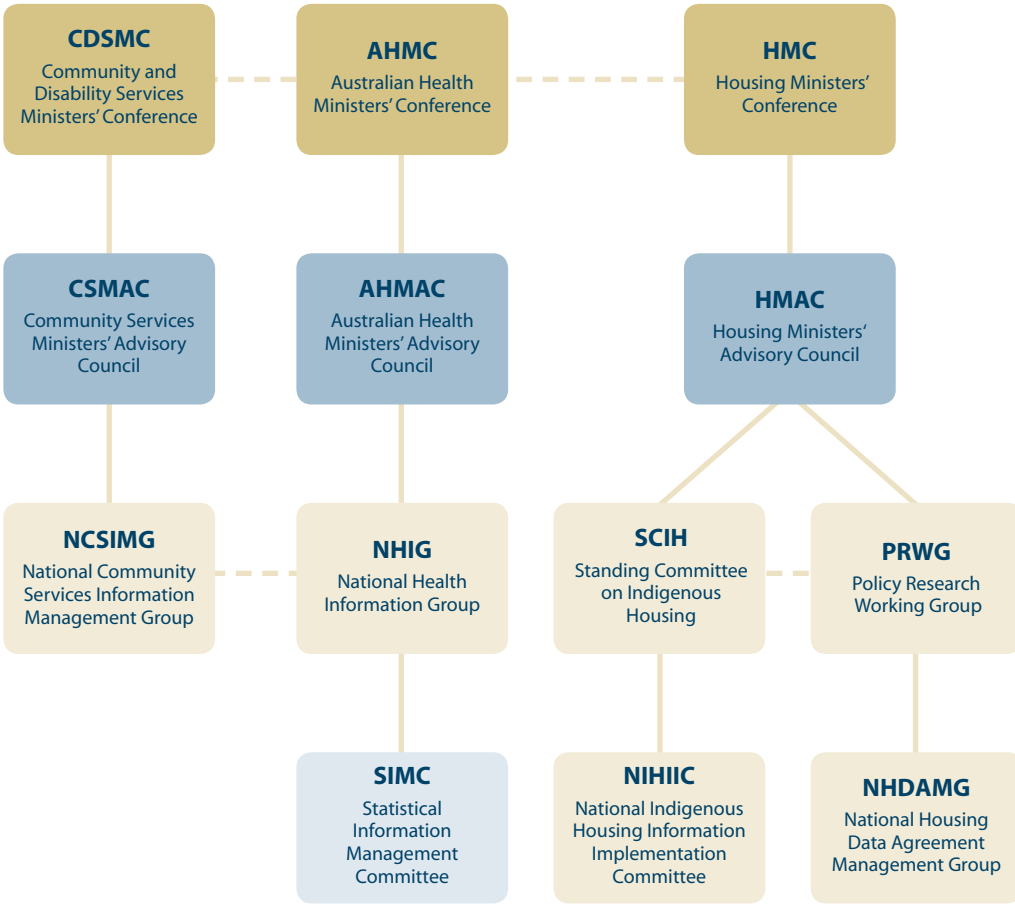
The agreement establishes the National Community Services Information Management Group (NCSIMG) as a subcommittee of the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council (CSMAC). The agreement also requires the NCSIMG to develop, for CSMAC consideration, a national work program, responsive to the needs of both policy makers and the community. NCSIMG members represent the Australian Government, state and territory jurisdictions with responsibility for community services, and representatives of key program groups within the sector. The NCSIMG has established the National Community Services Data Committee (NCSDC) to take the lead role in developing national community services definitions and has established a range of other standing and ad hoc committees to help its work in specific program areas.

1.4 Links to the national housing and health information agreements

There are recognised strong links between community services, health and housing assistance services. The respective information agreements established in each sector 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'.

Coordination in development of community services and health data is assisted by cross-memberships between the NCSIMG and the Statistical Information Management Committee which advises the National Health Information Group (NHIG) on statistical information issues in health, and between data committees in the two sectors. In addition the NCSIMG has observer status on the NHIG (the health counterpart of the NCSIMG). It is fundamental to this plan to foster and develop the interfaces between health, housing and community services information management; the focus of this plan, however, is on the community services sector.

Figure 1: Relationships – community services, health and housing



1.5 Achievements of the previous plan

This document replaces the *National Community Services Information Development Plan* published in 1999 <www.aihw.gov.au/committees/ncsimg/publications/ncsidp.pdf>. The priorities that were identified in the original plan have driven the NCSIMG Work Program. Over the past 5 years the original plan focused on both cross-sectoral infrastructure work to benefit the sector as a whole and data development work to support individual programs.

The NCSIMG has successfully pursued the directions identified in the original plan resulting in significant achievements against each of the four strategies nominated.

Box 1: Achievements of the original National Community Services Information Development Plan

STRATEGY ONE:
Strategic data development activity in the community services sectors

- New national minimum data sets have been developed for juvenile justice and children's services. ✔
- Substantial progress on improving the quality of Indigenous identification and inclusion of national data standards for Indigenous identification in all major NMDSs; publication of a report on data quality; development of a website to further improve data quality; completion of a national plan. ✔
- Significant progress in the development of a new unit record-based NMDS for child protection. ✔
- Scoping report on family support services completed. ✔

STRATEGY TWO:
Building national data infrastructure

- Expansion of the authoritative source of national community services data definitions. Two further editions of the *National Community Services Data Dictionary* have been published, incorporating the first set of data standards integrated with the health sector. ✔
- A second version of the *National Classifications of Community Services* provides a basis for consistent classification of community services according to activities and service delivery settings. ✔
- Completion of a project and report analysing alternative approaches to statistical linkage of community services data, and making recommendations on appropriate protocols. ✔

STRATEGY THREE:
Protocols and practices which underpin data development

- Development of guidelines to assist data developers. ✔
- Development of a new electronic registry for national data standards with online assistance for data developers (METeOR). ✔

STRATEGY FOUR:
Consultation with consumers and service providers

- Regular consultations were held with peak bodies for service providers and consumers. ✔
- Service providers are represented on NCSDC. ✔

Box 2: Access to NCSIMG work

The *National Community Services Data Dictionary*, now in Version 3, <www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/9995> is acknowledged by signatories to the National Community Services Information Agreement as the authoritative source of national community services data definitions. It is widely used across the sector and its benefits are being further promoted.

The *National Classifications of Community Services* <www.aihw.gov.au/committees/ncsimg/publications/nccs_v2.pdf> (second edition published in 2002), is used across the sector as a basis for consistent classification across a diverse range of service types of the delivery of community services in terms of the activities provided to clients, and the setting in which such services are delivered.

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Information Development Plan*, <www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/8007>, is a major contribution to the availability of quality, nationally consistent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data in the community services sector. The plan incorporates a set of principles, developed following extensive consultation to guide the collection and use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community services information.

The report *Statistical Data Linkage in the Community Services Sector* <www.aihw.gov.au/committees/ncsimg/publications/stat_data_linkage.pdf>, analyses and reports on the range of options available to undertake statistical data linkage in the community services sector.

NCSIMG has directed considerable effort towards community services programs identified in 1999 as lacking a sound national data infrastructure. Significant data development work undertaken under the auspices of the plan includes:

- a national minimum data set for juvenile justice <www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/7237>
- a national minimum data set for children's services <www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/10090>
- data development to support the delivery of child protection and support services <ww.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/7453>

Reports published by NCSIMG are available electronically at: <www.aihw.gov.au/committees/ncsimg/index.cfm>.

1.6 Community services information in Australia

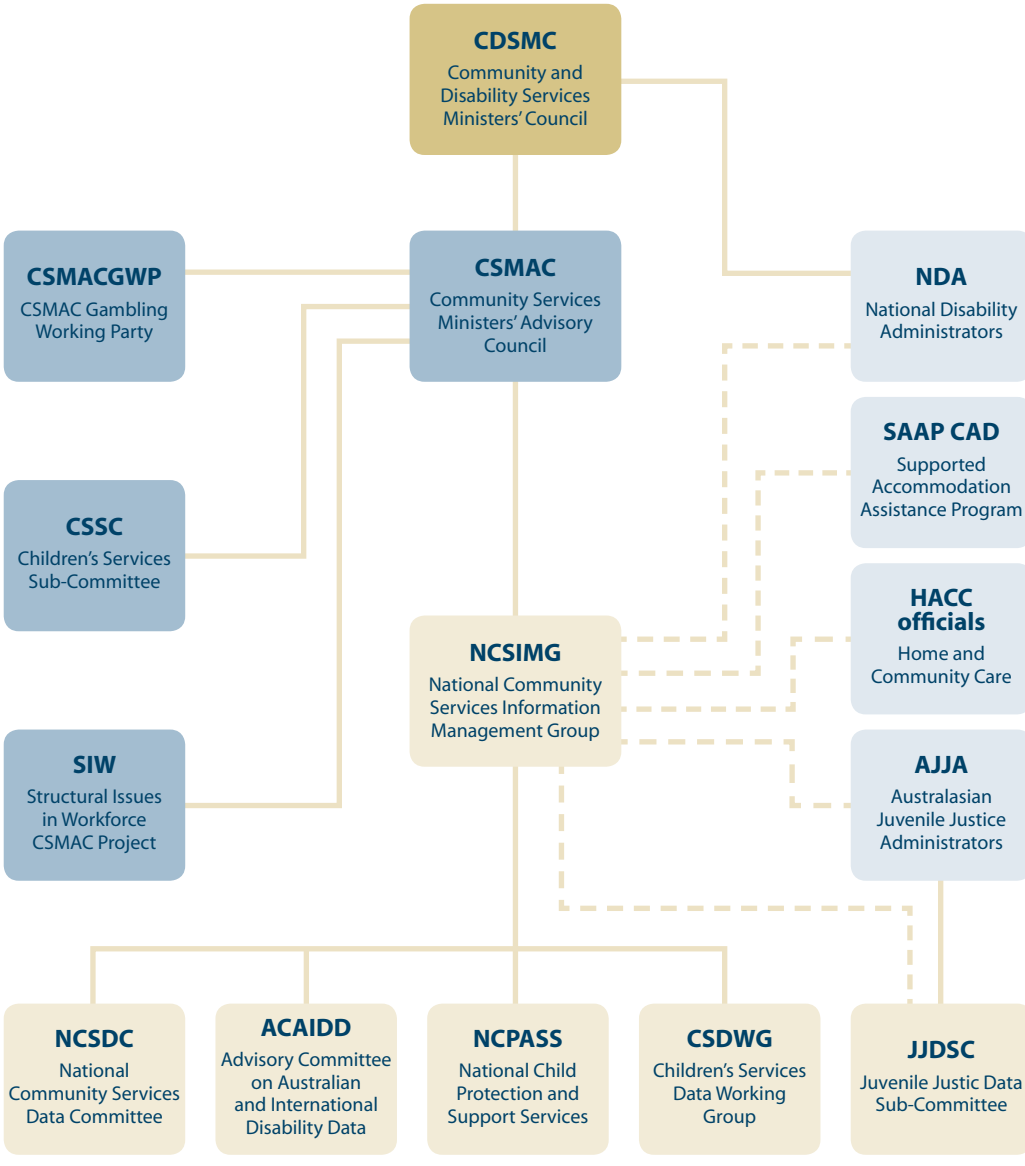
Community services information relates to a broad array of services provided to a wide range of clients and delivered by a complex system of government and non-government organisations. As a consequence, the development of high-quality data which is consistently defined and collected across both programs and jurisdictions is a challenging and multifaceted task. The appendix at the back of this document provides summary listings of current national data collections and data development activities undertaken by government in all community services sectors covered by the NCSIA.

1.6.1 The community services information system

The complexity of the community services sector is reflected in the range of committees and working groups which have some influence on the development of community services information. Although the two central committees established under the NCSIA are the NCSIMG and the NCSDC, a range of other committees focussed on particular types of community services are also represented.

Figure 2 summarises the relationships between the NCSIMG and other organisations and groups in the national community services sector.

Figure 2: Relationships



1.7 Linking information to policy

The focus of NCSIMG activity is on national information development, collation and reporting, driven by policy needs. High-quality, nationally consistent, evidence-based information about community services is essential for public accountability and policy development. Government agencies need to ensure that public funds are being directed to implement policy to best meet the needs of clients. Governments are concerned that policies are appropriate and that resource allocation is effective.

Policy makers, the public, clients and researchers of community services need to know and understand what is happening, where and to what effect. Providers of community services need good-quality data to improve the quality of services and outcomes for their clients and to lobby for the level and type of assistance needed. Service providers also need information to monitor and develop their own service policies and to assess their own performance against industry standards.

To report on community services, information is required that describes:

- the people assisted by community services
- the assistance they received
- the providers of community services
- the locations and settings in which people received assistance
- service integration to ensure complementary service provision.

However, in order to know whether these are the people, the assistance and the places that policy intended, information is required that describes the inputs and outputs of community services in a way that facilitates an assessment of outcomes.

Throughout Australia there is currently substantial data development activity in the community services sector. This represents a considerable investment of time and resources by governments and the many agencies involved. There are potential benefits, including cost savings, to all agencies, providers and clients from an approach that minimises duplication in data development, collection and reporting activities.

A major objective of the NCSIA is the development of nationally consistent data. Signatories to the agreement have committed their organisations to using existing national data standards and collaborating on the development and endorsement of new data standards where national consistency is required. Noted, however, that developing and reaching agreement on national data standards is a complex, ongoing matter, as service models and policies change.

It is also recognised that information reporting on the effectiveness and efficiency of services through national performance indicators is an important means of contributing to policy development. The responsibility for determining performance indicators, including national measures, usually rests with specific program areas. As a consequence of the agreement there is the opportunity for NCSIMG to

provide expert advice to program areas and administrators on the adequacy of existing indicators and the data which underpin those indicators, and to propose amendments where appropriate. National performance indicators are published in the *Report on Government Services* and it is important that these indicators are based on data that are comparable across jurisdictions so that the information aids jurisdictional understanding of the effectiveness and efficiency of services.

Linking data to policy means that clarity is needed about what policy intends to achieve. If national data development and collection are to produce information that shapes key policy questions and issues, the specifications for national reporting requirements need to relate to the objectives of policy. Implementing policy means decisions need to be made about where, when and how certain things need to happen. Understanding what actually happened as a result of resource allocation is a pre requisite for measuring performance or assessing outcomes.

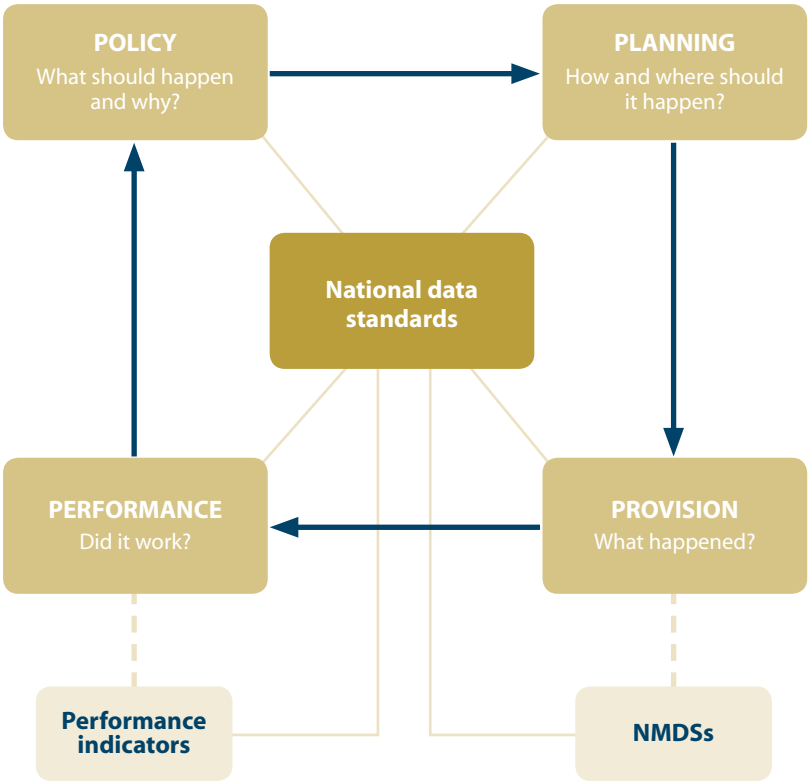



Figure 3: Linking policy to information