



**Council of Australian Governments (COAG)**  
**What's Going On?**  
**An NCOSS Analysis of the Third COAG Communiqué**  
2 October 2008

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Since the start of 2008, as a result of a change in Government, there has been an increasing amount of change being proposed across Australia. Much of this is to be driven through COAG processes. This change is happening quickly and it can be difficult to stay in touch with what is happening.

As part of its commitment to keeping the sector informed and involved NCOSS has committed to producing an analysis of each of the COAG communiqués in 2008. We have attempted to assess what the announcements really mean (progress, no progress, more meetings of "working parties", possible distractions etc) for NSW. This is the third in that series of analysis.

**The most important thing to note is that most decisions of relevance and importance to the sector will not be made until the COAG meeting on the 17 November 2008.**

### **Ageing and Disability**

- COAG have agreed to progress reforms to roles and responsibilities between the Commonwealth and States and Territories for community and residential care services for older people, people with disabilities and people with mental illness.
- The reforms aim to build seamless service systems to better meet needs for these 3 target groups. A range of principles have been developed to underpin the reforms, most significantly the creation of a national aged care system and national disability service system for community and residential care.
- The next step in the process is that senior officials will be developing a reform package to be considered at the next COAG meeting, now brought forward to November 17<sup>th</sup>.
- The major concerns regarding this reform are:
  - no information about what changes will occur to the actual service system
  - no consultation is planned, except for with local government. A process where no feedback is gained from those with a practical understanding of the reality of the service system, is likely to leave such major change not achieving its aims to better meet client needs

## **Early Childhood Outcomes of Indigenous Children**

- COAG has agreed that the Commonwealth, States and Territories will work together to improve the early childhood outcomes of Indigenous children by addressing the high levels of disadvantage they currently experience to give them the best start in life. \$564 million of joint funding over six years will address the needs of Indigenous children in their early years. This will include 35 Children and Family Centres to be established across Australia to deliver integrated services that offer early learning, child care and family support programs. The funding will also increase access to ante-natal care, teenage reproductive and sexual health services, and child and maternal health services.

## **Energy Efficiency**

- COAG has agreed to develop a National Strategy for Energy Efficiency, to accelerate energy efficiency efforts across all governments and to help households and businesses prepare for the introduction of the Commonwealth Government's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS). Roles and responsibilities for energy efficiency policies and programs are to be agreed by end December 2008, and implementation of this Strategy will be finalised by June 2009, to ensure that programs assisting households and businesses to reduce their energy costs are in place prior to the introduction of the CPRS.
- This agreement is welcome as there are significant overlaps in policies and programs around energy efficiency.
- However, NCOSS remains concerned about energy efficiency measures for low income households and will seek to ensure the current NSW measures for low income households are at least maintained if not enhanced by this agreement.

## **Housing and homelessness**

- It had been expected that COAG would consider the proposed text of the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA), which is due to commence on 1 January. Consideration of the NAHA has now been postponed to the COAG meeting of 17 November in Canberra.
- The release of the national White Paper on Homelessness, originally scheduled for September, has also been delayed. It is expected that additional spending on SAAP arising from the White Paper will be connected to the NAHA.
- COAG considered an implementation plan for the regulation of remaining areas of consumer credit. This follows COAG's earlier decision that the Commonwealth will assume responsibility for the regulation of mortgages, mortgage broking, margin lending and all remaining areas of consumer credit, such as pay-day lending and financial counseling services.

## **Child Protection**

- The National Child Protection Framework will be considered at the November 2008 COAG meeting.
- COAG endorsed the recommendations from the Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference (CDSMC) on improving information sharing on children and families at risk, including the development of new Commonwealth-

State measures to help locate children at serious risk of abuse or neglect when their whereabouts are unknown.

COAG also agreed to develop a new protocol for information sharing between Centrelink and child protection agencies and to include Centrelink in the national "Child Protection Alerts System" by the end of 2008.

## **Health**

- COAG had agreed to the development of a Commonwealth-State relations reform package across a number of areas, including community care and support services for people with mental illness. This will be presented for consideration at the next COAG meeting. There has been a commitment that the current mix of service providers, including NGOs, will continue. The Commonwealth is currently responsible for a number of components of the COAG National Action Plan on Mental Health (including the Personal Helpers and Mentors Program (PHaMs) and Day-to-Day living. It had been anticipated that responsibility for these programs would be subject to reform.
- The Ministerial Council of Drug Strategy (MCDS) is developing a final report on potential government actions to address alcohol abuse, due early 2009. COAG has noted the MCDSs work on the following areas: options to reduce binge drinking including in relation to closing hours, responsible service of alcohol, reckless secondary supply of alcohol and the alcohol content in ready-to-drink beverages.
- There does not appear to be any plan for community or non-government consultation on these measures.