



Child and Family Support System

Lived Experience Network

Impact Report



Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Aboriginal Peoples of South Australia

We acknowledge and respect Aboriginal people as the first people of this country and recognise the traditional custodians of the lands in South Australia. We acknowledge that the cultural, spiritual, social, economic and parenting practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people come from traditional lands, waters and skies, and that their cultural and heritage beliefs, languages and lore are still living and of great importance today.

We acknowledge Elders past, present and emerging, and recognise Aboriginal children as the Elders of the future. We also acknowledge Aboriginal staff, families and communities who work to keep children safe, supported by culture and a strong sense of identity.



We recognise the ongoing impacts of intergenerational trauma, invasion and colonisation, and the strength shown in overcoming them.

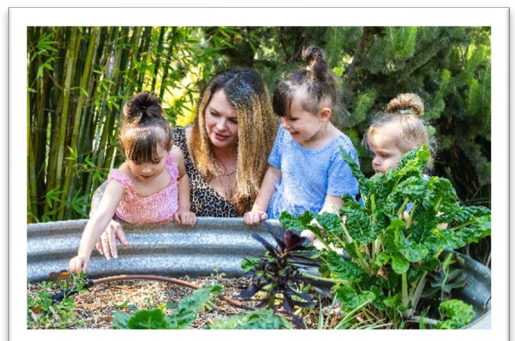


We are committed to listening to Aboriginal voices and supporting truth telling, ensuring that what Aboriginal people need and hope for is included at every stage of how the Child and Family Support System is shaped and delivered.

Acknowledgement of Lived Experience

The Child and Family Support Division recognises families as experts in their own lives and values people with lived experience for the insight, leadership and courage they bring to understanding what works and what needs to change.

The Lived Experience Network (LEN) is a key stakeholder group in the Child and Family Support System, sharing their knowledge to help shape and improve system design and practice. By listening to and learning from these voices, the Division supports continuous system improvement and better outcomes for children, young people and families in South Australia.



Foreword from the Child and Family Support Division

Every day, across South Australia, families show extraordinary strength as they navigate the pressures, challenges and hopes that shape their lives. Our responsibility within the Child and Family Support System is to walk alongside them, listening deeply, responding with empathy, and ensuring that the supports we provide are meaningful, safe, and grounded in real experience.

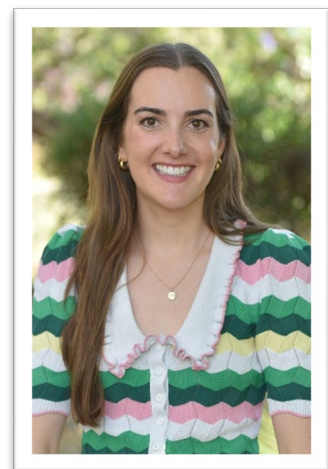
The Lived Experience Network (LEN) is central to making this possible. LEN System Advisors bring a depth of understanding that cannot be replicated through data, policy or professional expertise alone. Their insight, born from courage, resilience and a commitment to making things better for others, shapes how we design services and policy, how practitioners engage with families, and how our system continues to evolve. Their message is powerful and consistent: meaningful change happens when lived experience is not an afterthought, but a guiding force.

Throughout 2025, LEN's contributions have informed practice guides across Safer Family Services, shaped the redesign of the Adults Supporting Kids website, influenced the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, and helped ensure that early intervention, cultural safety, and child-centred practice remain at the heart of everything we do. Their voices have carried into collaborations with the Office for Early Childhood Development, the Office for Women, community partners, and policy makers. In total for 2025, 11 consultations, six presentations and two quarterly meetings were held.

This work takes generosity and bravery. I want to acknowledge every System Advisor, current members and Alumni, for the leadership they demonstrate in sharing their experiences, reflections and advice. Their advocacy amplifies the voices of children, families and communities who have often been unheard. Their contributions help us face difficult truths, challenge assumptions, and build a more responsive and compassionate system.

To the LEN: thank you for the clarity, honesty and hope you bring to this work. You remind us of our North Star, keeping children at the centre of all we do, and you guide us toward a future where every family can thrive.

Gabrielle Fisher (Manager, Strategy, Policy and Innovation)



Foreword from the LEN System Advisors

“Coming from lived experience of the foster care system I know how much I missed out on. When I think about how the system now provides Intensive Family Support Services to families who are struggling — it makes me reflect on how much my life could have changed if those supports were in place for my family when I was a child. This is the kind of support that keeps families who are struggling together — not just taking kids away. Hopefully in time we’ll lower removals and family breakups and just help keep families together.

Being a System Advisor is an important part of my healing journey because our lived experience expertise is valued in LEN. Just knowing that I get to have a say and provide input into how the system can work better is rewarding. The people who consult with us want to know our opinions and listen to our ideas on how to make the system better.”

Marissa Good

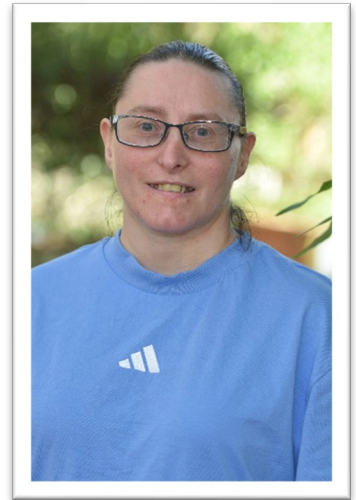
“LEN has provided me with the opportunity to reflect on those difficult times and sharing my experiences has helped me heal my inner child. I hope sharing my experiences inspires change so that it doesn’t happen to the next generation. It helps me feel like my journey was worth it because now I am able to provide that insight.

My passion is to improve the sector so that people like me don’t slip through the cracks and practitioners think a lot more about children’s experiences in families facing addictions and domestic violence. My hope is that practitioners feel better equipped to step in earlier so that children’s experiences are validated and they are not left feeling like it is all their fault.”

Jessica Burnage

“LEN is important to me because it gives me a chance to speak up about the needs of children and young people who experience domestic violence, with a strong focus on keeping them safe. I believe the system needs to act earlier, as early intervention and prevention are essential to keeping families safe and preventing harm. By using my own lived experience, I hope to help improve the system so other families don’t have to face the same struggles or system failures that my family did.”

Emma Lipson



The Lived Experience Network and the Child and Family Support System

How LEN helps shape the Child and Family Support System in South Australia

The Child and Family Support System (CFSS) brings together early support services offered by government, non-government organisations (NGOs) and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). These services help families with different levels of need and safety concerns, and aim to reduce child protection involvement through early, holistic support.

To strengthen family support services beyond the reform phase that began in 2019, the Child and Family Support Division in DHS uses a continuous learning approach that brings together data, research, practitioner insights, system observation, lived experience, and Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

The Lived Experience Network (LEN) plays a key role in helping the system learn from lived experience. LEN shares real-life insights into family challenges and helps reveal gaps that lead to more effective and empathetic solutions.

LEN was established in 2020 through the CFSS co-design process and is now a fully embedded and valued part of the Child and Family Support Division. LEN is a committee of adult **System Advisors** from diverse backgrounds who have experienced significant family stress and the need for support services. They meet regularly throughout the year to provide systems advice and respond to presentation requests when they arise. The catch cry of our LEN System Advisors — **“nothing about us without us”** — reflects their commitment to strengthening the system to support others like them.



The advice of LEN contributes to:

- Shaping policy, service models and practice resources
- Improving websites, marketing and communication to better reach families
- Informing service providers about how practitioners can best work with families
- Supporting services to be more trauma-responsive and culturally safe for families.

Over the past five years, LEN has contributed to strengthening and improving the CFSS through its consultations and presentations with DHS and key partners.



LEN System Advisors

LEN members known as System Advisors serve a two-year term, with staggered membership so experienced members can support new ones. System Advisors draw on their lived experiences to help the system learn from the challenges their families have faced and from the supports that made a difference. Although each person's experience is unique, they share a commitment to strengthening the system for future families.

LEN Alumni

Once their LEN term ends, System Advisors can join the Alumni network. The Alumni role in LEN enables members to use their skills and lived experience to support new System Advisors, represent diverse voices, and highlight issues they have seen within the CFSS. Alumni members remain committed to strengthening the system and staying connected to LEN, and their ongoing contribution is highly valued by both DHS and LEN members.

2025 LEN System Advisors

AJ Crocker

Ann OConnor

Cait Maddison

Emma Lipson

Jessica Burnage

Marissa Good

Maureen Humes

Naqibullah Hakim

Samantha Tipping

Stacey Neale

Zora Dotlic

2025 LEN Alumni Members

Chloe Cameron

Jamie Schmidt

Lisa Majetic

Naomi Hicks

Rebecca Majchrak

Shelly Coad

Wei Gao



LEN Systems Advice

Child and Family Support Learning System Case Study with The Front Project and Centre for Policy Development

The Front Project and The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) work with governments and the social services sector to improve systems that support children and families in Australia. These organisations partnered to conduct a case study focusing on the CFSS learning system and how the Child and Family Support Division promotes learning across the sector.

LENs critical role in elevating the voices of families in the learning system was acknowledged and efforts were made to connect the case study's author, Dr Ryan Martin from the CPD, with LEN System Advisors.

In June, Chloe Cameron (LEN Co-founder and Alumni member) and Jessica Burnage (LEN System Advisor) were interviewed by CPD to provide first-hand accounts on how LEN operates, its purpose and how it contributes in practice to research and learning. They also provided reflections on key successes and any challenges encountered along the way. In December the CFSS case study report, now titled *How to embed learning systems in social services: A case study of South Australia's Child and Family Support System*, was completed (<https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/policy-and-research/research/414-how-to-embed-learning-systems-in-social-services-a-case-study-of-south-australias-child-and-family-support-system>). Plans were also made for Jessica to assist with its launch in early 2026.



DHS Adults Supporting Kids Website

The Adults Supporting Kids website (ASK) is a resource for anyone with concerns about the safety and wellbeing of children, young people or families (<https://adultssupportingkids.com.au/>). It supports early intervention by offering free information and connecting families with local support services. The look and feel of



the ASK website was being refreshed, with a focus on the images used across the topic tiles and featuring real families to strengthen connection and engagement. As the ASK website was originally developed through a co-design process with the LEN, all changes were made with the intention of maintaining and respecting this partnership.

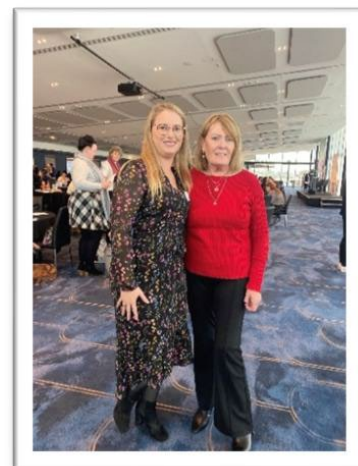
LEN input emphasised the importance of each photo ensuring it **“conveys the seriousness of the topic yet remains hopeful and uplifting for those in need”**. LEN's feedback on current images and what appeals to

target audiences is valued by DHS' System Stewardship project officers and informs the website's ongoing development.

CFSS Statewide Practitioner Communities of Practice – Engaging Dads and Men Who Use Violence

The Statewide Practitioner Communities of Practice (CoP) held in June focused on engaging dads and men who use violence, reflecting the CFSS commitment to a whole-of-family, child-centred and healing approach to domestic and family violence. The CoP brought together 290 practitioners from government, non-government and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations, creating a valuable opportunity to share insights and strengthen practice across the sector.

LEN System Advisors Emma Lipson and Ann O'Connor were invited to present, and they shared powerful reflections shaped by their experiences with domestic violence.



Ann encouraged practitioners to use clear, calm language and to show empathy for men who carry trauma and shame. She stressed that this must be paired with accountability and strong support systems for everyone involved.

Emma highlighted that worker safety and readiness are essential.

“The child safety conversation needs to be had with the family as this is a big reality they need to face if things don’t change. The worker could ask the question: how do we get to that? How can the family get to a spot where this is not happening, and children are able to feel safe?”

Emma - System Advisor 2025

The final message of the System Advisors was that **early intervention is critical**.

The CoP gave practitioners from across the state the opportunity to explore how to balance accountability with supporting families toward healing and safety. Its timing was important, as the release of the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence had brought renewed focus to this issue. The experiences and advice shared by LEN have helped shape how practitioners reflect on and respond to this complex issue many families in the CFSS face.

Following the powerful presentations delivered by LEN System Advisors Emma Lipson and Ann O'Connor at the Communities of Practice, a decision was made to integrate key quotes from their session into the *Engaging Dads and Men Who Use Violence* practice resource. Evidence and theory lay the foundation in this resource, while lived experience helps practitioners truly “walk in someone else’s shoes,” supporting more empathetic and effective engagement with families. The practice resource is now available on the DHS website to practitioners across the sector (<https://dhs.sa.gov.au/how-we-help/child-and-family-support/tools-for-organisations/practitioner-resources/practice-guides/engaging-with-dads-and-men-who-use-violence>).

“Men need support during difficult times — a phone number of someone he can call when he is not coping... Practitioners could say something like, ‘Let’s get you somewhere you can talk about what has hurt you’”.

Ann - System Advisor 2025



AC Care – Communities for Children Partner Agencies – supporting engagement with Aboriginal Families

LEN System Advisors Maureen Humes and Naomi Hicks presented to AC Care and its community partners in Murray Bridge during July. This partnership allows local organisations to deliver community-based programs to support families across the Murray Bridge region and surrounding country areas. Our System Advisors were invited to share their insights based on their lived experience, with a focus on how services can better engage Aboriginal families who are not currently accessing services. This enabled providers to gain valuable insights on how to build more inclusive, responsive, and culturally safe services.



“My Passion is to see children kept in the care of Aboriginal families and to see the system change in a way that is responsive to Aboriginal families”

LEN System Advisor 2025

After their presentation, Naomi and Maureen were able to connect with AC Care Senior Aboriginal Leaders who work with Aboriginal families in Murray Bridge and surrounding areas. Their presentation highlighting the potential strengths, struggles and barriers to services that Aboriginal families face allowed AC Care and its partners to gain deeper insight into how to increase engagement with families and foster greater trust within communities.

DHS Social Policy Forum – Lived and Living Experience

In August the Social Policy Evaluation and Reform Division invited LEN to be a part of a forum exploring how lived experience can benefit the Department in the co-design of policy and in the evaluation of services. System Advisors Jessica Burnage and Emma Lipson along with alumni Chloe Cameron presented.



Key reflections from this presentation were that without a genuine understanding of its value, lived experience engagement can be seen by staff as an added burden, rather than the powerful and transformative approach it truly is. This forum helped to highlight the benefits of lived experience approaches and allowed System Advisors to speak directly to senior policy makers, influencing organisational change across DHS.

“We need to share ongoing power - it can't just be a tokenistic workshop. We have to fundamentally weave our way through the design - valuing lived experience equally on par with professional expertise.”

Jessica - System Advisor 2025

Aboriginal Cultural Governance Framework for the CFSS

System Stewardship has commenced a co-design project with the sector to define what effective Aboriginal cultural governance looks like and how the CFSS can be more accountable to Aboriginal children, families and organisations.

Aboriginal Cultural Governance puts culture at the centre of the Child and Family Support System, guided by Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

In October, this critical conversation became the focus of the LEN Quarterly Meeting. To strengthen LEN voices, efforts were made to meet with Aboriginal Alumni members Naomi Hicks and Maureen Humes too.



LEN described cultural governance as giving control to Aboriginal people to support their own communities, through clear governance structures that include Aboriginal leadership and decision-makers with lived experience. They highlighted the role of allies working alongside Aboriginal people, reinforcing the view that **supporting Aboriginal governance within the CFSS is everybody's business and responsibility.**

Embedding cultural governance in service design and delivery was seen as critical to improving cultural safety and reducing fear of services. Supporting practitioners to



=move beyond cultural awareness and a tick-box approach, towards being genuinely responsive to the needs of Aboriginal children and families.

LEN emphasised the fear Aboriginal families experience when engaging with services delivered without the accountability of cultural governance, where the perceived

“end of the line” is often the threat of statutory involvement.

Aboriginal cultural governance across the CFSS was seen as critical to reducing the fear Aboriginal families experience of having children taken away, building trust in family support services, and leading to better outcomes for Aboriginal families.



“Removing that fear and anxiety so that they can seek help and not fear children being removed from their families”

LEN System Advisor 2025

LEN will continue to be engaged in this project to support where possible the ongoing development of the Aboriginal cultural governance framework for the CFSS.

Safer Family Services Practice Guides

The Quality Practice and Development Team within Safer Family Services regularly consult with LEN when developing or reviewing practice guides or resources. Practice guides are tools to help practitioners reach the best outcomes with children and families. Involving our System Advisors to shape the development of these guides is critical to ensuring practitioners have the insights to best support families.

During 2025, the following practice guides and resources were developed for Safer Family Services:

- 🕒 Working with Families Living with Disabilities and Neurodivergence Practice Guide
- 🕒 Responding to Disclosures of Child Maltreatment Practice Guide
- 🕒 LGBTQIA+ Inclusive Practice Guide
- 🕒 Working with Families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds Practice Guide
- 🕒 Intensive Family Support Information Sheet for Families

Induction Program for new Safer Family Services Workers

SFS has a mandatory three-day induction program held in March and October for all new members. System Advisors of the LEN are regular guest speakers of this event to

provide new staff with an overview of the LEN as an important mechanism for ensuring the voices of families with lived experience of the CFSS are heard.

All presentations by the System Advisors generated strong discussions between the new staff and provided them with valuable insights to consider moving forward in their career. The SFS workers reported that they found the discussions to be valuable and encouraged them to reflect on their role within the system.

“Your insights are invaluable to use as workers on the frontline. Thank you for the important work you do. Ensuring clients know we’re walking with them and not against them is so important; thank you for reminding us of this”

SFS Worker 2025

LEN Collaborations

DHS Office for Women - Responding to the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

In August 2025, the Final Report and Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence were delivered to the Premier Hon Peter Malinauskas MP by Royal Commissioner Natasha Stott-Despoja AO.

In response to this the former Minister for Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence the Hon Katrine Hildyard MP brought together people impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence to give advice and directly discuss matters with her.

Representatives from lived experience networks were nominated to participate in an interim discussion group with the Minister, including Emma Lipson from LEN. Through this forum, Emma provided valuable insights on how the Minister could work in genuine partnership with survivors to implement the Royal Commission’s recommendations, particularly those relating to the establishment of a Lived Experience Advisory Network (LEAN) for adults and a Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG).



DHS Office for Women – Evaluation Design for Southern and Northern Prevention and Recovery Hubs

Clear Horizon in partnership with the Office for Women sought to develop evaluation plans for the *Prevention and Recovery Hubs* in Adelaide. The goal of these hubs is to support people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence through a variety of services such as counselling, and legal and financial advice. Clear Horizon consulted with the LEN in June to better understand through lived experience what these *Prevention and Recovery Hubs* should look like. The system advice provided by the

System Advisors directly informed the evaluation plans on the two hubs and were promised that a follow up consultation would be arranged when the plans were finalised to keep them in the loop.

Office for Early Childhood Development – Preschool Engagement for Children at Risk and in Care

In April, the Office for Early Childhood Development (OECD) consulted with LEN to gain a better understanding of the experiences, challenges, barriers and attitudes of people from complex backgrounds towards preschool. This was sought to improve the appeal and willingness for parents to enrol their children and to create supportive pathways. The System Advisors outlined factors that make preschool appealing for all families, as well as highlighted barriers that families might face when applying for preschool. Preschool was acknowledged by the System Advisors as more beneficial for children in developing school readiness and providing developmental support.

The OECD visited the LEN again in November, with a focus on what the model looks like on the ground and which families need extra support. From this continued work, the OECD has gained valuable insights that have consistently shaped the service model. LEN has informed the OECD on the practical help families need to enrol and attend preschool, the role of a support worker, who families feel most comfortable receiving support from, and any gaps in the model design. The OECD has final Outreach Service Model design and is now awaiting approval, before returning to LEN in early 2026 to provide an update.



Connect with LEN

To find out more about LEN go to <https://dhs.sa.gov.au/LEN>

If you are over 18, have relevant lived experience and are keen to hear more about how to become a LEN System Advisor, email DHSLivedExperienceNetwork@sa.gov.au

If you are interested in collaborating with LEN, refer to the Lived Experience Network Practice Guide (<https://dhs.sa.gov.au/LEN-practice-guide>) then email DHSLivedExperienceNetwork@sa.gov.au



