

CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

Organisation: Social Futures

Date Received: 16 December 2020



Social
Futures



Submission to
NSW Parliament inquiry into the child
protection and social services system

December 2020

About Social Futures

Social Futures is a regionally based not-for-profit operating for more than 40 years. We are experts in tailoring programs to fit our diverse local communities.

We create positive social change in regional Australia, working directly with individuals, families, communities, organisations and governments across our focus areas of homelessness and housing, youth and family, community inclusivity and programs that promote genuine participation for people with disability.

We are a regional leader and work alongside our partner organisations to strengthen and build capacity and collaboration within the community services sector.

In 2019–20 Social Futures supported more than 20,000 participants through our programs and services including almost 6,000 children, young people and their families supported to reach their full potential through our 9 children, families and youth programs. These programs deliver case management, mental health services and early intervention including targeted support for young people at risk of homelessness, alcohol and other drugs misuse, contact with the criminal justice system and disengagement from school.

We also deliver the Far North Coast Family Referral Service (transitioning to Family Connect and Support) which assists children, young people, and families who do not meet the statutory threshold for child protection intervention but would benefit from accessing specific services to address current problems, prevent escalation, and foster a protective and nurturing environment.

Our Better Chances Forum supports improved outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and their families by bringing together sector professionals from the community, government, education and private sectors to share knowledge and collaborate.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Prioritise and increase investment in prevention and early intervention including universal community strengthening activities and services.

Recommendation 2 – Fund a consistent system-wide approach to child-safety that is evidence-based, client centred and responsive with regular ongoing data collection, monitoring and evaluation.

Recommendation 3 – Develop shared practice frameworks, back by shared decision-making tools, across the community services, health, education, employment support and justice sectors to support a common understanding of the principles underpinning the system and promote shared accountability.

Recommendation 4 – Mandate engagement with coordination and collaboration processes across relevant government and non-government services and improve information sharing processes and timeframes.

Recommendation 5 – Ensure the model includes resourcing for strong linking and client advocacy services to enable families to navigate the system, stay connected and improve outcomes.

Recommendation 6 – Establish a common data sharing platform with a coordinated, consistent intake, assessment and support system across government and non-government agencies so we can see the outcomes of our work across the system and providers are accountable for performance.

Recommendation 7 – Publish timely regional and local data demonstrating accountability for the results we are achieving at population level, supported by program performance measures that show what we are contributing to population-level results.

Recommendation 8 – The system-wide approach must be culturally responsive and accessible, and provide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and leadership.

Recommendation 9 – Prioritise and invest in out of home care (OOHC) models that support continuous and stable care including professional and treatment care models.

Recommendation 10 – Improve training and resources for professionals who work with children and young people, including police, to ensure they are trauma informed, understand their child protection obligations and have the capacity to meet them.

Recommendation 11 – Provide funding for long-term family and domestic and family violence (DFV) support services for children and families.

Introduction

Despite ongoing shifts in Government policy and outward commitments to improving the system for vulnerable children and young people the number of children in out of home care continues to increase. In 2018, the Australian Institute of Family Studies found the number of children in out of home care (OOHC) had risen every year for the previous five years with the numbers rising by 7,366 (18%) from 30 June 2013 to 30 June 2017.¹

In the almost 20 years since the last NSW parliamentary inquiry into the child protection system in 2001, the number of children in OOHC has risen from 7,786 to almost 20,000 today. The recommendations of that Legislative Council report remain relevant, with the majority yet to be meaningfully implemented. Sadly, many of the current cohort in OOHC are the children of the same young people reported on back in 2001.

As both a social services provider and sector leader delivering collaborative spaces for professionals to improve outcomes for children, young people and families, Social Futures has an important stake in supporting an effective child protection and social services system that provides positive and lasting change in the lives of our most vulnerable community members.

Invest early

Where we are now

Numerous research reports and reviews into the child protection system over decades have consistently found that early investment in vulnerable children, young people and families is the most effective way to break intergenerational cycles of abuse and neglect and improve long-term outcomes for our most vulnerable community members.

However, funding for early intervention services remain a small fraction compared to funds spent on child protection and OOHC. NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) was allocated \$2 billion in the 2018-2019 budget for the provision of child protection related services. Only 7.5 per cent of this amount was for early intervention. While this represents a slight increase on previous years it is still only a tiny proportion of the child protection budget compared with 60 per cent spent on OOHC services.

If we are to significantly reduce the number of children and young people entering OOHC and improve lifetime outcomes for vulnerable groups, the Government must commit to significant long-term investment in early intervention services and support.

If the goal is prevention then we must also provide greater clarity about how we define early intervention. The vast majority of places for so called early

¹ CFCA Resource Sheet, Australian Institute of Family Studies, September 2018.

intervention programs such as Brighter Futures, Whole Family Team and Intensive Family Based Support and Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP) come from families who are already in crisis and have been referred from DCJ with only a tiny fraction available for community referrals. If these programs are to genuinely provide early intervention for families before they meet the risk of serious harm (ROSH) threshold or come in contact with the child protection system then they must be expanded and resourced to meet community needs.

Strengthening communities and universal services

Intensive and formal services are not the only option for early intervention nor should they be the primary mechanism for most families. Strong communities help keep people connected and supported. These community strengths are found in families and through universal services and supports like early childhood education, community centres and groups, clubs, and schools.

Resourcing additional supports and pathways around universal services also helps prevent children and young people from falling through the cracks. Child vulnerability is not always straight forward to define and identify. Vulnerability often results from a combination of risk factors that are not static and may change over time. While there is a strong correlation between vulnerability and risk factors for abuse, neglect and other socioeconomic factors, identifying vulnerability is not the same thing as identifying child protection issues. Some families may benefit from accessing supports even if they do not rise to the level of child protection issues or fall neatly into an identifiable category for vulnerability.

The more that we integrate services and supports into universal services we remove stigma and normalise seeking and engaging with them when the need arises. We also increase the capacity of universal service workers and community members to identify vulnerable children and families and link them with appropriate supports.

A great example of a universal service model which also targets support to vulnerable communities are Aboriginal run preschools. In the Far North Coast town of Lismore, Jarjums Centre Inc provides early childhood education programs to First Nation Children aged 2-5 years. It includes wrap-around services such as allied health, occupational and speech therapy, a nutrition program, family support, and community development to ensure children and families are supported for a smooth transition to school. Jarjums Centre also runs a homework hub to support children to stay engaged through primary school. They also provide transport assistance to ensure the service is accessible.

Recommendation 1 – Prioritise and increase investment in prevention and early intervention including universal community strengthening activities and services.

The need for reform

Consistency matters

In 2018 Social Futures took part in the successful Family Referral Service in Schools pilot program delivered across a number of schools and communities across regional NSW. The model aims to effectively and efficiently identify students and families who may be at risk of underachievement and poor developmental outcomes, and intervene by connecting those students and families with appropriate services from within the school setting. The model is responsive and adaptable to the localised needs of the school and students.

Despite evaluations showing the effectiveness of the program and a positive response from schools, ongoing funding has not been forthcoming and a number of schools have withdrawn from the program.

It is worth noting that the new Family Connect and Support service that is replacing the Family Referral Service from 2021 includes some funding to provide outreach in universal service settings, which could include schools, but opportunities are likely to be minimal in the current funding package.

If we are to recalibrate the system towards prevention and early intervention then linking universal services with wrap around and embedded service models is a cost-effective way to ensure families are supported and to facilitate access to the service system when its needed. But it requires consistent and long-term funding support.

How do we know what works?

With limited resources it is vital that that funding is targeted to impactful early interventions. But which early intervention models work? In order to have effective evidence-based policy we need strong data and evidence.

However, the system currently lacks accountability. Organisations and programs are funded without mandates for meaningful data collection, reporting or evaluation. Often new models are piloted and then dropped regardless of whether they can show a positive impact.

A common refrain we hear in our work leading sector collaboration in Northern NSW and from service users, is that the system is fragmented and piece-meal with a focus on programs not people. Despite numerous reviews and recommendations for improvement, it remains crisis driven and siloed. Funding is often short-term and unstable. In this environment, it is almost impossible to establish what interventions and models are most effective in the long-term and it is difficult for people accessing the system to receive consistent and sustainable support.

A system-wide approach

We need whole of system reform. We must ensure children and families' needs are considered first, ahead of the needs of the service system, to determine the support they require and make it more effective. A consistent and accountable system-wide approach is critical to achieve this. Ultimately this approach needs to be supported by a National framework.

The approach must put children, young people and families at the centre and ensure that services are well connected and flexible to meet their needs. We know there is often only a narrow window of time to connect with an individual or family. Failing to make this connection can lead to disengagement from services all together. People can slip through the cracks when the service they approach for support is not able to connect with them. Existing program guidelines and contracts need to allow more flexibility in order to be responsive and accessible.

The approach must also provide for a well-coordinated and collaborative system of supports. Members of our Better Chances Forum, which brings together professionals from across the Northern Rivers region, have identified that multi-agency responses are frequently restricted by funding constraints, differing referral processes and criteria, wait times, inconsistent application of information sharing provisions, or under servicing by statutory child protection services.

Overwhelmed families frequently need support navigating the maze of services. Because of the piece-meal system, there is often no lead service identified, just short-term services linking into various supports and no long-term case management service. This can create confusion as to who is doing what. Services also frequently change the way they support families due to funding changes.

Support coordination meetings currently operate in Northern Rivers including, Safety Action Meetings, two Families in Focus groups and the Strengthening Children and Young People Interagency. They facilitate a multi-agency approach in responding to identified concerns for the safety and wellbeing of children or young people that do not meet the Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) threshold, and facilitate integrated case management supported by information sharing through Chapter 16A of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*. Success of this approach relies on voluntary agency participation being consistent.

Our children, youth and family program workers have identified slow processes and lack of accountability around information sharing as a continuous barrier to working effectively with their participants. In their experience, formal channels through NSW Health are particularly slow for recent births and the information is often insufficient. For example, a recent Chapter 16A request confirmed a hospital admission but provided no further details about how the parent was, their attachment with baby or anything that was noticed about family behaviour.

There are also large gaps in the system with Commonwealth agencies not subject to Chapter 16 requirements of the NSW Act, key services like the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Australian Government Department of Health may not participate in child protection information sharing processes.

Consistent, system-wide practice standards and frameworks are essential to supporting stability and accountability. Currently frameworks and policy are often aspirational. They must be built into contracts and program guidelines and agencies held accountable. They must also be genuinely system-wide and embedded throughout to support child-safety. This includes the justice and court systems, including family law, education, health and community services.

Shared frameworks should also be supported by shared decision-making tools that provide clear and direct actions. This must be backed by investment in training and professional development of both Government and non-government

services and workers to develop a shared understanding of the tools used to assess and respond to risk.

A shared practice framework allows for services, communities and government to come together with a common understanding and approach to child protection. Examples of this from other states include 'Signs of Safety Approach' in WA and the 'Framework for Practice' in Queensland. Such approaches not only unite services they also increase accountability.

International evidence shows that moving away from the traditional statutory top down approach towards an integrated collaborative model that includes families and community in the process leads to better outcomes. The current statutory approach in NSW remains, problem focussed and risk adverse. We need a model and supporting framework which is trauma informed, strengths based and solutions focussed to build on parental capacity and community support.

Recommendation 2 – Fund a consistent system-wide approach to child-safety that is evidence-based, client centred and responsive with regular ongoing data collection, monitoring and evaluation.

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Recommendation 7 – Publish timely regional and local data demonstrating accountability for the results we are achieving at population level, supported by program performance measures that show what we are contributing to population-level results.

A culturally responsive and accessible system

In NSW, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are more than ten times as likely as other children to be in statutory OOHC. In the 20 years since the Bringing Them Home Report, national representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children increased from one in every five children in OOHC to one in every three.²

Too often cultural needs and the impacts of intergenerational trauma are considered as an afterthought in system design and responses. If we are to begin to reverse these figures in any significant way than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be at the centre of our approach to child-safety. This means including them in the decision-making process as we reshape the system.

All parties working in the sector must work supportively alongside Aboriginal workers, organisations and communities. It is important this occurs in ways that enable self-determination for Aboriginal people, rather than being led by the needs of mainstream organisations and service systems.

The child-safety approach must understand and acknowledge the impacts of colonisation, cumulative harm and Stolen Generations on Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander families and communities in order to provide effective, cohesive and trauma informed responses and prevent the ever-increasing number of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander children from coming into care.

Recommendation 8 – The system-wide approach must be culturally responsive and accessible, and provide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and leadership.

Improving out of home care

While out of home care remains an important intervention for children and young people experiencing abuse or neglect, it presents its own set of challenges. Inappropriate and unstable placement can add to risk of abuse and poor outcomes and this may be exacerbated for children and young people with challenging behaviour due to past trauma or other factors.³

Professional and treatment care models provide an important option for vulnerable young people who need intensive support and may suffer from instability in home-based care.

Recommendation 9 – Increase funding for OOHC that support continuous and stable care including professional and treatment care models.

² The Family Matters Report 2017: Measuring trends to turn the tide on over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care in Australia.

³ CFCA Resource Sheet, Australian Institute of Family Studies, September 2018.

Education and resourcing

While system-wide reform is essential to improving long-term outcomes for children and young people and reducing the number of children in OOHC, additional resourcing and education in key services would improve identification and support of vulnerable and at-risk children and young people.

Many ROSH reports that meet the risk thresholds are not responded due to a lack of DCJ capacity with overwhelmed Child Protection Workers often left to make difficult decisions about which vulnerable children receive intervention and support.

Despite efforts to educate organisations that work with children and young people on their obligations, many still don't understand their role in the system. At Social Futures we still come across other organisations and services that do not have a good understanding of their duty of care and reporting requirements. For example, we recently worked with a service that was unaware of Chapter 16A obligations that prioritises the safety, welfare, and wellbeing of a child or young person over an individual's right to privacy.

Similarly, police may also lack skills and training in relation to how children may be impacted by violence, particularly in relation to family and domestic violence (FDV). We have come across instances where the police fail to register children as having observed FDV if they were in the home but in another room. Police must also be properly resourced to ensure they have appropriate capacity to meet their ROSH reporting obligations. In addition, in our experience, Police Domestic Violence Liaison Officer and Youth Liaison Officer positions often remain unfilled for significant periods of time, those appointed lack experience and are not well supported. Ensuring the role is sustainable and informed requires training and ongoing support.

Home visits can be an important and effective way to engage and support the safety of children and families, especially in cases of domestic or family violence. However, few services offer home visits and lack of police resources can be a block. After a recent Safety Action Meeting at which police agreed to a home visit with one of our workers, we were unable to find a time where they were able to attend.

The long-term impacts of DFV on children are well researched but while there are some early intervention and crisis services available, there is a lack of longer-term support. If we are to break the cycle and improve outcomes for impacted children we need to fund support that is trauma informed, consistent and sustained.

Recommendation 10 – Improve training and resources for professionals who work with children and young people throughout the child safety system, including Child Protection Workers and police, to ensure they are trauma informed, understand their child protection obligations and have the capacity to meet them.

Recommendation 11 – Provide funding for long-term family and domestic and family violence (DFV) support services for children and families.



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We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land where we live and work and their continuing connection to land, water, sea and community. We pay respects to Australia's First Peoples, to their unique and diverse cultures, and to Elders past, present and future.