

CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

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Submission

Advocacy, and Children Youth and Families

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Inquiry into the child protection and social services system



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About Uniting NSW.ACT

Uniting is the service and advocacy agency of the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT, and is one of the largest not-for-profit community service providers in this region.

Every year, we work with over 100,000 people, many of whom are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in NSW and the ACT. We provide early learning, family support, disability services, aged care and services for people at risk of homelessness.

Since its beginnings, the Uniting Church has been committed to social justice and addressing contemporary social issues as an integral part of its life and mission. We bring this to life by inspiring people, enlivening communities and confronting injustice.

Alongside our direct service provision, we are committed to speaking up for changes needed to improve the lives of people experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

Why is Uniting NSW.ACT making a submission?

Uniting NSW.ACT has considerable experience in areas of interest to the inquiry. We supported more than 44,000 people in FY19-20 through our youth and family services, including:

- The Permanency Support Program, including foster care and early intervention programs
- Aftercare: supporting young people as they leave or have just left care in Western and South-Western Sydney, the Illawarra, Mid-North Coast
- Additional supports for young people in care and as they transition to independence, which we fund under our Extended Care pilot program
- Child Restoration under Newpin
- Youth support services predominantly for adolescents focussing on: social development, family reconnection, managing risks of early school exits and significant harm
- Youth Housing and Homelessness programs: for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and reconnecting adolescents with their families
- Early intervention supports: services and resources for vulnerable children, young people and families
- Intensive Family Services: through Brighter Futures early intervention for families with children needing child protection support; and Intensive Family Preservation to increase the safety and wellbeing of children at risk of harm
- Parenting, playgroups and education: services that connect people with support workers and other parents
- Fathers' support programs
- School Readiness schemes.

Previous submissions by Uniting NSW.ACT

Uniting NSW.ACT has made submissions to a series of prior inquiries into the child protection framework, including:

- **Their Futures Matter Access System Redesign consultation** (2019) in which we supported improving intake and assessment, provided the system is sufficiently funded to meet demand; a focus on multi-agency responses with strategic commissioning independent of FACS; community hubs; greater opportunity for families to self-refer early for help and advice; collaboration with Aboriginal communities; and more attention to workforce development.

- **Family is Culture independent review of Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care** (2018) where we argued there is a need for holistic intensive family support services specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, supported by workforce development, and systems and processes to encourage participation in early intervention.
- **Shaping a Better Child Protection System, NSW FACS Discussion Paper** (2017) in which we provided a technical response to inform legislative changes in response to the forthcoming Tune report; called for adequate resourcing and culture change within FACS to give effect to intent of reform; and better ongoing consultation with the sector.
- **NSW Legislative Council Child Protection Inquiry (2016)**, which noted that there is insufficient funding for early intervention and aftercare services, that OOHC was being transferred to the non-government sector without adequate training, support or information exchange (prior to introducing the Permanency Support Program); and that commissioning and accountability mechanisms were creating unnecessary instability for the sector.
- **Commonwealth Department of Social Services “Stronger Families” reform consultation** (2018), which generally endorsed the shift to evidence-based and outcomes-oriented funding; and called for local place-based coordination.

In addition to these submissions, late last year Uniting NSW.ACT prepared and widely circulated to government its **Uniting Pre-Budget Submission 2020-2021**. This supported intent behind Their Futures Matter (evidence-based, outcomes-focussed investment approach); and raised risks around implementation such as the need to ensure an integrated service system for all vulnerable families not just priority cohorts, importance of place-based early intervention which address systemic issues such as unemployment, poverty and housing stress.

How vulnerable children and families are identified and how the current system interacts with them including any potential Improvements, particularly at important transition points in their lives

How vulnerable children are identified

The principle has long been accepted in NSW that the best way to protect children is to prevent child abuse and neglect from happening in the first place, through systems that identify families early, and provide the help they need before they come into contact with the statutory child protection system. This approach to prevention and early intervention was endorsed by the NSW Government's 2009 *Keep Them Safe* strategy and the Council of Australian Governments' *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*. It also features in more recent approaches, including David Tune's *Independent Review of Out of Home Care in NSW* and the NSW Government's response to it under *Their Futures Matter*.

Uniting NSW.ACT supports the NSW Government's current reform agenda. We agree with the goals identified in the Tune Report, including that:

- children and young people should grow up in permanent and stable family arrangements
- that OOHC should be short-term and temporary wherever possible and
- that families should receive the right supports at the right time to avoid the need for children to be removed in the first place.

We also support the overall approach initiated under *Their Futures Matter* to implement this vision, which emphasises the systematic use of data and other evidence and directing funding and effort to interventions that reduce future vulnerability.

Mandatory reporting and its impacts

The Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW (Wood Inquiry) into child protection in New South Wales instigated a number of substantial amendments to the mandatory reporting provisions that clarified responsibilities and reduced the number of unnecessary reports. These were most notably:

- raising the threshold for reporting to the child protection Helpline to 'risk of significant harm' from 'risk of harm', thereby reducing the volume of reports
- removing the penalty for failure to report
- allowing government mandatory reporters in some departments to make a report to Child Wellbeing Units (in health, education, police and juvenile justice).

Data shows that the total number of notifications increased significantly from 2004-05 to 2008-09, with a quarter of reports from non-mandatory reporters. The 2010 legislative changes following the Wood Inquiry significantly reduced notifications – reducing by more than half by 2010-11, with this trend then stabilising.¹

¹ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2016/child-abuse-and-neglect-v3-nsw.pdf

However, the proportion of children and young people aged 0-17 years in NSW involved in a risk of significant harm (ROSH) report has trended upwards since that time, increasing by more than 50 per cent to 52.9 people per 1,000 population in 2017-18.²

According to data from the Department of Communities and Justice from 2018-19³:

- 58 per cent of the 361,403 reports made to the Child Protection Helpline were assessed as reaching the risk of significant harm threshold (208,129)
- there were approximately half that number of individual children and young people (105,772) involved in those reports
- less than a third of these were seen by a caseworker (30,949)
- for almost half of these, harm or actual risk of harm was substantiated (14,131).

Clarity as to reporting thresholds has the potential to better focus the time of child protection agencies and case workers to those most in need of intervention, and reducing the chance of children and young people falling through the cracks.

Recommendations:

Provide regular training for mandated reporters to ensure that they know what cases to report, understand thresholds, know how to report necessary details for child welfare agency intake team, and what cases not to report.

Provide information to the public to assist them to understand their responsibilities and identify cases that warrant reporting, along with the information that they should report.

Improve education for those working with children who are traditionally not trained in responding to risk of harm (such as teachers, Early Intervention providers, Early Learning providers).

Review ChildStory to provide a central database where concerns can be recorded and responded to appropriately, ensuring that the system meets its design intent.

Make greater use of NGOs that provide signpost services - accessing children's histories to make well balanced assessments to signpost to professionals and families the range of wellbeing capabilities that might be considered in case planning and the appropriate supports.

How the current system interacts with them, particularly at important transition points in their lives

Restoration

The NSW Government describes a priority of the Permanency Support Program as keeping children safely together with their families wherever possible, through early intervention and effective family support. The preferred permanency option for children and young people in out-of-home care is to support families to allow them to be reunited with their parents where safe to do so.

Uniting supports this goal, however, we note that government funding for early intervention does not extend satisfactorily to the range of care needed to assist families with more complex issues such as alcohol and other drug services; health and education services for parents and families with drug and alcohol issues; mental health supports; and complex and developmental trauma related adult behaviour.

² FACS Annual Statistical Report 2017-18: Objective 2: Improving the lives of children and young people

³ https://public.tableau.com/profile/facs.statistics#!/vizhome/ASR2018-19_textversion/Textversion

Without a cohesive and truly collaborative approach for increases in access to services, and funding for a higher level of care, a restoration approach may not be sustainable over time.

It is also key that legal services practice and funding supports a restoration approach. Restoration requires unsupervised access between child and parent and, in our experience, the court system can be slow to facilitate this. Under our Newpin program, we also experience many examples where delays in court decisions have hampered the restoration process.

Recommendation:

Ensure a cohesive and collaborative approach to allow families to access the range of services that they need to support successful restoration.

Improving life chances for young people leaving out-of-home care

Currently, young people who have been in care are among the most vulnerable groups in Australia. They are more likely to become homeless, have poor physical and mental health, have issues relating to substance use, and be involved with the criminal justice system. A survey of NSW care leavers found that within one year of leaving care, around 35% had experienced homelessness.⁴

The majority of young people in out-of-home-care experience an abrupt end to care when they turn 18. Many young people find the process of transitioning difficult, and may be poorly prepared for independence because of factors such as past trauma, poor health, limited educational attainment and lack of support.⁵

In certain limited circumstances, a young person can be financially supported to remain with a carer until they complete Year 12 (or equivalent) studies. However, the support only extends to the end of their studies, and for a range of reasons, including placement breakdown, many young people are unable to obtain it. This means too many young people end up leaving care during, or prior to, their HSC studies.

Uniting believes that young people leaving care need access to continuing care and support as they transition to independence. Transition to adulthood doesn't take place on a young person's eighteenth birthday. It emerges over time and often occurs at a different pace for each young person. It requires stable, safe and caring support so that young people have the same chance at connected and independent adult lives as other young people in NSW.

Recommendation:

Expand across NSW the services under Futures Planning and Support to provide young people leaving OOHC with youth mentoring supports to assist them with the transition, support their education goals, and facilitate family reconnection if appropriate.

⁴ Extending care to 21 years in New South Wales, Analysis by Deloitte: Commissioned by Home Stretch Campaign NSW, October 2018

⁵ Beauchamp, T. (2014). Young people transitioning from out-of-home care to adulthood, a review of program approaches in Australia and overseas.

Expand aftercare support programs

Uniting NSW.ACT provides services under the Futures Planning Support program to assist young people aged 17 to 25 years who have been in out of home care. Uniting is also piloting a program under the Premier's Youth Initiative on the mid-North Coast to assist at-risk youth leaving foster care by providing short or long-term accommodation and coaching to support their transition to independence.

Currently specialist Aftercare programs assist care leavers with independent living once they have exited from foster care (usually by the age of 18). Aftercare supports are an essential part of the service system for care-leavers who may have no other forms of support. The programs do not include the direct provision of housing but provides advice and referrals and assistance to access services, including housing, employment, financial, health and legal support services.

Uniting considers that, while there is limited formal evaluation of specialist Aftercare services, anecdotal and case-study evidence suggests that Aftercare services do make a significant positive difference. Studies have found that those who do access the service often move from crisis to relative stability (although many continue to need access to the service to address challenges as they arise).

In practice, however, a significant part of the resources in these programs is currently directed towards young people in crisis – those who are already involved with the criminal justice system, have had or are in the process of having children removed, have mental health or substance dependence issues, or are homeless. Not all young people who have left care are eligible for the same level of support, and in practice many have already left care before being connected with this service or are unable or unwilling to seek it out.

Participants in a University of NSW initiative to collect the stories of young people leaving care⁶ identified an absence of a clear pathway into aftercare services. No participants reported a managed transition process from leaving care to accessing aftercare services. During periods when they were not connected with services, participants sought support from informal networks, experienced precarious housing and temporary reengagement with crisis services.

Recommendation:

Provide a clear transition for young people leaving care into independence, including adequate and accessible Aftercare supports.

⁶ Social Policy Research Centre Stories of aftercare services and support needs after leaving care: A snapshot from the Stories of Resourcing and Resourcefulness project, March 2019

Increase investment in transitional housing and support for young people

Youth Foyer

Stable housing, supports and training

Uniting is currently working with the NSW Government, in partnership with St George Community Housing and Social Ventures Australia, to develop a Youth Foyer in Chippendale for young people leaving OOHC.

From early 2021, the Foyer will provide affordable accommodation linked to training, employment and other support provided on-site. The goal is to develop the skills of Youth Foyer students so they can break the cycle of homelessness and lead independent and fulfilling lives. It is modelled on a globally successful program.

The key services provided to Youth Foyer students include accommodation, development of life skills, supported participation in vocational education and training, mentoring, and employment assistance based on their individual aspirations and learning needs.

Students will spend an average of 18 months living in the Foyer, where they will meet regularly with a Foyer worker who will support the young person toward their goals, provide tailored support to address health issues, and help them transition to stable long-term accommodation.

An evaluation of a similar foyer in Victoria found that the service substantially improves participants' education, employment, housing, health and wellbeing outcomes, and these improvements are largely sustained a year after young people exit the program.

Foyers are an evidence-based model but are not suitable for all young people. Other accommodation and support options are also urgently needed for young people who require more intensive support, including those with alcohol and drug problems, mental health issues and contact with the justice system.

Over 9,000 young people (aged 12 to 24) living in NSW were experiencing homelessness on the 2016 Census night. A significant proportion (44%) of all individuals who need and seek help from homelessness services are young people and children.⁷

In considering alternative approaches to youth homelessness services, AHURI recommended a number of service design considerations, including:

- focussing on local programs, not centrally managed discrete programs
- considering new ways of joining up services and linking homelessness service providers with mainstream agencies, such as schools and educational programs
- investing in youth-specific social housing for young people
- providing supported accommodation linked to education and training, such as the Youth Foyer model (see breakout box)
- extending support for all care-leavers until 21 years (see Extended Care breakout box)
- providing Aboriginal young people with a choice of Indigenous and non-Indigenous support options.

The respective roles, responsibilities, including points of intersection, of health, education, police, justice and social services

A fundamental principle of the Their Futures Matter reforms, now being delivered by the NSW Stronger Communities Investment Unit, is to provide person-centred services that cross the boundaries of government agencies. The Tune review on which these reforms are based noted that the traditional approach of shared responsibility across government agencies has not improved the outcomes for children and families with complex needs.

⁷ AHURI, Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people, April 2020.

The then-department of Families and Community Services (now Communities and Justice) is not the agency with primary accountability for addressing the drivers of their needs, and has limited ability to procure or access timely services to change the life trajectories of vulnerable children and families - which stem from missed opportunities or inadequate interventions earlier in a child's life through housing, health, and early education.

In theory, the Stronger Communities Investment approach provides greater flexibility of funding across government agencies, reducing the siloed nature of their program funding and delivery. In practice though, the mechanism for doing this is unclear, and there is little external transparency or accountability for the manner in which funding is allocated to programs across agencies. Individual agencies remain predominantly responsible for their own programs.

An area where cross- agency responsibility has been effective is in delivering Premier's Priorities that focus on specific outcomes for young people and families. While this shows what can be achieved through specific cross-agency targets, it is also limited to only a handful of specific outcomes and does not provide accountability for broader welfare outcomes.

Recommendation:

Increase reporting of budget funding for initiatives that cross agency responsibilities, and outcomes across portfolios .

The adequacy of current interventions and responses for vulnerable children and families and their effectiveness in supporting families and avoiding children entering out of home care

Need for continued focus on early intervention

The Wood Inquiry recognised that “the contemporary challenge facing all child protection systems in Australia, and in particular NSW as the largest, is sufficiently resourcing flexible prevention and early intervention services so as to reduce the numbers of children and young people who require the state to step in to keep them safe.” It also acknowledged that “there are not sufficient prevention, early intervention and targeted services provided by state agencies or by the non-government organisations for children and young people at risk and their families.”

The Tune Review, the major independent review of the out-of-home care system that led to the Their Futures Matter reforms, acknowledged that the NSW child protection system is crisis-oriented and responses to families who are struggling occur too late.

Prevention and early intervention services play a critical role in helping parents to build parenting skills and address issues such as domestic violence and substance use. Research shows that it is cost-effective to invest in early intervention and address issues as they emerge rather than responding to crisis (which is both more challenging and more expensive).

The government has been implementing the recommendations of this review in stages, however, not enough progress has been made on investment in prevention and early intervention to prevent issues escalating to the point where children must be removed from their birth families for their own safety.

Uniting put to the Wood Inquiry⁸ that “I don't think that we yet as a State in New South Wales have agreement about what it is that we want prevention and early intervention to achieve...everything is described in terms of a program, and that program has, by definition, inclusions and exclusions.” It also submitted that, while there are a range of programs and services in place, there is not a strong prevention and early intervention framework: “The existing programs are necessary components of the range of services needed in NSW for a comprehensive and effective prevention and early intervention service system but without place based co-ordination and access to resources, we will continue to have people falling through the gaps, either because they do not receive basic assistance or because their needs escalate and will require more intensive intervention.”

In 2018-19, there were 15,317 children receiving IFSS services in NSW, and 1,785 families receiving MultiSystemic Therapy for Child Abuse and Neglect (MST-CAN) and Functional Family Therapy - Child Welfare (FFT-CW) services.⁹

These are valuable programs, however, they still represent a series of interventions conducted on the basis of a number of specific programs – it is important that policy makers do not lose sight of the ongoing need for a holistic focus on the needs of individual families and children.

Use caution in adopting a cohort approach

The NSW Government Stronger Communities Investment Unit report “Forecasting Future Outcomes”¹⁰ is a ground-breaking study, identifying seven vulnerable groups in NSW with particularly high service costs. The Government is rightly prioritising these groups for attention under its investment approach, because they represent the greatest opportunity for savings.

We recognise the merits of this “cohort” approach; indeed it underpins our work with the NSW Government on our Newpin and Foyer social benefit bonds.

However, the cohort approach and the insights derived from this kind of analysis of administrative data should be used with caution when applied to reform of the service system as a whole. The NSW Government’s “Forecasting Future Outcomes” report states that the seven cohorts have been identified through statistical analysis of averages and common patterns of service usage across individuals within a specific dataset. The cohorts have a sound evidence base, and are one rationale for prioritising investments, but in making investment decisions it is essential to avoid making assumptions that the data does not support. We should avoid assuming that:

- the problems which have led to high levels of expenditure, and their causes, are the same for all members of each cohort, or
- the characteristics which were used to identify these cohorts (e.g. service use, demographics) are either the causes of vulnerability and disadvantage, or the factors which should be addressed to reduce downstream expenditure.

Additionally, the cohorts the Government has identified should not be the sole focus for the whole child and family services system. There are, and will continue to be, many others who require assistance, particularly families with complex needs who require support from multiple services such as housing, AOD, mental health.

⁸ Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW Volume 1, Page 216

⁹ Department of Family and Community Services, Annual Statistical Report 2018-19

¹⁰ https://www.theirfuturesmatter.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/673284/Forecasting-Future-Outcomes-Stronger-Communities-Investment-Unit-2018-Insights-Report.pdf

While we acknowledge that the Government is aware of these issues and had announced a research program to address them, the outcomes of this are not clear, nor what measures have been implemented. We recommend that the Government continue to be transparent about this, by publishing the results of further research and indicating well in advance the funding to be allocated to investment in improving outcomes for each cohort.

The development of early intervention initiatives should also include a focus on place-based approaches in communities with entrenched disadvantage, particularly for Aboriginal communities. This should include strategies which recognise and address the impacts of systemic issues such as unemployment, poverty and housing stress on the wellbeing of vulnerable families.

Recommendations:

Implement specific intervention programs within a holistic perspective of the needs of individual young people and their families.

Ensure that people are not left behind when prioritising cohorts.

Maintain a place-based focus on to address systemic issues within communities with entrenched disadvantage.

The child protection intake, assessment, referral and case management system

The Wood Inquiry found that children and young people receive a higher level of care and support when placed with accredited non-government providers compared with those placed within the NSW Government's out-of-home care services.

A report prepared by Report prepared by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, Canberra¹¹: recommended that "A system for protection that is prevention-based will require an expanded or sustained role for the NGO sector, particularly in delivering secondary prevention strategies. This means that relationships between government and NGOs will be critical to implementing the systems change goal."

The Wood Inquiry also pointed to non-government sector's greater capacity to offer a suite of integrated services, which increases the likelihood of improved outcomes for program participants. It also noted that such organisations had a greater capacity to build trusting and engaging relationships with the children, young people and families using their services, with many participants fearing a conflict between the role of statutory agencies in child protection and the provision of support services.

The non-government sector can only perform transferred functions well if the funding provided to the sector is commensurate with providing adequate case workers and caseloads. While the non-government sector appears to have more capacity to innovatively develop models and staff roles to meet emerging client trends, if poor functioning with government is the result of caseloads are too high to undertake and sustain quality case work, then this cannot simply be remedied through transfer outside of government.

¹¹ ARACY (2009) *Inverting the Pyramid: Enhancing Systems for Protecting Children*. Report prepared by the Allen Consulting Group for the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, Canberra.

Recommendation:

Continue to support the role of non-government organisations through funding arrangements commensurate with strong case management outcomes, funding certainty, and a clear delineation between roles of government and the non-government sector.

The availability of early intervention services across NSW including the effectiveness of pilot programs commissioned under Their Futures Matter program

Positive changes under government reforms

Measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have led to some improved outcomes for children and needing support, including:

- fewer children have entered care: 539 children in NSW entered care in the June 2020 quarter, which is 5.4% lower than the March 2020 quarter and 8.0% lower than June 2019¹²
- Government agencies have displayed unusual responsiveness to meet emerging challenges, which has been seen through investment in evidence based programs and recent announcements of continued investment such as Family Connect and Support
- a positive shift among the child protection community towards birth family, with the view that parents need to be included in a child's life in the long term and better access to extended family through Family Finding model
- improved outcomes for individual children undertaking Therapeutic Life Story therapy
- improved access to Temporary Accommodation under government initiatives, and improved pathways to stable longer-term housing under programs such as *Together Home*.

COVID has further highlighted systemic disadvantage

However, COVID-19 has increased disparities and heightened systematic gaps.

A recent report by Ernst & Young,¹³ which drew on the experiences of foster and kinship carers, identified negative impacts on children in care and families of COVID-19 including:

- an expected spike in the demand for respite care and low-cost child care services in the medium term driven by extended strain on carers and kinship families who are caring for children more intensely
- less ability to have regular and ongoing family contact delaying safe reunification of children and young people in OOHHC with their birth families
- delays in permanency achievement caused by delayed court processes, disrupted by COVID-19 measures
- increased in-home risks as families spend significantly greater amounts of time at home without observation from the community, potentially exacerbated by financial stress, mental health issues and substance abuse

¹² https://public.tableau.com/profile/facs.statistics#!/vizhome/FACS_Caseworker_Dashboard/DCJCaseworkerDashboardVersion3?publish=yes

¹³ https://assets.ey.com/content/dam/ey-sites/ey-com/en_au/topics/covid-19-response/ey-impacts-of-covid-19-on-oohc-.pdf

- reduction in the pool of available carers, with the majority aged over 50 and at greater risk of experiencing more serious complications from COVID-19 and more likely to be required to self-isolate.

The adequacy of funding for prevention and early intervention services

Funding stability and transparency

There remains limited transparency in Budget Papers as to allocation of funding and what programs represent ‘early intervention’. Budget papers for 2020-21 assert that investment in evidence-based early intervention services is the cornerstone of support for vulnerable children and families. A total of \$1.4 billion in to support the safety and welfare of vulnerable children, which includes initiatives to help drive down the number of children entering out-of-home care. Yet, there is scant information available as to how this expenditure is to be allocated across programs and the extent to which they represent early interventions.

The NSW Government has explicitly adopted the investment approach as one of the foundations of Their Futures Matter, the underlying rationale for which is that Government funds new initiatives, even if they are more intensive and more costly than existing programs, because they are more effective and thereby reduce the need for future expenditure. However, if the investment approach is to be effective, it is essential that new initiatives are funded initially through increased spending, and not by transferring funding from current programs. The Government should then apply its own evidence-based approach to the process of realising savings, winding back those services for which demand is expected to drop, over timeframes that are consistent with the evidence about actual changes to service usage.

Recommendations:

New initiatives under Stronger Communities should be funded through increased overall expenditure rather than cutting funding for existing initiatives. Savings should be realised over time in a manner consistent with the evidence on the impact of and savings from new programs.

Increase transparency by providing additional information in the Budget Papers, regarding expenditure on major categories of activity (e.g. early intervention, intensive family preservation and restoration, OOHC, systemic capability, and cohort-specific investments), and change over time in these categories.

Maintain a commitment to transparency by publishing the results of further research, and indicating well in advance the funding to be allocated to investment in improving outcomes for each cohort.

Workforce development

Workforce development and capability has been a recognised need for at least ten years in the child and family sector. It was identified, for example, by the last major child protection reform before Their Futures Matter, in the aftermath of the Wood Special Commission. This need is becoming more acute under the Government's current reform agenda because initiatives such as the introduction of therapeutic approaches in the Permanency Support Program are making more significant demands on staff.

Ngurambang and Gaba Yula Permanency Support Programs

Partnering with Aboriginal community organisations to provide culturally appropriate support to Aboriginal children and young people in care

Uniting NSW.ACT has partnered with the Aboriginal community organisations Ngurambang and Gaba Yula to provide culturally appropriate support to Aboriginal children and young people in care.

Our networks and partnerships are an ongoing commitment to the needs and special care characteristics of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

We help carers in facilitating life opportunities and in the ongoing development of birth family relationships with the Aboriginal children they care for through our community partnerships.

Ngurambang means "special place or home" in Wiradjuri, and aims to:

- provide culturally appropriate support to Aboriginal children and young people in care - be it educational, physical, spiritual, social or emotional need.
- support carers and encourage their links and connections to their community and country. Thereby enabling the children and young person's ability to maintain their identity and connections
- facilitate life opportunities
- develop relationships with birth families and maintain Aboriginal family values.

Gaba Yula, which means "to make good again" in the language of the Gomeroi people, aims to:

- recruit carers that are best able to meet the individual needs of Aboriginal children and young people within their communities where possible.
- maintain family contact, parenting services and reunification/restoration strategies
- provide training and support throughout their journey as carers.
- maintain cultural connections
- provide access to culturally supported playgroups.

The NSW Government has acknowledged the strategic importance of workforce development in the context of the Their Futures Matter reform process. Our long experience with intensive, therapeutic outcomes-funded programs such as Newpin is that highly-qualified and well-supported staff are critical to realising the benefits of programs funded on an investment basis.

The development and implementation of the workforce strategy should include strong focus on recruitment, retention and development of Aboriginal staff and those working in rural and remote areas. This should be resourced through the establishment of a dedicated child and family sector industry development fund (as exists in other sectors undergoing change and innovation). Capacity building is also needed to support teachers, GPs and other members of the community to respond to concerns about the wellbeing of children and refer families to earlier support.

Increased certainty as to Budget funding of programs will also provide the basis for non-government agencies to retain quality staff without interruption between contracts or programs.

Recommendation:

Develop and implement a workforce strategy for the child and family sector resourced through the establishment of a dedicated child and family sector industry development fund. The workforce strategy should include a strong focus on recruitment, retention and development of Aboriginal staff and those working in rural and remote areas.

Conclusion

A series of significant inquiries and reforms have progressively improved outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and families in New South Wales.

The Government sector has a strong role to play in setting policy direction and maintaining a funding and contracting environment to optimise the delivery of well-targeted services.

In particular, Uniting NSW.ACT considers that an ongoing focus on a number of aspects will ensure that more vulnerable people and families will receive the services they need before their needs escalate to more intensive interventions:

- improving information and training for mandatory reporters and the public to better identify the need for children to be reported to child welfare agencies
- supporting restoration outcomes with a broad view of the services that their families need to make restoration successful and safe
- improve transparency regarding Budget funding of initiatives, reporting of cross-agency outcomes, and data around priority intervention cohorts
- taking a holistic approach in administering individual intervention programs, along with a place-based focus on to address systemic disadvantage within communities
- supporting the non-government sector through improved funding certainty, and a commitment to workforce retention and development.