

Investing in Children and their Families

Executive Summary

We can do better.

The purpose of this paper is to Contribute knowledge gained through frontline experience to the discussion around prevention and early intervention and to Advocate for an evidence-informed approach to Investment in children and their families. This paper outlines a pathway for addressing the necessary policy reforms required in New South Wales to ensure that children and families do not fall through the cracks. We can and should do better. We will only achieve better outcomes for our most vulnerable in this State if we are all partners in this together.

Fams was established in 1981 and its vision is a society with;

- Safe Children
- Strong Families and
- Supportive Communities

The children, families and communities the sector works with often have complex needs and it can take a long time to achieve lasting outcomes. Evidence tells us that for more than a decade, most of the population level indicators on vulnerable children and families have been tracking in the wrong direction.

Fams has consistently argued that investment *in* and direction *of* services must be built on strong, transparent and accessible data and that government needs to genuinely engage with ‘true prevention’ strategies.

True Prevention

Fams knows that risk of harm must be considered on a continuum and may be present at many stages of a child’s life. True Prevention is preventative work, at the earliest time possible, with children, families and communities who are at risk of *entering* the child protection system. Its objective is eliminating the risk of children experiencing abuse or neglect and, working with families to keep children safe at home, wherever possible.

The NSW Premier has made clear her commitment to permanency principles and reducing re reporting. Fams is also committed to these principles, provided that all avenues are explored to ensure that children have the opportunity to remain with their own family with assistance and support at the *earliest possible time*.

Report of the Independent Review of Out of Home Care in New South Wales (‘Tune Review’)

The Tune Review conducted in 2015, concluded that;

‘...the current NSW system is ineffective and unsustainable. The system is not client centred, expenditure is crisis driven and not aligned to an evidence base and the Department of Family and Community Services has minimal influence over drivers of demand and levers for change. Moreover, the system is failing to improve long term outcomes for children and families with complex needs, and to arrest devastating cycles of intergenerational abuse and neglect.’

The *Tune Review* was a damning indictment of the current system but previous reviews (there have been 6 since 2008) confirm that failure to address the issues does not rest with one government or one Minister alone.

The children, families and communities of NSW cannot wait any longer for the system to be 'fixed'.

Fams knows that;

- Building skills and knowledge in outcomes-based frameworks enables organisations to collect and use data to inform practice and collaborate to provide better results for children, families and communities, practitioners and organisations; and
- Systematic policy and advocacy informs and enables government to implement solutions that support children, families and communities.
- Early intervention and prevention services offer critical support to children and families experiencing vulnerability. They have the expertise and knowledge to positively change the trajectory of those they work with but require adequate investment to reach the demand in community
- Significant additional investment is needed to fund true preventative action, in order to support children and families who are at risk, slow the rate at which children enter Out of Home Care, and result in a net saving for government within five years (reference?).
- A coordinated approach to early intervention and prevention is required in NSW. FACS and the sector must work together to better adopt, fund, measure, evaluate and iterate a service delivery model that satisfies best practice service delivery approaches.

Recommendations

All children in New South Wales have the right to a safe, healthy and happy childhood. To ensure that children and families experiencing vulnerability receive the right support at the right time NSW requires a prevention service system model that:

- is offered to families at the point of first ROSH report, or earlier when families experiencing vulnerabilities can be identified;
- is flexible to deliver tailored responses to reflect families' unique needs and circumstances;
- is data driven, with more transparent, regular and independent child protection information made available to the sector so that we can work with government to identify issues, trends and problems, and co-design programs that provide help earlier;
- funds service providers to work with families for as long as it takes to build resilience;
- promotes access to and coordination of social services and other community-based supports for families; and
- is outcomes-focused and evidence-informed with a view to a return on investment within five years.

Fams is now preparing its strategy to move from this concept paper to leading work with the sector and Government to identify an evidence informed service response that is targeted to where new investment is needed to achieve better outcomes for children and families at first ROSH report.