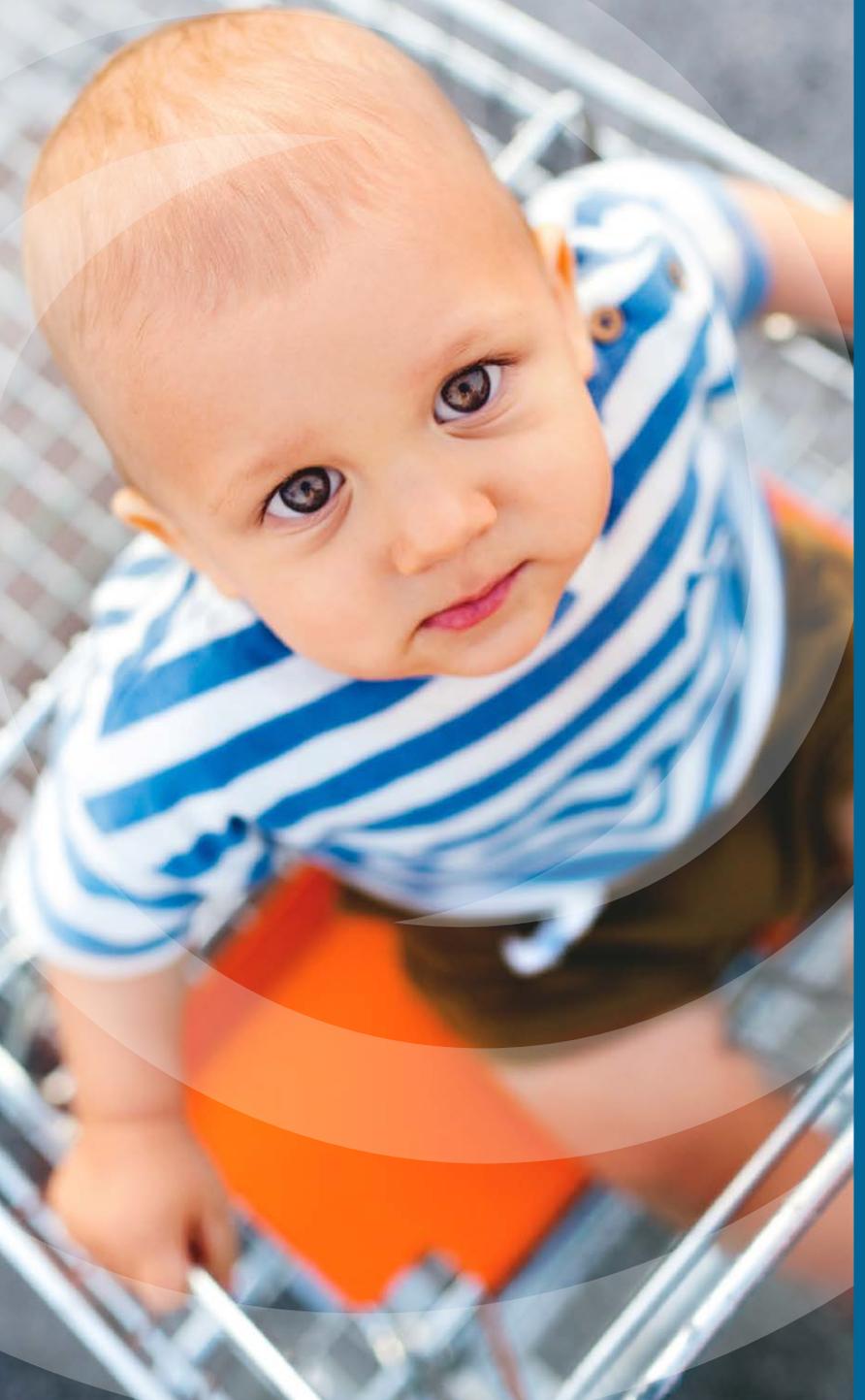




Safe Children, Strong Families, Supportive Communities

INVESTING IN OUR CHILDREN

Recommendations
for the next NSW
Government to
ensure the right
support in the
right place at
the right time.



About Fams

Children are kept safe by quality services which help kids and families when and where they need it. Fams makes this possible by advocating for better public policy, advising how to achieve sustainable outcomes and acting to help vulnerable children, young people, families and communities.

At Fams we advocate, advise and act.

Established in 1981, Fams has always been driven by strong values and our aim:

- Safe Children
- Strong Families
- Supportive Communities

We contribute to population outcomes through:

- Building skills and knowledge in outcomes-based frameworks to enable organisations to collect and use data to inform practice and collaborate to provide better results for clients, practitioners and organisations; and
- Systematic policy and advocacy to inform and enable the government to implement solutions that support vulnerable children, families and communities.

Investing in our children

Fams and the services we represent collectively believe that the safety, health and wellbeing of children and their families is at the heart of all our work. Those on the coal-face of the provision of family and community services see firsthand the devastation of a family not helped soon enough.

Fams would like to recognise the current NSW Government reforms under Their Future Matters as an important initial step, but this work needs to be accelerated and there is more that can be done as the figures show the problem is growing.

In June 2018 Fams, together with Social Ventures Australia (SVA) released a new report Investing in children and their families. This report analysed the data currently available to providers in the sector, and was informed by a sustained consultation process with service providers.

The report particularly looked at the number of kids who were falling through the cracks of our failing child protection system, and found that although there was a significant investment of public money directed towards children and families, we are not seeing an improvement in sustained, positive outcomes for children and their families.

The report highlighted that nearly 80,000 children and young people are determined at risk of significant harm the first time by the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) every year in New South Wales. 30,000 of these children and young people, are ignored and their reports closed. That's the equivalent of 423 school bus loads of children who remain at risk. Too many children are not safe, happy and healthy. Despite the continued best efforts of the child protection sector, government and the community, we continue to fail our children.

At the same time, the rate of children living in Out-Of-Home-Care (OOHC) increased for a decade, now reaching 20,000 children and young people.

The report overwhelmingly demonstrated that not enough is being done in Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI) and that there is substantial discrepancy in funding towards OOHC when compared with TEI. The report also proposed a series of opportunities for consideration built from the insights of those who work on the front line.

Since that time we have continued discussions with NSW elected representatives, FACS, family and children's services providers across the state. Through this consultation we have developed a clear series of steps that the government must take to ensure genuine and long-lasting reform of the sector working to keep children, young people and families safe.

Significant government and community investment is being made into supporting children and families, yet the focus remains on crisis care, not on supporting families with evidence-informed interventions at the first sign of concern. Only 17 per cent of this government investment is set aside for early intervention.

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.

Fams looks forward to working effectively with government, service providers and families to create these changes with one outcome in mind: improving the lives of the thousands of vulnerable children who deserve better.

Julie Hourigan Ruse
Chief Executive Officer
Fams

October 2018

Immediate Priority:



Address the shortfall



Provide an immediate additional \$184,000,000 funding to ensure that every child who is substantiated by FACS as being at Risk of Significant Harm is referred to an appropriate service (see appendix for cost estimate breakdown).

Ongoing Priorities:



Improve data collection, evidence and analysis



Measure what matters

Evidence-informed measures assessing long-term outcome.



Collect and analyse the right data

Improve the capture of, and access to, data to ensure whole-of-sector and whole-of-government planning.



Evidence to evaluate

Introduce an evaluation framework for the entire child safety and wellbeing continuum, target funding to those programs with proven long-term outcomes.



Whole-of-government, evidence-informed, collaborative planning and cross-sector collaboration



Work together to achieve outcomes

Improve collaboration through whole-of-government approaches. Work effectively with service providers and the community.



Invest in our children, fund what works

Amend funding arrangements ensuring that long-term, evidence-informed programs in TEI are prioritised.

Our NSW election priorities

Address the shortfall

1. First and foremost, provide an immediate additional \$184,000,000 funding¹ to address the current shortfall and ensure that every child who is substantiated by FACS as being at Risk of Significant Harm is referred to an appropriate service.
 - a. To address the at least 30,000 children each year who go unseen, this would require:
 - i. 25 new specialist workers across NSW assessing children and referring to adequate services (\$2,750,000).
 - ii. \$6,000 per family for up to three-months of support (\$180,000,000).

Undertake broad reform across the child wellbeing and safety continuum.

Improve data collection, evidence and analysis

2. **Measure what matters**

Create clear, evidence-informed measures which assess the long-term outcome improvements for children experiencing vulnerability.
3. **Collect and analyse the right data**

Improve the capture of, and access to, data related to children and families to ensure that whole-of-sector and whole-of-government planning can occur.
4. **Evidence to evaluate**

Introduce an evaluation framework for the entire child safety and wellbeing continuum, and ensure that funding is targeted towards programs where evidence demonstrates long-term outcomes for vulnerable families – including early intervention and prevention services.

Whole-of-government, evidence-informed, collaborative planning and cross-sector collaboration

5. **Work together to achieve outcomes**

Improve collaboration through transparent and accountable whole-of-government approaches working effectively with service providers and the community.
6. **Invest in our children, fund what works**

Amend program and sector funding arrangements, ensuring that long-term, evidence-informed programs in TEI are prioritised.

1. Cost estimate breakdown provided in Appendix.

1. Address the shortfall

First and foremost, provide an immediate additional \$184,000,000 funding to address the current shortfall and ensure that every child who is substantiated by FACS as being at Risk of Significant Harm is assessed and referred to an appropriate child and family service.

- a. To address the 30,000 children each year who go unseen, this would require:
 - i. 25 additional specialist workers across NSW assessing children and referring to adequate services.
 - ii. \$6,000 per family for up to 3 months support.

Improving child safety and wellbeing

An immediate investment into prevention and TEI would result in safe, happy children, and significant medium to long-term savings for government.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) showed that reducing the number of children experiencing vulnerability, as measured by the Australian Early Development Index, could result in:

- A 7.5 per cent increase in GDP over 60 years.²
- Positive net returns for FACS in as little as five years³, with UK estimates showing a \$10 saving over 20 years for each dollar invested in TEI.⁴

2. ARACY. (2014). The Nest agenda action: Improving the wellbeing of Australia's children and youth while growing our GDP by over 7 per cent. Canberra: Author.

3. Fams. (2018). Investing in children and their families: The right support in the right place at the right time. Sydney: Author.

4. Aked, J., Steur, N., Lawlor, E. & Spratt, S. (2009). Backing the future: Why investing in children is good for us all. London: New Economics Foundation.

2. Measure what matters

Create clear, evidence-informed measures which assess the long-term outcome improvements for vulnerable children.

Fams is calling for an overhaul of the measurement of the child safety and wellbeing system. Evaluation of the system, programs, service providers and the impact on families must:

1. Be outcomes focused, not outputs focused.
2. Be underpinned by useful, effective measurement.
3. Inform future funding arrangements of programs, interventions and service providers.

Why are outcomes so important?

We need to understand how a program, service or the broader system has positively changed or contributed to the trajectory for children, families or a community. Outcome measurement determines the success of an entire system, including all related programs, activities and events in that system.

Currently, the system is measured primarily via outputs – for example, the number of activities delivered and the number of children and families attending programs. The system measures “how much” or how busy it was.

An outcomes focus enables organisations to demonstrate that their work has contributed to improving the circumstances of the children and families that they have supported. It enables organisations to learn and leads to quality improvement of programs and services. It supports government decision-makers to ensure that policy is designed and funding apportioned appropriately.

3. Collect and analyse the right data

Improve the capture of and sector-wide access to data related to vulnerable children and the child protection system to ensure that whole-of-sector planning can occur.

Fams is calling for the next NSW Government to improve the way data is collected using the following principles:

1. Investment must be made to improve data collection and analysis.
2. Ensure data collection is aligned to outcomes, not outputs.
3. Commit to independently publish data and make it regularly available in a timely manner to the broader child protection sector for use in planning and evaluation.
4. Ensure the best and most recent data is used to determine future funding arrangements.

Why prioritise data and analysis?

If you can measure it and report it, you can fix it, and Fams is of the strong view that a new approach to data collection and analysis in the child protection space is urgently needed.

There is much rich data currently being collected by government agencies and service providers across New South Wales. Unfortunately, the data is siloed within and across the stakeholders, creating a barrier to its potential to drive the drastic change required to achieve better outcomes.

The current approach to data collection, analysis and reporting is not supporting government to make the best decisions, or enabling the sector to provide help early enough for vulnerable children and their families.

Current data collection is skewed towards the crisis end of the spectrum, and is focused on an array of output-focused measures. It doesn't tell us enough about families and their circumstances, and it doesn't help us understand what works and doesn't work to prevent children from entering the system in the first place.

Services are not able to assess the full extent of the problem. For example, they know how many children are in OOHC, but do not know when and how to connect with these children at the earliest opportunity to keep them safe at home, thereby preserving their family. This information is not systematically captured and made available. There is not enough known about the broader context that shapes parenting, and the challenges faced by many parents. We need greater clarity around the lifecycle of a family, the impact of triggers and challenges they face, the extent to which different services work collaboratively to provide support, and the services that are needed across the full child protection spectrum.

We need better evidence on the number of children and families having contact with different kinds of supports, and the outcomes those children and families experience as a consequence. This data will help us to learn what works, and to invest accordingly.

Without this data, we cannot learn how best to support parents to keep children safe. Without transparent, shared data that is put to work effectively, there will be no improvements to the number of children entering the child protection system.

Finally, there must be more transparent data sharing between the relevant government agencies and NGO partners. The sector would like to work with government to share its insights and data on outcomes. Service providers have unique, trusted relationships with thousands of families including those in hard-to-reach cohorts enabling them to share valuable data.

4. Evidence to evaluate

Introduce an evaluation framework for the entire child safety and wellbeing continuum and ensure that funding is targeted towards programs where evidence demonstrates long-term outcomes for vulnerable families – including TEI.

Fams is calling for the next NSW Government to:

1. Develop and embed over two years, an iterative quality improvement, outcomes-based evaluation framework for programs across the child safety and wellbeing continuum, with a particular focus on Targeted Earlier Intervention.
2. Evaluate programs, service providers and funding prioritisation against both short and long term outcomes.
3. Provide government resources and funding to improve the evaluation of interventions and programs across the sector.
4. Ensure that funding is weighted appropriately to programs which are shown to deliver long-term preventative outcomes, such as TEI, rather than focussing only on the crisis-care component of the child safety and wellbeing continuum.

The power of evaluation

Fams consistently hears that the current system is broken – for children, for families, for service providers and for government. There is significant investment of public money but little tangible evidence that what we are collectively doing achieving sustained outcomes. Vulnerable children, young people and families in New South Wales deserve better.

We need to stop investing in programs and interventions without understanding how – or if – they make a difference to children's lives. We need to turn to an evidence-informed model for child safety and wellbeing.

Australia's State and Federal governments have a proud history of using evidence to determine how best to design and fund systems that work. As highlighted in the Independent Review of Out of Home Care in New South Wales: final report by David Tune OAM, the public health model is one that is the envy of countries around the world. It is used to determine funding allocations, determine and evaluate health interventions, and create an increased knowledge and capacity across the community. Similar approaches could – and should – be applied to system design, evaluation and funding to protect children and families.

Fams' proposed approach would align with NSW Commissioning and Contestability Policy and Practice Guide, plus support the transition of funding agreements to the new Human Services Agreement. The sector is willing to work collaboratively with government to determine the most appropriate data to collect, and the most efficient way to communicate that data and learn from it. The sector requires funding to undertake this work.

We need to learn what works, and then invest in child and family wellbeing accordingly.

5. Work together to achieve outcomes

Improve collaboration through transparent and accountable whole-of-government approaches working effectively with service providers and the community.

Fams acknowledges that there is reform work currently underway, particularly through Their Future Matters (TFM). However, true, whole-of-government reform requires more robust opportunities for meaningful consultation and collaboration between agencies and services providers across the child safety and wellbeing continuum.

Fams is calling on the next NSW Government to:

1. Create collaborative pathways for government agencies and non-government providers across family and community services, justice, police and emergency services, health and education to jointly engage in the reform process – across outcome design; measurement, data collection and evaluation development; program design and delivery.
2. Embed self-determination principles into program and service deliver and design, to ensure that children's and families' social, cultural, racial and linguistic identities are affirmed and strengthened. This is particularly (although not exclusively) needed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
4. Ensure approaches that support government, service providers and community members co-designing proposed programs.
5. Focus on developing flexible programs that put children at the centre.

Co-design and collaboration as underlying principles

Despite the level of reform activity currently underway, we remain concerned that the system will still not respond to children early enough to change their trajectory if there continues to be a gaping chasm between government agencies across family and community services, justice, health, education, police and emergency services. Policy-makers, government agencies and service providers must be brought together to collaborate and design interventions, as no-one can address this alone. Without this, service providers who support families experiencing vulnerability will remain unable to develop or deliver the targeted, flexible and personalised responses that children and families need.

One of the issues consistently highlighted by government reports and sector consultation is that historical funding models, inflexible program guidelines, strict and expensive licensing restrictions, geography, and long waiting lists to access appropriate services have all conspired against success.

Service providers are already, where possible, delivering flexible responses which are appropriate given the significant diversity between families, the wide-ranging needs of families and the multiple potential support points. Despite such significant diversity in the programs, the need and the individuals accessing services, there is a clear Theory of Change that demonstrates success.

The journey begins with the family being connected to supports and able to set goals. Families' circumstances are then stabilised, with the children and families having stronger support networks and increased resilience. Ultimately, the families achieve their goals and children are safe at home.

Fams and the service providers it represents believe that the flexible delivery of programs and services are just as important, or perhaps more so, than what the programs deliver. The Theory of Change supports the importance of taking an outcomes-focused approach based on core principles of practice and responding to the unique needs of each family.

6. Invest in our children, fund what works

Amend program and sector funding arrangements, ensuring that long-term, evidence-informed programs in TEI are prioritised.

Business as usual cannot continue without being checked. We need to invest in children, and in deciding how to do things differently, we need to invest where the evidence says we will have most impact. We know that in order to avoid children being notified or re-notified, and avoid children being placed in OOHC, we need to reach them earlier with targeted interventions.

Fams is calling on the next NSW Government to:

1. Take an investment approach to funding across the child safety and wellbeing continuum.
2. Increase the overall funding of services across the entire child safety and wellbeing continuum, once outcomes are established, measurement in place and programs are evaluated.
3. Fund services and programs to levels adequate for meeting any agreed outcomes, using the evidence base proposed in priorities 1-3 to determine funding requirements and distribution.

Why an investment approach?

An investment approach can help to attract additional funding to the areas that are most likely to help children and their families avoid experiencing negative outcomes. If we think of a system working along a spectrum to achieve safe children living in strong families, and what children and families experiencing vulnerability might need from that system at different times along that spectrum, we can think about where investment would have the most impact.

Successive policy shifts have led to a re-defining of language. The terms “prevention” and “early intervention” are now used to describe supports much further along the crisis spectrum than our traditional idea of prevention. This has diminished the importance of work with families who have not yet had contact with FACS, or, alarmingly, with families who have only been notified to FACS once.

All the efforts are focussed too late to change the trajectory for these children and their families. Despite the contributions in funding and resourcing, there have been no significant improvements to the long-term outcomes for children who encounter the child protection system.

Programs are focused on child protection and crisis care, rather than getting to families early through evidence-informed, targeted intervention programs at the first stage of distress or vulnerability. Further investment is needed in evaluating the programs. Further investment is needed into the programs that work. Further investment is needed to prevent intergenerational trauma occurring, with the experiences of yesterday and today continuing their cycle.

This targeted, increased investment into what works will ultimately reduce the cost in the long-term and lead to happier and healthier families across New South Wales.

Appendix

Costing estimate

25 specialist workers - \$2,750,000

- One FTE specialist worker per 1,200 children.
- One FTE specialist worker for 25 children per week (5 per day) x 48 weeks = 1,200 children.
- Based on benchmark average unit cost per FTE - \$110,000 (based on \$95,000 per annum base salary plus 15% on costs).

\$6,000 support per family - \$180,000,000

- Based on FACS Early Intervention & Placement Prevention Program (EIPP) 2009/2010 estimates of benchmark costs of three months support.
- To respond to 30,000 children would require a minimum of \$180,000,000 or up to \$6,000 per family.

Total cost - \$183,750,000



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