Bridge the Gap

Effective early intervention components to meet the needs of children and families in New South Wales

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Thank you to CEI

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1. Purpose of this paper

The purpose of this brief discussion paper is to present the case for a strategic focus on the development of infrastructure, practices, skills and competencies for the early intervention sector to meet population need and spur discussion on an approach to facilitate the necessary transformation successfully embed sustainable and effective early intervention practice in NSW.

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. 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.

Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI) and Stronger Communities Investment Unit (formerly Their Futures Matter) outline an ambitious agenda of reform that clearly identifies the need to shift expenditure from crisis response to early intervention and prevention. However, system transformation needs time, clear expectations and resourcing from government. A holistic transformation strategy is necessary to promote consistency and transparent standards for recontracting and commissioning and ensure a sector that is better able to meet the needs of vulnerable children, families and communities.

The whole of sector can't pivot without support. What is needed in order to achieve the desired transformation is a comprehensive multifaceted strategy that encompasses
1. System infrastructure: that has clear policy directions, transparent and robust commissioning model, adequate resourcing and shared dataset
2. Organisational capacity: that can demonstrate minimum standards for governance and operations
3. Practice capability: principles and models of service delivery that are evidence informed
4. Workforce development: workers that have core skillsets (minimum competencies and qualifications that may or not be formal)

Fams is the natural lead in this work. We know 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.

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.

2. Targeted Earlier Intervention Reform

Reform of the NSW early intervention sector over the past five years[1] has focused on defining early intervention activity at the individual, group and community level, developing indicators and trialling tools to measure client and community outcomes and articulating how activities produce change through program logics.

This work has been important in laying the foundation for an effective and efficient early intervention sector.

1. Activity mapping has allowed NGOs to
   o re-think how the activities they deliver might fit together in a different way to be most responsive to the people they work with;
   o identify how their work aligns to the DSS Data Exchange; and
   o set how they will report to FACS for compliance and acquittal purposes.

2. Program logics are being used within NGOs as the tool to consolidate evidence, research, DEX flexible activities, short term outcomes, intermediate term outcomes and long term outcomes related to their early intervention and prevention work.

3. FACS and NGOs will transition to the Data Exchange as the platform to implement data collection and outcomes measurement.

These three initiatives will be in place and operational by June 2020.

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[1] See also Fams' *History of Targeted Earlier Intervention Reform*, www.fams.asn.au

3.   Our pathway for change

Beyond TEI reform, the work of Stronger Communities Investment Unit (SCUI) has largely been the vehicle to inform how the NSW Government perceives system transformation for child safety and wellbeing in NSW. SCUI has used historic cross agency data for forecast future outcomes for children and young people. The *Forecasting Futures Outcomes Report* challenges Government and the sector to focus on true prevention and early intervention strategies.

Significant gaps remain if early intervention workers are to achieve desired outcomes and the sector as a whole is to have a preventative impact on, for example, family contact with the child protection system[2].

It is recognised that the existing sector is diverse, and organisations currently sit along a continuum. Enabling a vibrant, sustainable and responsive service system, with ongoing capability to flex to meet emerging needs, requires focus on multiple elements. The answer is not simply regulation or directives to use prescribed evidence based programs. Past initiatives focusing on one element (historically either organisations or workers) whilst ignoring the structural needs has been a barrier to success. This focus on 'individual' or discrete deficits, or program reform rather than sector reform has skewed the conversation and produced fragmented activities.

What is required to achieve the desired sector transformation can be articulated as responding to the following gaps:

- System: the resourcing gap, which is the gap between the transitioning to a commissioning model and aligning to the Human Services Outcomes Framework and access to the necessary investment and data modelling to respond to vulnerable children, families and communities

- Organisation: the benchmarking gap, which is the gap between what is known is required to for good governance and the process for assessing minimum standards across organisations

- Practice: the implementation gap, which is the gap between effective practices and the high quality implementation and sustained adoption of these practices at scale (i.e. effective practices are implemented as intended and workers are supported to improve their practice by the system)

- Worker: which is the gap between what is known about effective practices, including not just effective programs but practices that reflect the breadth of early intervention work (e.g. delivery of playgroups and community engagement), and worker's ability to access and use these practices

4. Four components to bridge the gap

4.1. System capacity

An early intervention sector in NSW that is enabled to deliver high quality services and use effective practices requires a clearly articulated policy and practice framework and investment to meet demand.

The Forecasting Future Outcomes whole of government data set provides a new level of insight and baseline data. The ongoing collection, analysis and sharing of this data will be critical to informing strategic policy development and investment. This will continue to influence service system design and articulate where and how the sector contributes to the Human Services Outcomes Framework.

Further, the sector working with children, families and communities requires interaction among three systems:
1. A synthesis and translation system (i.e. a guide or menu of effective programs, common elements and practices in early intervention)
2. A delivery system (i.e. early intervention service providers, coalitions and networks)
3. A support system that bridges the gap between evidence and practice (i.e. tools, training and technical assistance to deliver effective practice).

This support system forms the basis of the approach to building sector, organisational and worker capacity.

4.2. Organisational capacity

An early intervention sector in NSW that is enabled to deliver high quality services and use effective practices requires organisational capacity to efficiently and effectively manage investment to achieve high quality outcomes.

The child and family service sector in NSW do not have an existing accreditation system. Third party verification is an expensive and time consuming exercise which is often out of reach for small NGO's.

The NSW NGO Capability Building Tool[3] sets minimum standards for governance and service delivery. This would provide a standardised mechanism for determining organisational capacity, risk management and quality assurance. Implementation of minimum standards will promote accountability and continuous improvement and build capacity to transition to outcomes based commissioning.

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[3] https://www.finance.nsw.gov.au/capability_building_tool

Strong and healthy organisations with robust governance support a sector that is positioned to achieve best outcomes for clients, implement evidence informed best practice, support and retain a skilled and professional workforce and be flexible and adaptable to changing and emerging needs.

4.3.   Practice capacity

An early intervention sector in NSW that is enabled to deliver high quality services and use effective practices requires an evidence-informed practice approach.

Evidence-informed practice is the integration of the best research evidence with practice expertise and client and/or community values. This differs from the often-used term evidence-based practice (or evidence-based program[4]) which implies that evidence is available for each situation, that decision-making is rigid, and that practice is an exact copy of a script or manual. Evidence-informed practice recognises the complexity of how evidence can and should be used in practice and reflects how workers draw on and differentially weight different sources of input in decision-making and conducting work in partnership with clients and community.

Workers in the early intervention sector need access to a range of skills and approaches that are effective in addressing the needs of clients and community. These approaches may include the use of manualised programs (e.g. Tuning into Kids) and discrete practices, techniques or strategies that are evidence-informed and common across programs (e.g. goal setting). This 'common elements' approach to early intervention service delivery is flexible and responsive to the specific circumstances, problems, and needs of clients and community. Common elements can be divided into:
- Common elements associated with effective service delivery or how workers in the early intervention sector work with children, families and communities to build strong trusting relationships
- Common elements associated with effective intervention or what workers in the early intervention sector do with children, families and communities to address needs.

Appendix C shows an example of common elements relevant for workers in the child and family services sector developed by Centre for Evidence and Implementation.

4.4.   Worker capacity

An early intervention sector in NSW that is enabled to deliver high quality services and use effective practices requires a skilled and professional workforce that is adaptive.

The presence of evidence-based or evidence-informed programs and practices is necessary but not enough to support effective practice in the early intervention sector. Workers are required to possess a wide variety of skills to address individual, family and community needs.

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[4] An evidence-based program or manualised program is a structured package of prescribed content put together in a series of (usually linear) steps or sessions that have been drawn from empirical research, usually randomised-controlled trials.

The workforce involved in supporting children and families is diverse. The changing needs of children and families, along with the increased focus on outcomes rather than outputs requires changes in service provision as well as the skillsets of workers.

A comprehensive workforce development strategy is required to ensure the sector is adequately skilled and resourced to respond to future changes and demands. This strategy should encompass:

- A minimum qualifications framework to support consistency in effective practice by determining core skills and knowledge for workers in the sector.
- Governance and organisational systems to support a healthy and sustainable workforce through best practice in recruitment, supervision, development and retention.
- Ongoing capacity building to support workers to implement and use evidence-based and evidence-informed programs.

Appendix D shows capacity building strategies used in supporting effective practice in community prevention adapted to the early intervention service context. A comprehensive learning and development initiative would support existing caseworkers and community workers to successfully select, adopt and implement effective practices in their services.

5.   Measuring outcomes

Too often, new programs, practices and initiatives fail to reach their potential and be adopted/ effective at scale because of poor implementation. Three common pitfalls to the achievement of sector-wide implementation are (AIFS/CEI, Aarons, Hurlburt, & Horwitz, 2010 Powell, Proctor, & Glass, 2014):

- Only focusing on 'what' program or effective practice to use, and ignoring 'how' the program or practice will be implemented
- Failing to consider influencing factors (such as enablers and barriers) that impact the ability of service providers to initiate and sustain the program or practice
- Focusing exclusively on workforce development at the expense of leadership skills and organisational and sector capacity.

Insights from implementation science can help to identify, understand, apply and assess strategies that promote and support the adoption, scale-up, and sustainability of effective practices for the early intervention sector in NSW.

Effective service delivery and effective intervention is what works to achieve outcomes for clients. We need to learn what works, and then invest in child and family wellbeing accordingly.

It is essential that an evaluation framework for the entire child safety and wellbeing continuum is established so that funding can be targeted towards programs where evidence demonstrates long term outcomes. In order to do this it is necessary to:

- Create clear, evidence-informed measures which assess the long-term outcome improvements for children experiencing vulnerability; and
- 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.

It is important that while we stop and reflect about reform, we continue to press ahead with examining what does and does not work in our sector. This necessarily means a commitment to self-evaluation. As a sector, working with service users with complex needs, we don't need to wait for government to tells us whether we are doing a good job or not. We need to want to know ourselves. We need to want to know this for our service users.

Fams argues that it is the ability of organisations to answer these key questions that will determine their future role:

- Can you describe what you do?
- Can you describe how you do it?
- Can you describe what your impact is?

The sector needs to be committed to a process of self-evaluation, which considers issues including: the competency of the Board of Management, the support and supervision provided to staff, the cultural safety of the organisation, and continuous learning from research and analysis of data to inform practice. Together, all of these will speak to the viability of an organisation into the future.

If we get systems transformation right, we should never need to reform the system again. Continuous improvement through reflection is key.

6.   Recommendations

The NSW Government commit to a holistic, integrated **Sector Transformation Strategy** containing

An **Investment Strategy** which should encompass:
- o Levels of resourcing to enable genuine early intervention services to vulnerable children, families and communities.

A **Practice Framework** which should encompass:
- o Menu of principles of practice, common elements and effective programs in early intervention.
- o Governance and organisation standards required to efficiently and effectively manage investment and deliver high quality client-centred practice
    - o In the first instance, this could involve funded early intervention service providers completing the NSW NGO Capability Tool by December 2020.

An **Evaluation Framework** which should encompass:
- o Clear, evidence-informed measures which assess the long-term outcome improvements for children experiencing vulnerability.
- o Capture of, and access to, data related to children and families to ensure that whole-of-sector and whole-of-government planning can occur.

A **Workforce Development Strategy** which should encompass:
- o A Skills audit and analysis of the early intervention sector.
- o A minimum qualifications framework to support consistency in effective practice by determining core skills and knowledge for workers in the sector.
- o Governance and organisational systems to support a healthy and sustainable workforce through best practice in recruitment, supervision, development and retention.
    - o In the first instance, this could involve funded early intervention service providers completing the NSW NGO Capability Tool by December 2020.
- o Ongoing capacity building to support workers to implement and use evidence-based and evidence-informed programs.

7. Appendices

7.1.   Appendix A   Reference List

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7.2.   Appendix B

Achieving high quality implementation

High quality implementation is increasingly being recognised as central to improving outcomes for children, families and communities experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. Substantial evidence exists showing a causal link between the implementation of programs and the outcomes of clients.

Purposeful, active, and integrated implementation approaches addressing organisational and individual practice challenges, as a planned part of implementation, yield strong implementation results. Passive uptake strategies (e.g. tip or fact sheets, guides and one-off workshop training events) are important but insufficient to build worker skill and guarantee quality practice. Instead, the implementation science literature has shown that addressing multiple core implementation elements that build both workforce competence and organisational capacity are critical for achieving effective implementation.

Implementation is neither a single event nor a linear process. Instead, implementation happens over time in stages that overlap and are often revisited when circumstances change. Table 1 shows four stages of implementation and example tasks adapted to the early intervention context.

Stages of implementation adapted to the early intervention context

Stage	Key focus	Example tasks
Stage 1: Engage and Explore	Exploring early intervention needs, effective practice and readiness for sector implementation	Define what needs to change and for whom Select and adopt program or practice Set up an implementation team Assess readiness; consider barriers and enablers
Stage 2: Plan and Prepare	Preparing the early intervention sector to implement effective practices	Choose implementation strategies Develop an implementation plan Decide how to monitor implementation quality Build readiness to use program or practice
Stage 3: Initiate and Refine	Building capacity to implement effective practices in the early intervention sector	Start using program or practice Continuously monitor and improve
Stage 4: Sustain and Scale	Making use of effective practices routine in the early intervention sector	Sustain the program or practice, embedding 'business as usual' Scale up the program or practice

Adapted from Hateley-Browne et al (2019)

7.3. Appendix C

Common elements for effective service delivery and intervention with children and families

These elements will need to be further developed and adapted for early intervention, particularly in terms of working with communities, but are useful in demonstrating the types of effective strategies, techniques and practices that can be used by workers.

Effective service delivery	Description
Authentic engagement	Building and maintaining a relationship with parents, carers and families that they experience as supportive and genuine, by becoming attuned and responsive to the family's circumstances, values and priorities.
Partnership relationship	Explicitly seeking a collaborative partnership relationship with parents, carers and families based on mutual sharing of information, decision-making, and responsibilities.
Strength-building	Focusing on the strengths of parents, carers and families, seeking to identify and openly acknowledge what families do well or are able to do for themselves.
Responding to family priorities	Helping parents, carers and families identify what is most important to them and providing services to help them address these needs.
Cultural acknowledgement	Explicitly seeking to understand and acknowledge cultural beliefs, values and practices of parents, carers and families, and providing support and services in ways that are congruent with these beliefs and values.
Feedback	Continuously checking how parents, carers and families have experienced the service and whether the practitioner is delivering the service in line with best practice.
Effective intervention	**Description**
Goal setting	To assist the family with identifying, prioritising and achieving realistic desired outcomes.
Problem solving	Training in the use of techniques (e.g., defining problem, brainstorming, choosing a solution, evaluating results) designed to resolve targeted problems.
Family communication skills	Training for the parent/carer and/or child/young person in how to communicate more positively and effectively by teaching specific skills and behaviours (e.g. using "I" statements and active listening) and practising these with the family.
Motivational enhancement	Building commitment to change by eliciting or responding to change talk, probing disadvantages of the status quo, advantages of change, optimism, and intention to change.

The use of common elements has several advantages for service providers including the
High feasibility, ease of access, and low relative cost, to material, training and coaching
compared with manualised programs
Ability to develop a confident, highly adaptive workforce that can flexibly use different
common elements at varying intensity to address multiple needs presented by children,
families and communities.

Common elements can be supported by Fams' *Principles of Practice*:
Children and families receive services that are flexible and responsive to their needs.
Children and families can access services embedded in their community.
Children and family's growth and development is enhanced by research supported practice.
Children and family's social, cultural, racial and linguistic identities are affirmed and
strengthened.
Children and families work together with services in relationships based on trust and respect.

The Theory of Change in Fams' *Investing in children and their families* outlines flexible
delivery so that services are: accessible, culturally safe, child-centred, non-stigmatised,
tailored, trauma-informed, place based, holistic.

7.4. Appendix D

Capacity building strategies for supporting effective practice
Adapted from Leeman et al (2017).

Type of capacity building strategies	Description
Selection and marketing of effective practices and interventions	How effective practices or interventions are identified and communicated to the sector
Training	Providing structured planned education or skill building sessions to service providers on effective practices or interventions
Tools	Access to media or technological resources for use in planning and implementation of effective practices or interventions
Technical assistance	Providing interactive, individualised education, skills building, and problem-solving sessions for workers
Assessment and feedback	Collecting data and providing feedback on performance to workers and service providers
Peer networking	Bringing workers together to learn from each other in technical assistance sessions
Incentives	Providing financial compensation and in-kind resources as incentives to build capacity
Structure of capacity building strategies	**Description**
Dose	The duration, frequency and amount of capacity building provided to assist targeted service providers in skill development
Level of capacity building collaboration	The extent to which capacity building providers collaborate with service providers targeted for assistance (i.e. do providers function as advisors or engaged partners?)
Target audience	Capacity building strategies vary depending on the target audience (i.e. is the target audience staff who undertake intervention planning, delivery or management?)