



Government of Western Australia  
Department for Child Protection  
and Family Support

# BUILDING SAFE AND STRONG FAMILIES

## Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy

SEPTEMBER 2016





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### **Acknowledgement of Country and Peoples**

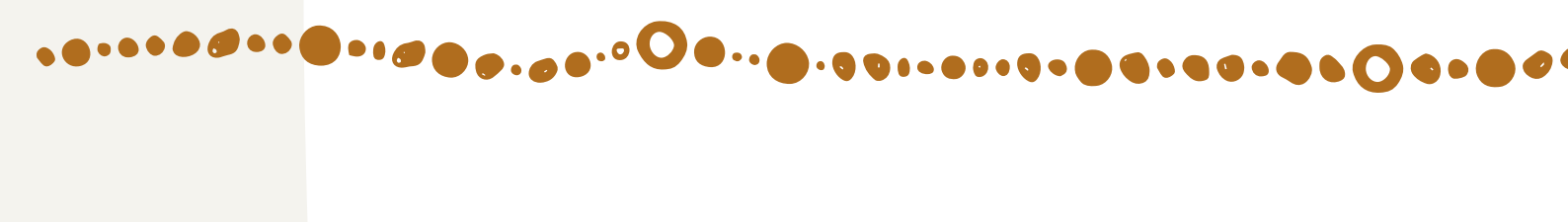
The Department for Child Protection and Family Support acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as traditional custodians of this land. It pays respect to their Elders past, present, and future.

It recognises the long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on this land and acknowledges that the past is not just the past. The past, the present and the future are, as they always are, part of each other – bound together.

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## MINISTER'S FOREWORD

We all want to live in a community where every child has the opportunity to live in stable, nurturing families within a safe community.

Providing the right services at the right time can literally be a lifeline for Western Australia's most vulnerable families.

The Department for Child Protection and Family Support has developed the *Building Safe and Strong Families: Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy* in partnership with the community services sector to enable the service system to be more responsive and effective for the most vulnerable families in our community.

The Strategy involves building new partnerships and strengthening coordination across Government agencies and the community services sector. It includes focusing the Department's workforce and funding to where it is most needed, and incorporates a strengthened role for Aboriginal people and Aboriginal community controlled organisations in designing and providing targeted support for vulnerable Aboriginal families.

At the heart of the Strategy are commitments to action, innovation and collaboration for an aligned and integrated service system that meets the needs of these families and children into the future. By working together we can provide the best possible support for families, to give children the opportunities they need to thrive into adulthood.

**Hon Andrea Mitchell MLA**  
Minister for Child Protection



## DIRECTOR GENERAL'S FOREWORD

The Department for Child Protection and Family Support's *Building Safe and Strong Families: Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy* recognises that earlier and more intensive engagement and intervention, before problems become entrenched, provides the best opportunity to effectively support and benefit individuals and families. This type of intervention will also help to reduce the likelihood of more serious intervention with the child protection system.

Families who come into contact with the child protection system, almost without exception, share the belief that 'safe and strong' families are the best place to grow children who go on to achieve their desired life outcomes. Most of these families and their children have experienced profound trauma and, despite their resilience, are struggling with its ongoing impact on their day-to-day lives. They face frequent and significant personal challenges and have experienced disadvantage and hardship; often over many generations.

In Western Australia most Aboriginal families are thriving. However there is a significant number who are experiencing disadvantage and adverse consequences across a range of life outcomes. A critical measure of the success of earlier intervention and family support must be to establish improvement in the outcomes and life circumstances for Aboriginal children and families.

Recent research has confirmed that the primary drivers for child protection interventions in Western Australia are family and domestic violence, parental substance abuse, mental health and homelessness. These issues are often interrelated, co-occurring and have a lasting and adverse effect on families, and most profoundly on children who are the most vulnerable.

Providing intervention and support to families cannot be achieved by one service or approach alone. The multiple and complex range of issues demands a coordinated, targeted and flexible response between government departments that is designed and delivered in partnership with the community services sector and service users. Likewise, services delivered by the community services sector must be targeted, culturally competent and practical.

Mirroring our need to work together, I am pleased that there has been such a large and diverse group of contributors who have helped design and shape our strategy. We are in furious agreement that together through a united, coordinated, targeted and flexible response we can reduce the number of children coming into care, particularly Aboriginal children.

This strategy aims to deliver our shared aspiration, and I look forward to working with you to realise this.

**Emma White**

Director General

Department for Child Protection and Family Support

# RE-DESIGNING WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S SERVICE SYSTEM TO MORE EFFECTIVELY DELIVER EARLIER INTERVENTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

The Western Australian Government provides social and family support to the whole community through the funding of universal services such as health, early childhood and education.

However, some families require additional support to live safe and productive lives. These families often struggle with multiple challenges such as family and domestic violence, homelessness, parental mental health problems and substance misuse. Many experience these issues over significant periods, with children born into situations of entrenched disadvantage.

These problems are complex and inter-generational and may lead to poor life outcomes, including involvement with the statutory child protection system and children needing to enter out-of-home care.


In Western Australia most Aboriginal families are thriving. However there is a significant number experiencing disadvantage and adverse consequences including over-representation across a range of negative education, housing, health, child protection and criminal justice outcomes.

Over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system is particularly stark and getting worse. Over the past ten years the number of Aboriginal children in care has increased from 873 to 2480. Unacceptably, despite comprising only 6.7 percent of the child population, 53 percent of children in care are Aboriginal. This includes approximately one in ten Aboriginal children in the metropolitan area.

When children are exposed to the unthinkable in their families; abuse, violence, drug use, fear and

**Some families require additional support to live safe and productive lives.**





uncertainty, their safety is, and must be, the first priority. Some children will need out-of-home care to keep them safe. However, a system shift, which involves a new and more focussed way of working, is required to achieve better outcomes for families with complex and multiple needs and to prevent children from needing out-of-home care wherever possible.

The Department for Child Protection and Family Support (the Department) has a critical role in providing and funding earlier intervention and family support services that aim to divert families from having contact with the child protection system, and ultimately prevent the need for children to enter out-of-home care.

There is no doubt that effective earlier intervention before problems become so entrenched that children have to be removed presents the best opportunity to make a positive difference. Given the significance of early intervention and family support services in the lives of vulnerable children and families, the focus, delivery and resources committed to this area need to be regularly and critically reviewed.

Consistent with improving service responses in this way and building on the capacity of Aboriginal families and communities, a thorough review of the Department provided and funded earlier intervention and family support service system has been undertaken. Results show that there has been some achievements in working with non-Aboriginal families with the rate of growth of non-Aboriginal children in care being below population growth for the past five years. However there has been considerably less success in working with Aboriginal families.

The need to create a service system that works for Aboriginal children and families is therefore critical, as is the need to consider a different way of providing these services: in partnership, with co-design as an underlying principle.

The *Building Safe and Strong Families: Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy* (the Strategy) provides a framework for the alignment of the service system to meet the current needs of families most vulnerable to their children entering out-of-home care. Importantly it builds on the strategies and services that have been effective in meeting the needs of vulnerable families and sets out a plan to re-align those that need to be more targeted and effective.

The Strategy focuses on four key areas with a range of actions under each:

- 1. Delivering shared outcomes through collective effort** – A system that is aligned and accountable to achieving shared outcomes for vulnerable families, with a focus on Aboriginal children and families.
- 2. A culturally competent service system** – A system that is safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal families.
- 3. Diverting families from the child protection system** – A system that identifies families that are vulnerable to involvement with the statutory child protection system, and provides early and intensive support.
- 4. Preventing children entering out-of-home care** – A system that prioritises and aligns the Department's workforce and resources to prevent the most vulnerable children from entering out-of-home care.

Where it is safe, children are best brought up in their families.





## DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRATEGY

Over the last two years the Department has undertaken significant review, analysis and consultation to identify ways to prevent the need for children to enter out-of-home care; and to more effectively support the children who are in care to live positive and productive lives. The Department has consulted and engaged with children, parents, birth families, carers, the community services sector, Aboriginal organisations, Department staff, other government agencies and numerous other stakeholders.

These various consultation mechanisms have included:

**Aboriginal Services and Practice Framework** – this foundation framework sets out the commitment and way forward for all of the Department’s work in improving outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

**Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy Discussion Paper** – this provided a platform for community discussion and feedback on strategies to more effectively support families and prevent children entering out-of-home care.

**Intensive Family Support Services Review** – this independent consultation and review identified strategies to strengthen the Intensive Family Support Services system and made recommendations to inform future design and planning for the implementation of targeted family support services, with a particular focus on Aboriginal families.

**Review of Community Services Sector Expenditure** – this external consultative review identified strategies to better align the Department’s funding of the community services sector to meet the core priorities, as well as strategies to better enable the community services sector to deliver targeted and high quality services.

**Organisational Review and Structural Re-alignment Project** – this project analysed the degree to which the existing Department service delivery structures and functions support the delivery of a consistently high quality service. This has resulted in recommendations to better align the Department’s workforce and structures to achieve its strategic priorities.

**Signs of Safety Research Program** - the Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework was implemented in 2008 to systematically improve outcomes for children, their families and the child protection workforce. The findings of an independent research program undertaken between 2013-2016 identified the need to further develop the framework and its practical application across the Department and strengthen the shared work with community sector partners to build safety in families.

**Building a Better Future: Out-of-Home Care Reform in Western Australia** – Significant feedback was provided on earlier intervention and family support through the development of this plan. Specific detailed input was received through the Relative Carer Review, Strategic Directions in Out-of-Home Care 2015-2020 Discussion Paper and Out-of-Home Care Reform Legislative Amendments Consultation Paper.

The actions from this strategy will also align, and build on the Government priorities of Regional Services Reforms and the Aboriginal Youth Services Investment Reforms.

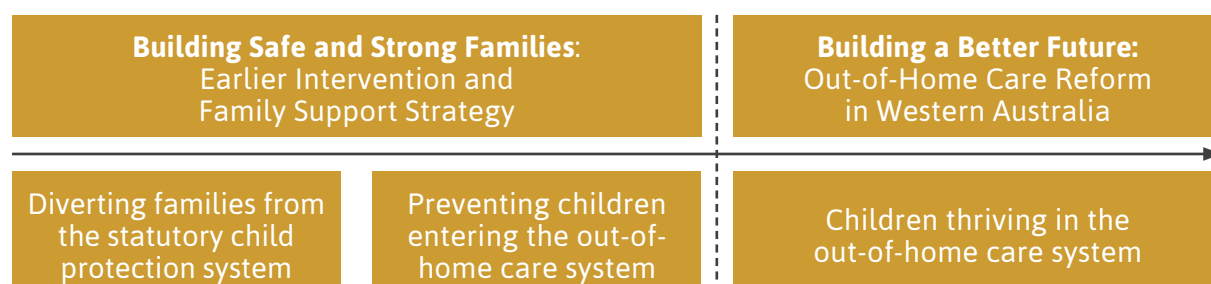


## The whole picture

In May 2016, the Minister for Child Protection released *Building a Better Future: Out-of-Home Care Reform in Western Australia* (OOHC Reform Plan). This OOHC Reform Plan outlined the series of policy, funding and workforce changes that will be implemented to create a system that more effectively and consistently delivers positive life outcomes for children in out-of-home care.

However, out-of-home care cannot and should not be considered in isolation. It is always the Department's first priority to prevent children entering out-of-home care wherever possible. Where it is safe, it is in the best interests of children to be brought up with their parents and extended families in their own communities.

This Strategy is the essential precursor to the OOHC Reform Plan.



This Strategy complements the Out-of-Home Care Reform in the delivery of comprehensive child protection reform in Western Australia.





## FOCUS AREA ONE: DELIVERING SHARED OUTCOMES WITH COLLECTIVE EFFORT

**A shared agreement between government agencies and the community services sector about the outcomes sought for vulnerable families.**

Preventing children entering out-of-home care cannot be achieved by one government department or agency alone. The issues that lead to children needing to enter out-of-home care are multi-faceted and inter-related.

Human services programs delivered by government departments and contracted to the community service sector currently have a variety of different outcome indicators and measures. It is only with a shared focus and a collective effort that the resources of government and the community services sector can be used to full effect.


### ACTIONS

#### Outcomes Framework

- 1.1 The Partnership Forum<sup>1</sup> to develop an across sector joint outcomes framework, including data sharing and linkage, to maximise and support the impact of early intervention programs, services and policies in improving the lives of the most vulnerable Western Australians.

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<sup>1</sup> The Partnership Forum brings together leaders from State Government agencies and the not-for profit community sector, and consumer advocates, to improve the outcomes for all Western Australians.



**It is only through shared focus and collective effort that resources can be used to full effect.**





## FOCUS AREA TWO: A CULTURALLY COMPETENT SERVICE SYSTEM

**A service system that is safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal families.**

Aboriginal children and families are significantly over-represented in all areas of the child protection system and other tertiary services including health, mental health, criminal justice, and drug and alcohol services. A safe and effective service system must therefore be culturally responsive and competent. This includes all mainstream services being more responsive and accountable to their Aboriginal clients, including increasing the number and capacity of Aboriginal staff as well as developing strong, sustainable and effective Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

### ACTIONS

- 2.1** Progress and implement the four priority areas outlined in the Aboriginal Services and Practice Framework:
  - Capacity Building
  - Community Engagement
  - Practice Development
  - People Development
- 2.2** Develop and implement a strategy to support the expansion of the Aboriginal community controlled organisation sector that will enable it to deliver significant proportions of family support services. Options for the development of a peak representative body will also be explored.
- 2.3** Work to strengthen the Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework to more effectively meet the needs of Aboriginal families.
- 2.4** Develop and implement a five year Workforce Development Plan to better equip the Department to meet the evolving future needs of the community including:
  - a cultural leadership and a cultural supervision program for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employees;
  - reviewing and setting targets for Aboriginal workforce development, including recruiting and and retaining Aboriginal staff; and
  - increasing the cultural competence of all staff to work with Aboriginal children and families.
- 2.5** Implement overarching service standards for all Department funded family support services to require demonstration of culturally competent services to Aboriginal children and families.
- 2.6** Undertake a review of contractual provisions to strengthen requirements and accountability of all funded services to deliver culturally responsive services and achieve positive outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.





## FOCUS AREA THREE: DIVERTING FAMILIES FROM THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

**A service system that identifies families vulnerable to involvement with the statutory child protection system and provides early and intensive support.**

It is possible to identify the families most vulnerable to having contact with the statutory child protection system. Without earlier and targeted support to divert these families from involvement with the child protection system, the inter-generational cycle of child abuse and neglect will continue.

Government agencies have sophisticated data and information collection mechanisms across all areas of human services. It is therefore possible for these agencies to proactively share information to identify families that are most vulnerable to involvement with the child protection system, and collectively provide intensive and comprehensive services to support them to live safe, secure, positive and productive lives.

### ACTIONS

#### **District Leadership Groups (Regional Managers Forums)**

- 3.1 District Leadership Groups to have a key role in identifying families most vulnerable to involvement with the statutory child protection system.
- 3.2 Develop and implement detailed processes and criteria to guide information sharing and data linking to support identifying and referring the families most in need.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The *Children and Community Services Act 2004* enables information sharing and data linking.

#### **Family Support Networks**

- 3.3 Re-focus lead agencies from being a coordination only mechanism to a case management and coordination service.
- 3.4 District Leadership Groups to provide targeted referrals for case management to the lead agency.
- 3.5 Strengthen contractual requirements and accountability of Family Support Networks and their partner agencies to deliver culturally responsive services and achieve positive outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.
- 3.6 Family Support Networks to be delivered by, or in partnership with, an Aboriginal community controlled organisation where possible.
- 3.7 Amend the governance structures of Family Support Networks to create formal links to District Leadership Groups, with reporting to the Child Safety Director's Group.
- 3.8 Explore opportunities to co-locate enhanced contact centres with Family Support Network lead agencies to improve coordination of reunification and parenting services across the sector.
- 3.9 As funding becomes available, and contingent on further evaluation of successful outcomes, Family Support Networks to be implemented in other areas. Further consideration of models that are achievable and appropriate for regional locations will be required.



## FOCUS AREA FOUR: PREVENTING CHILDREN ENTERING OUT-OF-HOME CARE

**The families most vulnerable to their children entering out-of-home care are identified early and prioritised for targeted and intensive service provision.**

Structural change and system development in the Department is needed to support a workforce that is more effective in identifying and working with the families that most require early intervention. Services provided need to be practical, targeted, culturally responsive and coordinated to build safety for children, families and communities.

Realignment of the types of programs and the delivery of services by the community services sector is also required to support this change of approach and make a positive difference for the families most in need.

### ACTIONS

#### Department workforce

- 4.1 Implement the 'Signs of Safety Reloaded Project' to further embed the framework and strengthen practice in line with the findings of the Australian Centre for Child Protection research report.
- 4.2 Consider implementation of a consistent, central point of intake for all child protection cases in the Perth metropolitan area.
- 4.3 Intake of child protection cases in country regions to be managed by a central point in each district.
- 4.4 Establish Intensive Family Support Teams in districts to focus on working to prevent the need for children to be removed from their families. These teams will include:
  - Parent Support and Best Beginnings workers who will more clearly target delivery of their services to the families whose children are most at risk of entering out-of-home care; and

- Youth and Family Support Workers to continue to connect and engage with Aboriginal young people most vulnerable to entering out-of-home care and link them to appropriate services.

- 4.5 Undertake further review of the Strong Families program to consider how to maximise the resources to work most effectively within the Intensive Family Support Teams and better engage and support Aboriginal families most vulnerable to their children entering out-of-home care.
- 4.6 Develop and implement a specifically designed training package for Intensive Family Support Team members, with a focus on further development of skills to work effectively with Aboriginal families consistent with Signs of Safety practice guidance.

#### Funded services

- 4.7 Use a co-design approach to develop a culturally safe, intensive in-home support and parenting service for Aboriginal families.
- 4.8 Realign existing funding for intensive and other family support services to more clearly focus on preventing the need for children to enter out-of-home care.
- 4.9 Redirect existing funding for youth services where needed to focus on case management for young people. Priority to be given to those who have repeated contact with the child protection and youth justice systems, Aboriginal young people and their families, care leavers, young parents and homeless young people.



## EVALUATION

An evaluation framework will be developed to measure the impact and overall effectiveness of the Strategy.









Government of Western Australia  
Department for **Child Protection**  
and **Family Support**

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