Introduction

The Department for Child Protection and Family Support (the Department) is developing an Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy (the Strategy) which aims to coordinate how the Department, along with other government and community sector agencies, works with families whose children are most vulnerable to poor life outcomes, including being removed from their parents’ care and/or entering the youth justice system.

A number of elements are being considered to more effectively meet the needs of vulnerable families and young people, including:

- targeting the most vulnerable families at risk of their children coming into care;
- prioritising services for Aboriginal families;
- services being provided by, or in partnership with, Aboriginal people and organisations;
- developing a joint outcomes framework of commonly agreed outcome indicators across government and community sector family support services;
- using data linkage and information sharing to identify families of concern; and
- engaging service providers and users in service design.

The drivers of child protection demand

The problems experienced by vulnerable families are complex, interlinked and often intergenerational. A case review by the Department, and research undertaken by Telethon Kids Institute, has confirmed that the three primary drivers for child protection in Western Australia are family and domestic violence, parental substance abuse, and mental health issues. The findings are summarised in figure 1.

Figure 1: drivers of child protection intervention
These complex problems result in significant harm to children who may experience:

- Neglect - including inadequate food, shelter, medical treatment, education, nurturance and/or supervision;
- Physical abuse - including being involved in family and domestic violence or being excessively and inappropriately disciplined;
- Emotional and psychological harm - witnessing family and domestic violence in the home and/or not having their emotional needs met;
- Sexual abuse and exploitation; and
- Cumulative harm - harms occurring in an ongoing and persistent way.

By the time families with complex problems come to the attention of the child protection system, their service-use is usually crisis driven. Responding to these issues by taking more and more children into care is a costly and unsustainable approach. This Strategy reflects the Department’s recognition that earlier and more intensive intervention before problems become entrenched, provides the best opportunity, value and benefit to individuals and families as well as long-term savings to the community.

This paper outlines the key elements of the Strategy currently under consideration and raises options for change within the Department and across the government and community service sectors. Consultation questions have been included as prompts and feedback is being sought.

**Strategic focus one:** Aboriginal families

**Target vulnerable Aboriginal families**

Most Aboriginal families are thriving in Western Australia. However, there is a significant group who are struggling with disadvantage and poor life outcomes. Within this disadvantaged group, people are experiencing over-representation across a range of negative education, housing, health and safety outcomes, as shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Aboriginal over-representation.
The needs of Aboriginal families facing multiple and complex problems cannot be addressed by one service alone. Instead they typically require an across-government response designed and delivered in partnership with the Aboriginal community and the community services sector.

The number and proportion of Aboriginal children in care has increased significantly over the last ten years, from 38 per cent of the total care population in June 2005 to 52 per cent in June 2015.

Over the same period, the rate of growth of non-Aboriginal children coming into care has stabilised. Figure 3 demonstrates the growth in numbers of Aboriginal children in care.

Figure 3: Children in the CEOs care at 30 June 2005 to 30 June 2015

The strategies which have contributed to slowing down the number of non-Aboriginal children entering care have been less effective for Aboriginal families. There is therefore a critical need for targeted and culturally secure services aimed at preventing Aboriginal children from entering care and/or supporting successful reunification with their families wherever possible.
Strategic focus two: Strengthen the service sector

Link to existing reforms

The development of the Strategy will align with other reviews and reforms occurring both externally and in the Department, including:

- Out of Home Care Reform.
- Organisational Review and Structural Re-alignment Project.
- Review of Community Sector Services Expenditure.
- Regional Services Reforms and the Aboriginal Youth Expenditure Review.

Strengthen across government involvement in governance and delivery of services and strategies

While some local information sharing about at risk families currently occurs, a strengthened, across government approach would enable better identification of families most in need of earlier intervention or targeted support services.

The existing Human Services Regional Managers Forums (Regional Managers Forums) in each district could coordinate interagency communication to identify those families most at risk, and/or those who have not engaged with existing services. The key agencies include Corrective Services, Mental Health (including drug and alcohol), Police, Housing, Health and Education. Relevant information could include identification of domestic violence; substance misuse; truancy; offending; mental health vulnerability; poor uptake on child health checks; and a parent’s prior experience of care.

How can Regional Managers Forums play a role in across-government identification of vulnerable families?

Identify and develop Aboriginal service options

Culturally safe, intensive in-home support and intensive parenting services

Further investment in intensive in-home family support and parenting services is needed to build and support the practical life skills of families and address neglect, which is the primary reason children come into care. It is suggested that this support would occur through direct contact and visits with families in their home.
In-home support services would aim to provide a determined coordinated effort to break the cycle of disempowerment for Aboriginal people, enable children to remain at home with family in a safe environment and support families to move away from social dysfunction and unsafe family life.

It is envisaged that in-home support services will need to provide intensive case management and be able to respond to a range of family issues, such as practical parenting and home management skills, support with housing issues and anti-social and criminal behaviour of family members as well as link to mental health, drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence services. The Family Support Network model has the potential to coordinate, connect and case manage families in this type of in-home support service.

A co-design process with Aboriginal organisations (including community sector services) and end users will need to be undertaken. However some of the essential elements of the program that have already been identified include:

- Aboriginal families need to be targeted for inclusion and the service needs to be culturally secure;
- families with children aged 0-6 years old need to be prioritised;
- an assertive and persistent approach will be required;
- a significant amount of time will need to be spent in the family home;
- a whole of family model, considering the needs and responsibilities of each family member will be required; and
- a tailored family plan, focused on each families’ unique priorities, strengths, needs and culture will be developed.

Through a process of co-design with Aboriginal service partners, clear outcomes will be developed around the Empowered Community\(^1\) norms of:

- school attendance;
- seeking employment;
- paying rent;
- no criminal behaviour; and
- old people and children are safe.

As discussed above, families involved in the program would be identified with across-government input and be actively recruited for participation.

A planned development and expansion of the program would occur across the metropolitan area and in major regional centres over four years. In addition to the existing Family Support Network sites, high priority areas for the first year may include: Rockingham; Cannington; Midland and Bunbury.

The Department, in partnership with other government agencies and the community sector has commenced a small scale pilot of an intensive in-home support service for Aboriginal families with very complex issues, including homelessness. Initial indications suggest that this type of program is most successful when led by a senior Aboriginal worker and provided by or partnered with an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation. A full evaluation in collaboration with Telethon kids is planned for 2016.

How should the provision of intensive in-home services be designed and delivered for Aboriginal families and in partnership with Aboriginal agencies?

**Individualised funding packages**

Given the range of complex problems faced by the most vulnerable families, it is proposed that services and programs would need to be tailored with individualised funding ‘wrapped around’ the needs of each family. An individualised funding model would also give families authority to participate, commit and make choices about the options which will help them to achieve their goals.

In the proposed remodelling of Family Support Networks discussed below, the lead community sector agencies operating the networks could be allocated brokerage funds each year. A formula could be created accounting for annual client number targets, types of services and number of service hours required, while also maintaining flexibility for families’ circumstances and needs.

**How could individualised funding packages be best implemented for at risk families?**

**Develop a shared outcomes framework for family support services**

Family support programs and services delivered by the Department, other government Departments and funded community sector services, currently have a variety of different outcome indicators. There is also a tendency to rely on outputs (how many families were worked with and what was delivered to them) rather than clear outcomes about the change that occurred. It is proposed that a joint outcomes framework be developed, where a set of commonly agreed strategic outcome indicators are established for all earlier intervention and family support programs. The following are suggested as a starting point for commonly agreed outcomes:

**Reductions in:**

- child protection contact  
- children needing to come into care  
- family and domestic violence  
- involvement in crime  
- poor parenting  
- mental health issues  
- family problems  
- involvement in anti-social behaviour  
- truancy/exclusion from school  
- poor housing/homelessness  
- alcohol and drug misuse  
- employment/training problems

The shared outcomes framework could also adopt evaluation strategies to provide in-depth service knowledge about effectiveness, such as tracking outcomes for families using the services versus families who drop-out or choose not to engage in services.
Strategic focus three: Review and redevelop services

Review and redevelop existing contracted family support services

Family Support Networks

Family Support Networks are a partnership of the Department and the community services sector that provide a common entry point to services for vulnerable children and families. The networks are managed by a lead agency that forms an alliance of ‘partner agencies’ to provide an integrated service response for families with multiple and complex problems, rather than offering one limited service. A senior child protection worker is located within each network for case consultation on child protection issues. Family Support Networks have been established in Armadale, Mirrabooka, Fremantle and the Mid-West (Geraldton).

The Department is committed to the expansion of Family Support Networks and the capacity of the human service system in WA to respond to complex family needs. The expansion will require a review of the Family Support Network service model and its operational functions to enable the networks to more effectively service families with complex multiple issues.

Some agencies which form the network alliance in each location are already responding to huge demand and have limited capacity. It is possible that other agencies, such as Corrective Services, the Mental Health Commission and Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations, could potentially partner in the program to improve capacity and facilitate shared governance and more comprehensive service response to the extensive range of issues vulnerable families face. This shared governance could occur at different points including at the steering committee level and at the service delivery point of the networks.

To better respond and divert Aboriginal families away from the child protection system, a target of a minimum 50 per cent Aboriginal client base for funded services could be introduced. The Department also envisages Family Support Networks moving toward an intensive case management model to provide tailored interventions and supported with flexible and individualised funding packages depending on family needs as part of the enhanced service system.

Any remodelling of the Family Support Networks will need to re-clarify the interface between the family support services delivered by the Department and those operated by the networks.
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tertiary family preservation and family enhancement

the tertiary family preservation service aims to prevent the children at most risk of entering care from requiring such intervention. this service takes referrals only from the department. in 2014/15, only 29 per cent of service clients were aboriginal.

consideration could be given as to whether all prevention and diversion services should have set targets to engage with aboriginal families. however, given that tertiary family preservation services have contributed to stabilising the number of non-aboriginal children entering care, caution may be needed to mitigate the risk that introducing aboriginal client targets may negatively impact on the rate of non-aboriginal children entering care.

while children entering care from these programs is not necessarily a failure (participation may indicate greater risk than was known), close consideration and measurement of ‘what works’, particularly for aboriginal families is important. it is also critical that these services have a strong connection to family support teams in department districts so that prevention and diversion work occurs on a continuum of support.

youth services

the department funds services for young people, particularly targeting young people at risk. to reduce duplication and service gaps, the department is seeking to clarify and coordinate how its funded youth at risk services relate to the youth services funded through other departments, including local government and communities, sport and recreation and corrective services.

youth service models could be formed based on a continuum of support from the recreational end of services to intensive case management, while still allowing for the complementary roles each can play for the other. it is proposed that services for the universal youth population (recreation, sporting and social) should be provided by other agencies, with the department and the department of corrective services funding services for those at most risk (involving more intensive case management to secure stable accommodation, work and education options and mentoring etc.). this will still allow for recreation-type activities to play a role in building relationships and engaging youth at risk in more intensive case
management services. One service provider could take the lead in the cross-agency coordination of youth service delivery and support the establishment of the youth service support continuum.

As part of the Aboriginal Youth Expenditure Implementation and Leadership Group, there is the capacity to design a youth service system with complementary goals along this type of continuum of risk and need. This would require a review of the Department’s contracts for youth at risk services with a potential realignment. The Regional Services Reforms and Aboriginal Youth Expenditure Review also calls for all Department funded/delivered services for young people who are at risk to demonstrate that they:

- intervene to reduce the level of risk the young person is experiencing;
- are responsive and tailored to address individual complex needs;
- provide support to engage in education, training and employment; and
- provide a minimum contract value of $300,000 per annum.

It is considered that intensive levels of support to identified high risk youth - young people leaving care; young people who engaged with juvenile justice and adolescent parents - are a clear point for earlier intervention. Investment and focus on these groups is the best chance to influence future social costs.

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**How do funded youth services align to the Department’s strategic priorities?**

**What might be the best way to deliver youth services along a support continuum from recreation to high risk?**

**Should secondary family support services be focusing on high risk groups of young people – as a way to prevent the next generation of children coming into care?**

**Review and redevelop Department delivered family support**

**Responsible Parenting Services**

Responsible Parenting Services, comprised of Parent Support and Best Beginnings, are home visiting services targeted to the at-risk and hard to reach families in Western Australia. These services have been funded since 2010 by Royalties for Regions (R4R) and in six regional districts of Pilbara, Murchison, Wheatbelt, South West, Goldfields and Great Southern.

While Responsible Parenting Services have been effective, the number of Aboriginal families currently engaged is variable and relatively low in metropolitan districts. It is therefore proposed that RPS could integrate more with the Department’s statutory work in child protection and more closely align to the strategic priority of preventing Aboriginal children entering care.
Parent Support

Parent Support provides in-home and outreach services to assist parents to take control of their children’s anti-social, criminal and truanting behaviour through better parenting strategies. The target group is ‘hard to reach’ families and their school aged children. At 30 September 2015, Parent Support had 877 open cases (51 per cent Aboriginal). Of families who completed Parent Support in the last 12 months, 85 per cent achieved some or significant change in their parenting which resulted in improved child behaviour.

Parent Support plays a key role in coordination at a district level for youth at risk of entering care or engaging with the justice system. This involves identifying young people most at risk and coordinating government agency case management. It is considered that capacity to participate in joint case management responsibilities should be maintained. However, the service could potentially engage with more Aboriginal young people and families, particularly across the metropolitan area. The service could also connect and operate in a more complementary way with the youth services funded by the Department. This would require identifying joint work and focussing on parents and young people as a whole unit. Overall, the resources associated with Parent Support will require revision and re-direction to better meet the needs of Aboriginal families.

How can Parent Support resources be used to better meet the needs of Aboriginal families and divert children away from the child protection system?

What are the best ways for Parent Support to work with youth services in the community sector to improve outcomes for Aboriginal young people and their families?

Best Beginnings

Best Beginnings is an earlier intervention program, delivered in partnership with the Department of Health, which targets mothers with high risk factors (domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, adolescent pregnancy and mental health issues). The service provides in-home visiting over the first two years of an infant’s life, aiming to increase attachment and focussing on the child and mother’s health and wellbeing and social connectedness. At 30 September 2015, Best Beginnings had 466 open cases, of which 27 per cent were Aboriginal.

Best Beginnings is an important diversionary service which could potentially be integrated more closely to intake or family support teams and earlier intervention functions. Best Beginnings workers have significant early childhood expertise and could be a valuable resource to the districts. The extent to which Best Beginnings prevents children entering care is not known. However, it appears that there may be capacity for the service to reach more Aboriginal families.
What would be the best way to align Best Beginnings to prevent Aboriginal children coming into care?

Revised RPS model

Parent Support and Best Beginnings have the potential to be further engaged in earlier intervention to prevent Aboriginal and other children entering care.

The service model for Parent Support and Best Beginnings could be adapted to be more clearly targeted to families with complex issues and more culturally responsive and flexible, with KPIs developed around work with Aboriginal families. There is also scope for the interventions to be better linked to strategies such as liquor restricted premises applications, child protection income management and other tools.

The role of the parent visitor could be expanded beyond Parent Support, to provide parenting support and services to the Family Support or other front end teams. The parent visitor would provide practical in home support to a range of families identified by the Department as requiring assistance to improve parenting and other life skills.

Parent Support, Best Beginnings, Youth and Family Support Workers and parent visitors could better connect and integrate with other family support efforts of the Department and the funded services, including links to Family Support Networks in districts where they operate. This could include providing case management services as part of the alliance of agencies.

Both Parent Support and Best Beginnings workers will need to continue to build and maintain relationships with the Department of Corrective Services and the Department of Health to provide integrated, joint case management.

Youth and Family Support Workers positions can continue to work with a high proportion of Aboriginal families to support key objectives of the strategy.

Would a structure which places Parent Support and Best Beginnings with the front end teams assist a focus on diverting children and young people from child protection?

How could these services best coordinate and connect with the family support and earlier intervention services funded by the Department – specifically Family Support Networks?
Strong Families

The Strong Families service assists families with complex problems to achieve their goals through coordination of government services. At 30 September 2015, Strong Families had 285 cases open in the quarter from July, of which 59 per cent were Aboriginal. However, the extent to which Strong Families prevents Aboriginal children coming into the care of the Department is unclear.

While Strong Families has contributed to better outcomes for many families, the increasing over-representation of Aboriginal children in care in the last five years indicates that the delivery of case management and intensive support for Aboriginal families with complex issues remains a service gap.

This is an opportunity to consider how the resources associated with Strong Families services can be re-directed to achieve outcomes that are more clearly aligned with the Department’s strategic priorities. Options for use of the Strong Families resources include closer linkages with Intake, Assessment or Child Centred Family Support teams to intervene earlier and work more intensively with families, while linking with local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Family Support Networks.

How can the Strong Families resource be adapted and realigned to earlier intervention and diversion of Aboriginal families from child protection?

Consultation Process

Feedback on this Discussion Paper is invited from Department staff and all stakeholders involved in the provision and use of family support services in Western Australia.

Written responses can be submitted to FIFSS@cpfs.wa.gov.au or via post to:

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Closing date for written submissions is 31 March 2016.

It is anticipated that a final version of the Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy will be released in June 2016.
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