1. Introduction

The Department for Child Protection and Family Support (the Department) is developing an *Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy* (the Strategy) 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. The Strategy will be developed and delivered through an engagement and consultation process with various groups, including Department staff, the community services sector, Aboriginal communities, and other government agencies.

2. Purpose

The *Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy – Discussion Paper* (the discussion paper) was distributed to key Department and external stakeholders in February 2016, to inform the development of the Strategy. Feedback was received from 66 written submissions and 16 in person presentations, including government and community services sector agencies, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and individuals.

This Themes and Issues Paper summarises these responses, outlining the general feedback and themes received through the consultation which will inform the development of the Strategy.

3. Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy

Recent research has confirmed the primary drivers for child protection in Western Australia are the often interrelated issues of family and domestic violence, parental substance abuse, mental health and homelessness. The complexity of these problems and the importance of earlier, intensive intervention before problems become entrenched identify the need for the Strategy to prevent children coming into care. The Strategy is concerned with ‘earlier intervention’, focused on secondary and tertiary family support services\(^1\) where complex issues in the family require intensive engagement and intervention and children are at high risk of entering care.

The Strategy has three strategic focus areas:

- Aboriginal families;
- strengthen the service sector; and
- review and redevelop services.

Given the increasing rate of Aboriginal children entering care, the need for improved, culturally safe, secure and responsive service provision to identify and support vulnerable families is apparent across all three focus areas.

---

\(^1\) Secondary services work with at risk individuals and families to reduce risk factors and prevent the need for tertiary intervention. Tertiary intervention is usually in the form of statutory intervention and responds to immediate and extreme risk that cannot be alleviated by providing secondary services.
4. Brief summary of responses

A brief summary of the responses received to the discussion paper is provided below:

- Strong support for a Strategy across the government and community services sector to reduce the number of children entering care, particularly Aboriginal children. A commitment to creating better opportunities for effective, earlier intervention.
- Recognition of structural disadvantage, poverty, intergenerational trauma and abuse as central to understanding the key drivers of child protection demand.
- Lack of suitable housing identified as a key issue – families can't be stabilised, engage with services, or improve their outcomes if fundamental housing issues are not addressed.
- Broad support for prioritising services for the most vulnerable Aboriginal families, emphasising the need for culturally safe, secure and responsive programs.
- Importance of meaningful consultation with Aboriginal stakeholders at all stages of planning, implementation, review and evaluation of the Strategy.
- Support for expansion with government and community services sector, of the Family Support Network (FSN) model, and adapting the model appropriately for regional areas, to focus on families with the most complex needs.
- Varying support for redesigning Department delivered family support programs to focus on earlier intervention with the most at risk families, aligned to the intake areas of the Department.
- Support for a shared outcomes frameworks with further consultation and co-design processes involving service users, government and community agencies.
- Broad backing for improved links between youth services and family support services.
- Some support for the suggestion of individualised funding packages, with further clarity regarding models and operational issues.

5. Responses to Strategic Focus Areas

**Strategic focus one: Aboriginal Families**

There is overwhelming support for prioritising services to vulnerable Aboriginal families to reduce the number of Aboriginal children entering care and improve poor life outcomes.

**Summary of responses**

- A need to provide services for Aboriginal families in a whole of family way, which recognises the impacts of poverty, intergenerational trauma and abuse, and other barriers to engagement.
- Strong support for an agreed co-design approach with Aboriginal families, communities and organisations taking a lead role in the design, delivery and review of service provision.
- Need to expand and build capacity of Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs).
• Recognition of the diversity of Aboriginal families and communities across Western Australia, with flexibility required within program design to respond to different needs and cultural settings.
• Varied levels of support for the proposed 50 per cent target of Aboriginal families accessing funded services. Minimum targets could be accompanied by incentives to exceed targets.
• Building relationships and partnerships at all levels is key to working with vulnerable families.
• Noted that Children’s Court judgements suggest earlier engagement of vulnerable Aboriginal families by Aboriginal workers could assist in preventing Aboriginal children entering care.

**Implication for Strategy**

There is sector wide and across government support for service development that is responsive to Aboriginal families through grass roots engagement, co-design processes and an evidence based approach. This includes the need to prioritise capacity building for ACCOs.

**Strategic focus two: Strengthen the service sector**

**Link to existing reforms**

Several submissions commented on the breadth of reform currently occurring across government and within the service sector, reinforcing the importance of the Strategy to align with this.

**Summary of responses**

• The Strategy should link with the current reform within the family and domestic violence service area, particularly the expansion of the Family and Domestic Violence Response Teams to include community service organisations.
• Key features of the Regional Services Reform project are directly applicable to the Strategy, such as flexibility around service models to cater to specific needs of regional and remote areas, including workforce development, funding and cultural appropriateness.

**Implication for Strategy**

Aligning the Strategy to existing review and reform is essential to developing integrated, coordinated approaches that meet the needs of the community, avoiding duplication and ensuring that service and system gaps are identified and addressed across the sector.

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

Strong support was indicated for improved information sharing processes across government and community organisations. Some caution was expressed regarding confidentiality and widespread information sharing without a clear purpose, which may result in distrust and disengagement.
Consultation question

1. How can Regional Managers Forums (RMF) play a role in across-government identification of vulnerable families?

Summary of responses

- Strong support was expressed for the use of RMF as a local coordinating body, with a range of suggestions for consolidation and improvement.
- There is variation in the operation, membership and effectiveness of regional groups. Clarification is required regarding how RMF, children at risk meetings, local network meetings and local youth at risk meetings work together.
- Greater connection with high level groups such as the Child Safety Directors Group and Youth Justice Services Reference Group is needed.
- The RMF to play a significant role in identification of vulnerable families, but need to contribute leadership in local responses, analysing trends and coordinating place based initiatives.

Implication for Strategy

A review of the purpose, membership, operational processes and procedures for the RMFs should be undertaken so they are ‘fit for purpose’ with commitment from all members.

Identify and develop Aboriginal service options

There is strong support for development of Aboriginal service options, with a range of approaches suggested to strengthen partnership and collaboration; refine existing service models through co-design; and promote Aboriginal service delivery. Feedback indicated that it is essential for Aboriginal families, services and organisations to be involved in the development of appropriate service delivery models and program evaluation. An in-home support pilot program in the Kimberley was cited as an example of “locally driven initiatives focusing on local solutions”. The importance of local champions and leaders in the community to drive these initiatives was emphasised.

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

Most responses provided in-principle support for a culturally secure service delivered in Aboriginal family homes, which is designed and developed through Aboriginal engagement.

Consultation question

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

- Clear support for flexible, practical in-home services for Aboriginal families who choose this type of service, designed through an evidence based approach. These services take time to develop family’s trust and demonstrate positive outcomes and need to be long term programs.
- Stability of housing a critical issue.
- Agreement that service models include individually tailored programs; a step-down process as intensive support needs reduce, be culturally safe and secure and focus on mental health.
- Flexibility required as an in-home service isn’t always the most effective or acceptable to families.
- Choice for Aboriginal families between Aboriginal organisations/services; or access to non-Aboriginal organisations and services is important.
- Family Support Networks to play a pivotal role in building partnerships with Aboriginal services, coordinating referrals, and community relationship building as well as service mapping in each district, to develop a clearer picture of current services and gaps for Aboriginal families.

Implication for Strategy

An in-home, culturally safe and secure intensive support model needs to be developed. This should have flexibility of design and focus, delivery by ACCOs, or Aboriginal partnership with other community service organisations having Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff.

Individualised funding packages

About a third of the written responses considered this issue and gave cautious support. There were some concerns about using the same approach as taken in the area of disability. Lessons learnt from the implementation of individualised funding in the disability and other arenas could be applied.

Consultation questions

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

Summary of responses

- Support for family based brokerage funding could be held within Family Support Networks or community organisations. This would provide flexibility to respond to individual family needs, and include options such as childcare, therapy and practical assistance.
- Development of robust screening, assessment, allocation and accountability mechanisms is required, with appropriate prioritisation and flexibility.
- Remote and regional responses queried how individualised funding might work in areas with limited service provision.

Implication for Strategy

Provision of individualised funding packages, which provide for practical assistance to be explored.
Develop a shared outcomes framework for family support services

The development of a shared outcomes framework was supported across most responses, with some measures and outcomes suggested. Work is needed to identify the agreed key indicators and measures to form the outcomes framework. Government agency responses indicated a desire to participate and commitment to the development of a framework.

Consultation questions

4. Would an overarching shared outcomes framework for family support services be useful?

5. What are the most appropriate outcome indicators?

Summary of responses

- The proposed framework was seen as a positive way to clarify and possibly simplify reporting.
- Some community sector organisations have progressed comprehensive measurement and outcomes mechanisms and an inclusive, cross sector co-design approach is required to progress a shared outcomes framework.
- Realistic expectations are needed, to include incremental short, medium and long term family specific outcomes.
- Aboriginal people to have input into defining the desired outcomes.
- Need to take care that services don’t only take the most responsive clients so good outcomes are always achieved, as it may be more difficult to achieve outcomes with the most at risk Aboriginal families.
- It may be difficult to identify how best to measure subjective indicators, and to compare varying indicators and outcomes data across different data bases.
- A number of submissions considered the proposed outcomes to be adequate, while others suggested taking a strengths based approach and incorporating wider outcomes.

Implication for Strategy

There is significant interest and commitment to participate in the development of a proposed shared outcomes framework.

---

2 It was suggested the outcomes be rewritten with a focus on improvements, rather than reductions.
Strategic focus three: Review and redevelop services

Review and redevelop existing contracted family support services

Broad support for integrated responses with increased coordination/collaboration was received. There is mixed support for minimum targets for services to Aboriginal families. Some organisations prefer a partnership approach; with others stating that targets/prioritising services to vulnerable Aboriginal families would assist with accountability and culturally safe and secure service provision.

Service gaps across the sector were identified, such as support for parents with children in care and families with children recently returned to their care.

Family Support Networks (FSN)

The important role of FSNs in increased coordination and collaboration across the family support sector is valued, with backing for building upon existing or developing FSNs. There was general support for FSNs to take on an integrated case management function. Expanding the FSNs to include greater membership of ACCOs and services funded by a range of government agencies is considered a priority, possibly resulting in some amendments to the operational model.

Consultation questions

6. What role should other government departments and their funded services have in the governance and delivery of Family Support Networks?

7. How could Family Support Networks best integrate with the services directly delivered by the Department?

8. In what ways does the Family Support Network model need to be adapted to account for differences in regional and metropolitan contexts in Western Australia?

Summary of responses

- There is overwhelming support for the FSN model, to remain delivered by community organisations with the inclusion of broader government services (including local government) and ACCOs.
- A review of the FSN model was supported, in consultation with current sites to identify operational effectiveness, with a need to be focused on earlier intervention and family support.
- Improved connection between FSNs and utilising the positive elements of Strong Families, at both operational and steering group level was strongly supported.
- For regional locations, local structures and networks could be adapted for integrated coordination, with consideration to geographic accessibility, local need, and fewer services.

Implication for Strategy

An inclusive process to be undertaken which will clarify purpose and roles for expanded membership, adaptations for regional locations and cultural appropriateness of the FSN model.
Tertiary Family Preservation and Family Enhancement

Few submissions commented on this area of the discussion paper. It was acknowledged that these services may be contributing to stabilising the number of non-Aboriginal children entering care, with referral dependent on the Department’s knowledge of these services. Low numbers of Aboriginal families are referred to these services, and strategies need to be considered to increase awareness of these services across the Department and reduce the need to introduce service targets.

Implication for Strategy

Approaches and strategies that facilitate greater Aboriginal participation and benefit from these types of services need to be explored. Findings of a current review will also inform the Strategy.

Youth services

There is general support for the proposed youth services support continuum. While universal services for young people play an important role, providing more intensive services to high risk young people was identified. These families could have connections with FSNs. The Youth Partnership Project was mentioned in a number of responses as an aligned services model.

Consultation questions

9. How do funded youth services align to the department’s strategic priorities?

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

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

Summary of responses

- There was strong support for more resources for services to focus on high-risk young people, with improved coordination and connectedness with secondary family support services, particularly for young people leaving care and adolescent parents.
- Integrated roles and co-location models should be explored, throughout schools, youth services and ACCOs. A balance is required between resources for targeted and intensive support for at risk youth, and universal, recreational activities. Mainstream services can be more appropriate for and inclusive of high risk young people.
- It was suggested that identifying and targeting high risk youth should occur in a number of ways, such as Strong Families, local regional meetings, youth at risk meetings, Regional Managers Forums, or by the Department of Education and the Department of Corrective Services.
**Implication for Strategy**

More intensive services for young people leaving care is a clear need and service responses will be identified through the Strategy and Out of Home Care five year plan. Improved coordination and integration is required for planning, funding and delivery of youth services, connected with family support service provision. It is appropriate for the Department for Local Government and Communities to take the lead with relevant government agencies to develop the continuum of services.

**Review and redevelop Department delivered family support**

**Responsible Parenting Services**

Integration with child protection functions prompted a broad range of responses. Government submissions provided support for an increased focus on earlier intervention, incorporating improved coordination processes. Community services sector agencies expressed the view that family support service provision is best suited to their expertise, with improved collaboration with the Department where necessary. Internal responses from Department staff were varied. Some held concern about the impact of change on their role, partner agencies, program integrity and effectiveness; while others saw an opportunity for better resources to support Aboriginal families whose children are most at risk of coming into care.

Regional and remote submissions highlighted issues such as the types of services available, accessibility and staffing. A place-based approach was recommended so any changes compliment local initiatives and meet community need.

**Summary of responses**

- There is support to review and redevelop Responsible Parenting Services, examine current gaps in service delivery and amend programs accordingly. There was enthusiasm for adapting or developing models, tools and resources specifically designed for Aboriginal families.

- Several submissions suggested employment of more Aboriginal staff to be proactively involved in engagement with hard to reach Aboriginal families. Options for existing Department staff including Youth and Family Support Workers, Aboriginal Practice Leaders and Family Resource Employees in supporting Aboriginal families was identified.

**Parent Support**

Most responses saw Parent Support as effective in engaging Aboriginal families’ given 51 per cent of open cases were Aboriginal, and questioned the need for change. However, there were also suggestions that improvements could be made to enhance earlier intervention opportunities, with a more holistic, coordinated approach.
Consultation question

12. How can parent support resources be used to better meet the needs of Aboriginal families and divert children away from the child protection system?

13. 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?

Summary of responses

- There is general support for expanding the use of Parent Support tools and resources for all Department staff in their work with Aboriginal families, with training provided as necessary.
- Better knowledge of the program and resources is needed across the Department.
- Expanding the referral criteria, timeframes and incorporating a wider family focus were commonly suggested, enabling proactive support for younger family members in addition to the needs of parents and older siblings.
- Co-location, joint case management, improved local networks and a whole of family approach were seen as effective ways to work with youth services in the community sector.
- Suggestions for increased connection to community, such as the Youth and Family Support Worker role in particular to be co-located within schools, community organisations or similar.
- The need for increased collaboration and communication between Parent Support and youth services was emphasised, along with partnering with Aboriginal leaders and communities in delivering culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal young people.

Implication for Strategy

Integrating Parent Support workers with child protection teams, to increase the use and understanding of the function will be useful. Broadening the criteria, role and responsibilities of Parent Support workers would allow for greater flexibility, increased opportunities for engagement and earlier intervention.

Best Beginnings

A variety of views were expressed across submissions with broad agreement for an increased program focus on preventing Aboriginal children coming into care. Some Department staff stated concern about how potential changes to the program would impact on their roles and program intent. Other internal comments welcomed the proposed changes. There was also acknowledgement that more complex families, with greater risk are entering the program. Suggestions included a new model incorporating Best Beginnings key principles; expanding to include a focus on families with children aged 0-6 years; or for the program to be adapted and delivered by Aboriginal staff. The question of whether Best Beginnings workers should be integrated with child protection functions was contested.

Consultation questions

14. What would be the best way to align Best Beginnings to prevent Aboriginal children coming into care?
Summary of responses

- Best Beginnings workers have a vast array of skills and knowledge that is either already being used, or that could be adopted, in supporting the work of child protection teams.
- Caution about Best Beginnings becoming part of child protection intake teams, however much support for Best Beginnings being aligned with new multidisciplinary/earlier intervention teams.
- Pre-birth planning processes are highly regarded and provide an effective opportunity for earlier engagement of vulnerable women and families.
- Service criteria to focus on Aboriginal mothers, mothers who have had previous children taken into care, or high risk families should be jointly case managed with child protection workers and other agencies.
- Program materials will need to be amended to increase suitability for Aboriginal families, or another program developed to meet this need. Some suggested that alternate, more appropriate programs are available for Aboriginal mothers.
- Aboriginal workers be recruited and trained to deliver the program, and linked with experienced Best Beginnings home visitors.
- Parent groups and Aboriginal services suggested that Aboriginal workers, or trusted agency staff attend sessions with Best Beginnings officers to increase engagement with Aboriginal mothers.

Implications for Strategy

There is support for Best Beginnings to become involved with vulnerable families as early as possible. Some changes are required to increase cultural safety and security for Aboriginal mothers and address the strategic focus of preventing Aboriginal children from entering care.

Revised RPS Model

There is support for a revised model to incorporate earlier intervention, wider engagement and utilisation of existing positions, and to broaden community involvement. Concerns exist that integration with front end teams would mean absorption into child protection and the programs are not necessarily designed for this role. Staff would need support. Regional and remote responses emphasised the importance of flexibility to meet local need.

Consultation questions

15. 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?

16. How could these services best coordinate and connect with the family support and earlier intervention services funded by the Department – specifically Family Support Networks?
Summary of responses

- The majority of submissions supported Parent Support and Best Beginnings working more closely with Department front end teams. The increasing complexity of cases requires closer alignment with front end work, with many Responsible Parenting Services team leaders, Parent Support and Best Beginnings workers already working alongside child protection teams.
- Some responses suggested this structure is already effectively diverting children and young people and that potential impacts on the service, partnership arrangements and engagement with families be considered.
- Earlier intervention teams are widely supported, focused on families with children aged 0-6 years, 6-12 years and 12 years plus. A gap between when Best Beginnings finishes and when families become eligible for Parent Support was identified.
- Responses from parent groups confirmed the need for family support across a continuum, with a focus not only on early years, but for parents in crisis with pre-teen or teenage children, as suggested by the Commissioner for Children and Young People.
- RPS workers joining FSNs or have Team Leaders attend as representatives, and accept referrals through the FSN were suggested.
- Co-location options were also put forward, with workers co-located within schools, youth services and/or other services external to the Department as appropriate.

Implications for Strategy

Some Districts currently operate with a structure where Parent Support and Best Beginnings work alongside and in collaboration with the front end teams which work well. Learnings from these Districts can be utilised to consider a model which best supports vulnerable families to prevent children entering care. Support and capacity building for staff will need to occur given the mixed views on changes to these services.

Strong Families

There is variation in view about the operation of Strong Families. Some consider Strong Families has a vital autonomous role that needs promotion to increase visibility, while others consider the role of Strong Families is unclear given broader changes towards more general coordination of programs since the creation of the program.

Consultation questions

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

Summary of responses

- Several submissions supported the current function of Strong Families continuing without significant change as a key advocate and coordinator, achieving accountability for families.
- Others saw value in considering a case management approach by coordinators, linked to the functions of FSN or in-home intensive support.
• The development of local arrangements to integrate and coordinate the work of Strong Families and FSNs, to clarify function, roles and responsibilities, and minimise duplication.

• Referral to Strong Families should be encouraged and promoted with the profile of Strong Families raised to focus on opportunities for earlier intervention.

**Implications for Strategy**

These mixed views indicate that closer examination is needed. As with other parts of the family support functions of the Department, Strong Families must directly contribute to earlier intervention and diversion of Aboriginal children from care or the juvenile justice system.

**Next Steps**

Responses and submissions will continue to be considered as the final Strategy is developed and implemented in coming months. It is expected that the Strategy will be released in July 2016.