



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Productivity Commission Study on Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory – Issues Paper

Department of Social Services Submission



Introduction

The Department of Social Services (the department) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Productivity Commission Issues Paper, *Study on Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory* (the Issues Paper) released on 15 May 2019.

The department's mission is to improve the lifetime wellbeing of individuals and families in Australia. The department works in partnership with government and non-government organisations to achieve our mission through the effective development, management and delivery of payments, policies, programs, and services.

In line with this mission, the department is committed to working collaboratively with our partners in the Northern Territory to improve the outcomes of families and children and to implement the recommendations from the *Royal Commission into the Detention and Protection of Children in the Northern Territory* (the Royal Commission). Working in partnership with the non-government sector, Aboriginal leaders and peak bodies, communities and across government, the department seeks to ensure that all children and their families are safe and well, resilient, ready to learn and connected to their community and culture.

This submission explores the:

- department's role in responding to the *Royal Commission into the Detention and Protection of Children in the Northern Territory* (the Royal Commission);
- role of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*;
- Commonwealth's investment in early intervention and prevention services through the Families and Children Activity (FaC Activity);
- Commonwealth's investment in place-based collective impact models through the *Stronger Places, Stronger People* initiative;
- measurement of the delivery of the FaC Activity through the Data Exchange;
- department's approach to evaluation; and
- department's work reviewing past funding arrangements and trialling new methods of commissioning.

The Productivity Commission's Issues Paper notes that there is a range of services that, while not specifically focused on family and child wellbeing, can support the resilience of families. The department has a range of areas of responsibility that fall into this category, including providing income support for families and young people; housing and homelessness activities; and services and support for people with disability and carers, and mental health activities. These activities are not covered in this submission.

Responding to the Royal Commission into the Detention and Protection of Children in the Northern Territory

The department has participated in the Northern Territory Children and Families Tripartite Forum (the Tripartite Forum) since its inaugural meeting on 23 July 2018. The establishment of the Tripartite Forum was a key recommendation of the Royal Commission to support sustained high-level engagement between the Northern Territory Government, the Commonwealth Government, and the community sector. The Tripartite Forum provides advice and guidance on improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families in the Northern Territory, including leading discussion on how a coordinated funding framework could function.

Regular communication across all levels of government is vital to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission. The department meets fortnightly with the Northern Territory's Reform Management Office and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to progress the recommendations of the Royal Commission. The department also chairs an Interdepartmental Committee with other Commonwealth departments responsible for progressing recommendations of the Royal Commission. The Commonwealth has sole or joint responsibility for 28 recommendations, 26 of which it supports, or supports in principle.

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020

The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020* (National Framework) was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments on 30 April 2009, in response to the increasing number of Australian children being exposed to child abuse and neglect. The key message is 'protecting Australia's children is everyone's business'. The National Framework is being implemented through four action plans.

State and territory governments have responsibility for their child protection systems, however the Commonwealth Government, through the National Framework, provides leadership to address complex problems that require cohesive, concentrated effort in partnership with state and territory governments and the community sector.

Findings of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* and the *Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory* have highlighted the need to strengthen the ability of families, organisations and communities to keep children safe. These Royal Commissions have helped inform the final action plan of the National Framework, the Fourth Action Plan 2018-2020 (Fourth Action Plan), which was endorsed by Community Services Ministers in December 2018.

The Fourth Action Plan has a strong focus on early intervention and improved outcomes for children in out-of-home care and organisational settings. There is also a strong focus on improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families throughout implementation of all Fourth Action Plan initiatives, including a standalone priority to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at risk of entering, or in contact with, child protection systems.

Grant Activities

As the scope of the Productivity Commission study is still being refined, this submission focuses on the Families and Children Activity, one of the Activities under the Families and Communities Program, as services provided under this Activity are directly focused on improving child and family wellbeing. The department is happy to provide the Productivity Commission with information on other programs and initiatives.

The Families and Children Activity (FaC Activity)

The FaC Activity sits under the Families and Communities program. Through the FaC Activity, the department invests around \$220 million annually in mainstream early intervention and prevention services to support families with enhanced family functioning, improve the wellbeing of children and young people, and increase participation in community life. These services are delivered across Australia.

The FaC Activity provides important early intervention and prevention services, such as children and parenting support and family and relationship services, so families get the support they need before issues escalate or become entrenched.

Primarily, under the FaC Activity, the department seeks to fund early intervention and prevention services for vulnerable families and children. However some programs and services, like the Intensive Family Support Services, are more targeted to at-risk families and children.

Programs delivered under the FaC Activity include:

- *Communities for Children Facilitating Partners (CfC FPs)* is a place based model of investment that aims to deliver positive and sustainable outcomes for children and families in 52 disadvantaged communities across Australia. CfC FPs fund other organisations to provide services including parenting support, group peer support, case management, home visiting services and other supports to promote child wellbeing.
- *Children and Parenting Support (CaPS)* services provide prevention and early intervention services and resources focussed on supporting the wellbeing and development of children aged 0-12 (up to 18 in some instances) and supporting adults undertaking parenting roles.
- *Intensive Family Support Service (IFSS)* is an early intervention and prevention program that aims to reduce child neglect by working intensively with vulnerable families. IFSS is delivered by eight providers in 26 locations across the Northern Territory and APY Lands in South Australia.
- *Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)* is a two year, home-based parenting and early childhood learning program that supports parents and carers of children aged four and five years to be their child's first teacher. HIPPY is delivered in 100 locations across Australia.
- *Family and Relationship Services (FaRS)* provide early intervention and prevention services and focus on at risk families including families who are at risk of breakdown, families with children at risk of abuse or neglect, and families experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability. FaRS aims to strengthen family relationships, prevent breakdown and ensure the wellbeing and safety of children through the provision of broad-based counselling and education to families of different forms and sizes. FaRS is delivered in 481 locations across Australia.

- *Specialised Family Violence Services (SFVS)* deliver a whole of family approach to support those affected by family violence. Services include, but are not limited to, broad-based and specialised counselling, behavioural change programs for those exhibiting violent behaviour, and education and support for children who witness or experience family violence. SFVS is delivered by 23 providers in 89 locations across Australia.

The department notes that the Issues Paper (Question Set 4) requests up to date information on the funding and delivery of children and family services. The department is working with the Productivity Commission to provide this information separate to this submission. In addition, information on individual grants from 1 January 2019 can be found in the department's [Grant Funding Report](https://www.dss.gov.au/grants/grants-funding), <https://www.dss.gov.au/grants/grants-funding>. This report is updated no later than fourteen working days after funding agreements under a grant takes effect. All grant opportunities are now advertised on the [Community Grants Hub](https://www.communitygrants.gov.au/) website, <https://www.communitygrants.gov.au/>.

Community engagement and consultation

The department is committed to ensuring our services continue to achieve positive outcomes for families and children across Australia. The department engages with communities at all stages across policy design and implementation to ensure our policies meet the needs of families and children.

In 2018, the department commenced a national consultation process on a number of programs under the FaC Activity to discuss how government and stakeholders can continue to work together to ensure these services continue to achieve positive outcomes for families and children across Australia. This consultation involved:

- 20 roundtables with service providers, academics, peak bodies, state governments and local councils
- 11 Indigenous specific forums with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies, service providers and community members
- 15 focus groups with hard to reach families and children
- An online submission process.

Over 500 stakeholders provided feedback. The Background and discussion papers from the consultation are available on the [department's engage](https://engage.dss.gov.au/stronger-outcomes-for-families/) website, <https://engage.dss.gov.au/stronger-outcomes-for-families/>.

Place-based initiatives and community involvement

Moving forward, the department is increasing its focus on place-based initiatives (Question Set 6). The department has funded place-based children and family services since 2004 through CfC FPs. CfC FPs develop and facilitate a whole of community approach to support and enhance early childhood development and wellbeing for children from birth to 12 years.

CfC FPs build on local strengths to meet local community needs and create capability within local service systems using strong evidence of what works in early intervention and prevention. In the Northern Territory, CfC FPs operate in Katherine, Palmerston, East Arnhem and Alice Springs to oversee broad community consultation, and develop solutions that address locally identified needs.

They collaborate with other organisations to provide a holistic service system for children and families. As part of this role, CfC FPs fund other organisations (known as Community Partners) to provide services including parenting support, group peer

support, case management, home visiting services and other supports to promote child wellbeing.

Place-based collective impact, the Stronger Places, Stronger People initiative

The department is also implementing a place-based collective impact initiative in partnership with 10 communities across Australia. The initiative, *Stronger Places, Stronger People*, tests whether collaboration between communities, governments, services and investors delivering on a locally designed plan of action can interrupt disadvantage and create better futures for children and their families.

Tennant Creek has been announced as a community in the Northern Territory to receive *Stronger Places, Stronger People* support as part of the Barkly Regional Deal. The total value of the Barkly Regional Deal is \$78.4 million, including \$45.4 million from the Commonwealth Government, \$30 million from the Northern Territory, and \$3 million from the Barkly Regional Council.

Under the Barkly Regional Deal, the department has committed up to \$2 million over five years from 2019-20 for *Stronger Places, Stronger People* in Tennant Creek. This funding will be used to resource a local project team in Tennant Creek that will work with local leaders, residents and organisations who partner to form a leadership group, to develop and progress the community's vision and plan of action to create better futures for children.

Reporting and evaluation

The Issues Paper (Question Set 5) asks for information on the monitoring, reporting and evaluation used for families and children services. One key mechanism for monitoring outcomes of family and children services is the department's Data Exchange.

Data reporting through the Data Exchange

The department uses the Data Exchange to measure how grants, including the FaC Activity grants are being delivered. The Data Exchange is a program performance reporting tool developed for organisations to collect a small set of data consistently across program areas. This information is shared back with organisations through a set of self-service reports to inform best practice and early intervention approaches to service delivery.

The Data Exchange enables analysis across programs and at a national level and complements specialist evaluations and research. It also enables a shift in focus from outputs to more meaningful information about outcomes like family functioning, age-appropriate development and personal and family safety. Service providers can opt in to the Partnership Approach, which allows them to report on the outcomes their services are achieving for their clients. This allows an understanding of the collective impact of programs and the combinations of services that deliver the best results.

For more information on the Data Exchange, go to the [Data Exchange](https://dex.dss.gov.au/policy-guidance/data_exchange_framework/) website, https://dex.dss.gov.au/policy-guidance/data_exchange_framework/.

Evaluation

The department acknowledges the importance of evidence and evaluation to inform program design and reform. Over the years there have been a number of evaluations, both Post Implementation Reviews and impact evaluations, of some of the different sub-programs under the FaC Activity. These have been undertaken at a sub-program level rather than at the Activity level due to the varying nature of the different sub-programs. Recent evaluations conducted for each program and links to evaluations are listed below.

CfC FPs

2016 Post Implementation Review conducted by ACIL Allen is available at <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children/publications-articles/communities-for-children-facilitating-partners-post-implementation-review>

2014 and 2009 impact evaluations have been conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and are available at <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/stronger-families-australia-sfia-study-phase-2> and <https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/op25.pdf>.

HIPPY

2018 Evaluation of HIPPY was conducted by ACIL Allen Consulting and is available at <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children/programs-services/parenting/families-and-children-activity/children-and-parenting/evaluation-of-the-home-interaction-program-for-parents-and-youngsters>.

2011 Investing in Our Future evaluated the national rollout of HIPPY and is available at <https://www.bsl.org.au/research/browse-publications/investing-in-our-future-an-evaluation-of-the-national-rollout-of-the-home-interaction-program-for-parents-and-youngsters-hippy-final-report/>.

2009 The home learning environment and readiness for school: A longitudinal evaluation was undertaken throughout 2008 on six of the nine HIPPY sites in Australia at that time. It is available at http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/6104/1/Home_learning_environment_and_school_readiness_HIPPY_2009.pdf.

FaRS and SFVS

2018 FaRS workforce survey was conducted by the Australian Institute of Families Study and is available at <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/national-survey-fars-funded-service-providers>.

Building on past funding arrangements

The department notes that the questions posed by the Productivity Commission on improving the funding arrangements of family and children services (Question Set 6), draw upon the Productivity Commission's report on *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reform to Human Services*.

The department is focussed on ensuring that commissioning approaches are appropriate for the outcomes sought and consider the local community and service system. The department is developing a 'Getting Better Outcomes' approach and trialling the Indigenous Grants Policy to guide future commissioning decisions.

Getting Better Outcomes

The department is developing the 'Getting Better Outcomes' approach, an outcomes-focused and evidence-informed approach to the design and delivery of policy, payments and programs.

It seeks clearer evidence about which interventions produce better outcomes, and puts a greater focus on collaboration, innovation and design thinking for policy interventions and service delivery. It also seeks to enhance relationships and better coordinate efforts to achieve outcomes across government and between service delivery partners.

Trialling of the Indigenous Grants Policy

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet announced the commencement of the Indigenous Grants Policy (IGP) trial from 1 July 2018 as part of *Closing the Gap* initiatives. The IGP is underpinned by six principles that aim to improve access for Indigenous Australians to the significant expenditure on grants, including increasing the involvement of Indigenous people in the design and delivery of programs that affect them, and improving on-the-ground service delivery.

The IGP trial involves three departments: the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Department of Social Services and the Department of Communications and the Arts. The department is the only participating agency that is trialling the implementation of the IGP for mainstream, national programs, including through the FaC Activity, the National Disability Advocacy Program, and the Fourth Action Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children.

Since the announcement of the IGP trial, the department has also held national consultations on how its FaC Activity can better support the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. The department is responding to consultation feedback in an effort to test elements of the IGP in future grant applications and funding arrangements.