Western Australian Family Support Network Evaluation Report – Summary

Background

The Family Support Network (FSN) is a key initiative delivered under the Department of Communities (Communities) Building Safe and Strong Families: Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy (EIFS Strategy). The FSN provides a common entry point to earlier, targeted services and support for families with complex problems and those most vulnerable to involvement with the child protection system.

Core aims of the FSN is to help families:

- Receive an integrated and coordinated service response to address their needs and divert them from the child protection system.
- Develop and strengthen culturally safe support networks.
- Improve parenting skills to safely care for their children at home.

The FSN is comprised of two service streams:

- **Assessment and coordination (A&C)**: provides a common entry point for families and individuals to navigate the service system and link them to support services tailored to their needs.
  Intensive case management (ICM): provides up to 12 months of case management and coordination support for families who are experiencing complex challenges and are most at risk of involvement with child protection.

The FSN operates across the Perth metropolitan area and each service is managed by a community services organisation lead agency who delivers the service in partnership with an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO).

FSN Service Location	Lead Agency	ACCO Partner
Mirrabooka/Joondalup	Mercy Community Services	Yorgum Healing Services Aboriginal Corporation
Cannington/Armadale	Centrecare Inc.	Wungening Aboriginal Corporation (Wungening)
Perth/Midland	Centrecare Inc.	Wungening
Fremantle/Rockingham	Communicare Inc.	Langford Aboriginal Association

Evaluation of the Western Australian Family Support Networks

In January 2023, Communities engaged consultants Keogh Bay to undertake an evaluation of the FSN, and the Final Evaluation Report (Final Report) was completed on 1 August 2023.

The aim of the evaluation was to:

- provide information to support future FSN commissioning activities;
- support continuous improvement, including a focus on the Child Protection Leader (CPL) role; and
- provide a contemporary evaluation of the program's impact.

Keogh Bay utilised a mixed methods approach, including desktop research and analysis, quantitative data from FuSioN and Communities ASSIST client database, stakeholder consultations with 78 stakeholders, including 13 families with experience of the service, an online survey of Partner Agencies and a Value for Money assessment.

Of the families consulted, there were an almost equal number who had received A&C and ICM services and 39 per cent were either from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) background or identified as Aboriginal.

Summary of key findings

The Final Report contains a number of key findings, including:

- Overall, the FSNs are a valued, community resource for families and individuals who are struggling with complex issues that are affecting parenting, child safety and wellbeing.

- FSNs provide families with a way to improve their functioning outside of the child protection system and this is critical to Aboriginal families given past government policies and practices.

- FSNs have supported a significant number of families and individuals in the community. Over the period 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2022, FSNs worked with 10,6992 cases (both A&C and ICM). For the A&C service stream, 29,283 clients were referred for A&C supports. While the overall case numbers were high, the proportion of Aboriginal cases was low at 17 per cent.

- The FSN eligibility criteria are more flexible than other services (particularly A&C) and the services are individualised and holistic and are not limited to one sector (e.g. homelessness, parenting etc).

- FSNs, particularly the ICM services, can provide in-home parenting support along with case management and coordination which is reported to be a large gap in the community.

- FSNs support families early, and in a coordinated way, to access Partner Agencies.

- Overall, the value for money analysis demonstrated that financial investment in FSN creates a positive cost saving for Government. Between the period 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2022, for there was a return of $2.88 for every $1 of investment by Communities[1].

Opportunities for improvement

The Final Report contains 15 'opportunities for improvement' to further strengthen and improve the current FSN service. These are provided below, along with additional information from the report to assist with providing context.

Opportunity 1: The FSN Operating Framework to clarify:
- The FSN aim, objectives and target cohorts, separate for A&C and ICM.
- What is meant by FSNs being an 'early' or 'earlier' intervention service.
- The level of child protection issues and complexity families can be experiencing to be eligible for ICM (see below).

During the consultations, Communities' districts indicated they would like to see ICM services support families with child protection issues that are less than the threshold of what would constitute an open case.

If this was to be considered, a base-level of skills/experience expected would need to be mapped for case workers, coordinators and management (noting family support workers would have a different level of skills and qualifications specified) including child protection, motivational change skills and FDV in addition to parenting and cultural competency. Consideration of a mental health and AOD consultancy role to be shared across FSNs.

Report context: The evaluation found FSN Lead Agencies, child protection districts and community services organisation often had different understandings of the FSNs role in early intervention. It is indicated that this stems from a variety of factors, including wording in key documents, such as the Operating Framework. District stakeholders raised the need for ICM to take families experiencing higher child protection risks and complex issues as currently there are families with a risk threshold too low for child protection intervention, but too high for ICM services.

Opportunity 2: The FSNs alliances are operating more as a local network. While stakeholders still feel this model is beneficial, Communities could consider updating the Operating Framework to capture the way the alliance is currently working i.e. more a network approach where the Lead Agency does the majority of case management but holds ongoing networking activities (noting that these networking activities are critical to ensure they have strong local knowledge to ensure families get the fastest and most appropriate, holistic services they need when referred to the FSN).

Updates could include:

---

[1] The value for money analysis estimates the potential savings to Government that are likely to be generated as a result of a reduction in child protection activity and out-of-home care placements.

- Cases are usually coordinated and case managed by the FSN, and are not allocated to Partner Agencies, unless in the best interest of families and that provider offers case management / coordination as part of their service range (referrals are still made to network and other providers as per usual).
- Partner Agencies don't use FuSioN.
- Where suitable, the FSN coordinates services around families by the A&C stream (and ICM) to maximise Partner Agency benefits.
- Warm referrals to Partner Agencies are to be highlighted as the preferred option, if wanted by the family.
- FSN Lead Agencies hold network meetings tailored to local need.

MoUs between Lead and Partner Agencies to be updated in line with any Operating Model updates, particularly removal of the mandated use of FuSioN.

Report context: The 'alliance' or network of Partner Agencies is not being delivered as currently defined in the Operating Framework. However, stakeholders still considered the FSN has evolved into a model that is still 'powerful.' For example, A&C cases are not usually allocated to Partner Agencies, with the Lead Agency or ACCO taking responsibility for a case. The Lead Agency utilises the Partner Agency in other ways, including via partner network meetings. This is because Partner Agencies rarely have case management/coordination available, or broader than their specific service, or the capacity to use FuSioN.

Opportunity 3: Communities to consider strategies to enable equal power between Lead and ACCO Agencies to enable culturally secure and safe supports for families outside the child protection system.

This may include opportunities for ACCOs to operate in the Lead Agency role (noting potential structural inequities in ACCOs' capacity to apply for tenders against large mainstream organisations). If ACCOs choose to operate in partnerships with a mainstream provider, the timeframe in which this partnership will be meaningfully formed could be proposed as part of their tender submission.

In the short-term, improvements in partnership arrangements could be achieved by requiring Lead Agencies to develop and implement plans to better meet the principles set out in the *ACCO Strategy 2022 to 2032*.

Report context: While stakeholders recognise the value of ACCO partnerships in delivering the FSN, an ACCOs role as a Partner Agency, with the Lead being a mainstream organisation, can create a power imbalance, which conflicts with the right of self-determination for Aboriginal people and the safety, wellbeing and protections needs of their children.

Opportunity 4: The Operating Framework to include more information on expectations about FSNs providing culturally secure and safe supports, including learnings from the Ten-Year Roadmap SNAICC is developing in 2023.

Report context: Culturally secure and safe services are critical to enabling equitable access, engagement, quality assessment and outcomes and partnerships with Aboriginal clients. Where there are ACCO staff embedded within the FSN, this is beneficial. However, these roles are not within a leadership position and results in little opportunity to build Aboriginal ways of working throughout the FSN consistently, and more broadly across the mainstream organisation. The report found culturally secure and safe practises could be more consistently embedded across the four corridors.

Opportunity 5: The Operating Framework to be updated to state that FSNs can choose whether to engage with their local DLG where appropriate and beneficial**.**

Report context: It is a requirement in the current Operating Framework for each FSN to be accountable to a Local Steering Group (LSG). However, these are either not operating or where they are, it is considered that LSGs were useful to support initial implementation but are no longer needed now services are well established. Additionally, the EIFS Strategy suggests LSGs report to District Leadership Groups (DLG), however, this is either not happening in practice and each DLG is independent and has a different focus depending on its location.

Opportunity 6: The CPLs role is to be better defined in line with the report findings. This includes investigation to be considered relating to the level of access CPLs should have in FuSioN and family information more generally.

Report context: Overall, stakeholders significantly valued the Child Protection Lead (CPL) role, but suggested some opportunities for improvement, including better defining the role in the Operating Framework, positioning the role back at the district instead of being employed through State-wide Referral and Response Service. The full list of suggestions for improving the CPL role are found on pp 4-5 of the Final Report.

Opportunity 7: FuSioN changes to occur to capture better outcomes for FSNs as well as improvements to exported report formats.

Report context: A number of suggested amendments to the client database (FuSioN), are made throughout the report, including barriers to allocating cases to Partner Agencies and challenges with exit and entry outcome data tab items in FuSioN.

Opportunity 8: Communities to consider whether there is additional budget for FSNs to fund better access to interpreters as well as parenting training for workers.

Report context: Stakeholders requested that FSNs have a separate, or additional, budget for the purchase of interpreters due to the cost especially when this is needed over the life of a case. In addition, training workers in parenting methods is expensive and out of reach for some agencies.

Opportunity 9: Communities to consider the development of a Theory of Change for A&C and ICM, and a broader monitoring and evaluation framework for FSNs.

Report context: A Theory of Change could be developed separately for the A&C and ICM service streams to understand the distinct activities and associated outcomes.

Outcomes from the Theory of Change could then feed into an outcomes measurement tool recorded in FuSioN (including a culturally secure tool). Activities and outputs from the Theory of Change could form part of a Monitoring Framework to support any new commissioning activities or further enhancements to the model.

Opportunity 10: Communities to consider expanding the type of service options available in A&C services, for certain families. This includes the option of longer case work, coordination and in-home supports of A&C clients who require this additional level of support (via any referrer as with current A&C services).

This expanded service, if considered, would likely require additional investment so the higher level of service for some families, doesn't reduce the overall number of families/individuals who can be serviced within the same funding amount.

Report context: A&C supports are currently short term in nature compared to ICM. Stakeholder feedback from all stakeholder groups including clients, was for A&C services to be expanded in terms of the service range, length of service and types of support (including in-home supports) for those families that need additional support. It is important that expanding the type of service options for some families did not impact on the overall number of families able to receive a service.

Opportunity 11: Communities to monitor any cohorts who are disadvantaged from the ICM eligibility criteria change.

Report context: Commencing in July 2023, there are changes to the ICM eligibility criteria to better manage ICM services being at full capacity. While FSNs were in the main supportive of the changes, the changes have the potential to minimise support for some service users, such as those with older children and it is suggested any impacts are monitored to identify if there is any disadvantage to particular cohorts.

Opportunity 12: Communities to consider asking SRRS and districts to record data on potential unmet demand for ICM supports (i.e., the number of eligible families they were unable to refer to ICM supports in any year due to the service being at full capacity).

Report context: As part of the monitoring (Opportunity 11) Communities consider the State-wide Referral and Response Service (SRRS) and districts record the number of families they would have like to refer to ICM services but were unable to as the service was at capacity. This will assist in identifying unmet service demand.

Opportunity 13: The Operating Framework could be updated for ICM to include best practice ways of working between Communities and FSNs.

Updates could include:

- Active handover or joint visits between Communities' district offices and the FSN when the family is known to a child protection worker.

- Good levels of information in ICM referrals forms, particularly those relevant to case progression as well as family, child and worker safety.

- Districts/SRRS to be advised by phone if a referral is rejected by an FSN so they can clarify and discuss why the family was not accepted.

Districts and FSNs to be re-informed that FSN cases can be kept open whilst a new notification/CSI is being conducted.

Report context: Most stakeholders reported positive feedback on how Communities and FSNs work together, however there were some practical suggestions to strengthen ways of working, which are further detailed on page 69 of the report

Opportunity 14: Communities to consider how to capture data that links ICM activity to outcomes, particularly whether a child has had further contact with the child protection system, to ensure robust outcome measurement.

Report context: While anecdotal evidence was supportive of outcomes for families as a result of ICM, quantitative data is not robust enough to confirm whether ICM directly contributes to children's safety and ability to remain at home.

Opportunity 15: Communities to investigate with the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) whether there is a solution available where the FSNs can access a behaviour support provider who can deliver in-home services and advice for FSN families to compliment the work of FSNs.

Behaviour support for children with a disability is a specialised support service. Use of parenting approaches that are not designed for children with a disability can be harmful and create further issues within a family. In addition, access to NDIS (or any other) in-home behaviour support is a gap within the community.

However, children accessing FSNs are reported to have behavioural challenges relating to both their disability (undiagnosed/diagnosed) and trauma/parenting approaches used within the family.

Report context: Acknowledging that FSN are not disability specific support services, Lead Agencies have reported there are a large number of families needing support with children experiencing dysregulation and behaviour issues, which may be from trauma, attachment difficulties and/or disability/neurodiversity. Finding in-home supports for disability/neurodiversity was difficult, even with families who had NDIS funds.

Next steps

Communities will consider the Final Evaluation Report findings and 'opportunities for improvement', alongside the FSN service providers, with a view to developing an implementation plan. The implementation plan will drive the progression of viable actions and activities to ensure the FSN, as a key community service, is realised to its full potential.

Key activities and outcomes to further strengthen the FSN will be published on the FSN and Communities websites.