

Intensive Family Support Services

Department response to impact evaluation report by Wunan Foundation trading as Social Compass September 2020

DSS October 2020



Background

Intensive Family Support Service (IFSS) is an intensive home and community-based family support service offered to highly vulnerable families living in selected communities in the Northern Territory and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of South Australia. The program provides practical parenting education and support to parents and caregivers in their communities and homes for around 12 months to help improve the health, safety and wellbeing of their children. IFSS is not Indigenous specific but over 80 per cent of clients are Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander. The phased rollout of the program commenced in 2010 – 2011, and ten years on a comprehensive evaluation was considered timely.

The findings in the evaluation will inform both improvements to the program and wider reform work resulting from the Productivity Commission Report on *Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory* (the Productivity Commission Report) and the Royal Commission into *Detention and Protection of Children in the Northern Territory* (the Royal Commission Report).

Social Compass undertook the impact evaluation of IFSS. The evaluation commenced in late 2018 and the Department of Social Services (the department) accepted the final report in March 2020.

The department welcomes the findings of this impact evaluation which will inform planned staged improvements.

Key findings that will inform the redesign work

The report found that the following aspects of a service aimed at supporting vulnerable children and families are critical. Consideration of these will be part of the redesign work.

- Strong and appropriate cultural governance.
- Strength based, culturally appropriate and trauma informed practice models.
- One size does not fit all and flexibility to enable communities to customise and contextualise services must be accommodated. This may include services that support individual families, kinship groups and communities as a whole, and services which utilise culturally appropriate resources including in-language.
- Evidence-based processes to identify drivers of neglect and abuse, and current and emerging need are required. These inform selection of service delivery locations, can support future outcomes measurements, and ensure services are located and designed to maximise well-being outcomes for families and children.
- Bi-cultural workforce, tools and processes that support and strengthen the workforce and reduce staff turn-over.
- Clarity in relation to roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders and promotion of trust and strong relationships.
- Outcomes for service users can be both long and short-term and there is a need to ensure that short-term outcomes can be measured as these are critical to achieving any long-term, sustainable outcomes.

- Issues beyond the scope of IFSS, such as lack of other support services, overcrowded housing and food security, can impact on providers ability to achieve some outcomes for families.

Opportunities

There are extensive opportunities presented by the planned collaborative work between the department and DTFHC to improve the IFSS and IFPS programs. The phased improvements are expected to result in a more integrated intensive family support system with increased connection to other family support services, reduced duplication and maximised service coverage to meet current and emerging priorities.

The department understands that comprehensive, timely and appropriate communication strategies will be needed to support the redesign work and implementation and delivery of the refreshed program.

The department acknowledges the work by Social Compass in undertaking this evaluation and the significant contributions made by all of the IFSS providers and other stakeholders in readily engaging in hosting site visits, participating in interviews and responding to surveys.

Next Steps

This evaluation will inform the redesign work which will also be informed by the Productivity Commission and Royal Commission Reports. The department has engaged the Australian Centre for Child Protection (ACCP) as subject matter experts to lead and inform the redesign work. The department and DTFHC are undertaking this redesign collaboratively.

The redesign work will, if approved, result in a grant round for the delivery of new services to commence in July 2021.

The department recognises that the focus and priorities of many organisations and governments have shifted with the evolving coronavirus emergency. Much of the face-to-face consultation the department had planned to support the staged improvements to IFSS may not be possible. Nevertheless, the department will continue to progress this work and are working with ACCP and DTFHC to develop alternate mechanisms for expert and stakeholder engagement in the redesign work.

Departmental response to findings

The Department of Social Services will use the findings from the impact evaluation into the Commonwealth funded Intensive Family Support Services to inform ongoing policy and program development, including phased improvements to the program.

Finding	Response
<p>Appropriateness</p> <p>1 Strong cultural governance in IFSS sites and program flexibility have enabled IFSS providers to adapt the original IFSS practice model to include culturally appropriate, trauma-informed services. Adaptations of the model to suit community needs have resulted in a diversity of service models across IFSS sites.</p>	<p>The department notes this finding and this is a key consideration for phased improvements to the program, currently underway.</p>
<p>2 Some elements of the original IFSS practice model continue to have a negative impact on program functioning. These elements include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A neglect-focused outcomes measurement tool which does not align with the strengths-based approach of the program and has only been used to a limited extent.• Geographic limitations of service delivery.• Lack of clarity about the eligibility criteria for IFSS children and families.	<p>The department acknowledges this finding. The focus on strengths-based, culturally appropriate and trauma-informed program development will play a key role in phased improvements to the program.</p> <p>The department notes that many IFSS clients are highly mobile. This means the need for services in particular locations will not remain static over the life of any future IFSS programs. Opportunities to build in flexibility for delivery of services to mobile clients and flexible means to respond to emerging need are considerations for the phased improvements.</p> <p>The department notes the lack of clarity about the eligibility criteria for IFSS amongst IFSS providers. It also notes a number of areas where the report indicated confusion or lack of familiarity amongst IFSS providers with regard to the Operational Guidelines, particularly following amendments to the guidelines.</p> <p>Moving forward, clear and comprehensive communication strategies will be a focus, to ensure all stakeholders share an</p>

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	accurate and comprehensive understanding of changes brought about as part of the phased improvements and to ensure client eligibility is clearly articulated.
<p>3 IFSS providers have achieved greater cultural appropriateness and enhanced family engagement through the development of locally designed tools and resources by Aboriginal people, including visual material and resources in local language.</p>	<p>The department acknowledges the importance of a flexible approach allowing for customisation and contextualisation of programs to better suit community needs. Recognition of the importance of flexible approaches is being factored into the phased improvements process.</p>
<p>4 Most sites visited for the evaluation have bi-cultural teams of Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff. IFSS staff and other stakeholders identified this bi-cultural model as essential to providing an appropriate service.</p>	<p>The department acknowledges the importance of bi-cultural teams to deliver services.</p> <p>One service provider is currently developing a resource documenting the bi-cultural service delivery for other service providers in acknowledgement of this best practice. This resource will be drawn on during the phased improvements.</p>
<p>Efficiency</p> <p>5 Current DEX data reports and financial data for similar programs are inadequate in their design to provide insights into the efficiency of the IFSS program.</p>	<p>The department acknowledges the limitations of comparing financial data between Commonwealth and State and Territory funded intensive family support programs and that improvement of data collection and outcomes measurement is being considered as part of the phased improvements to the program.</p>
<p>6 Increased flexibility and clarity of the referral pathways into IFSS has allowed service providers to more efficiently and effectively support vulnerable families in their local community.</p>	<p>While earlier findings noted some challenges regarding eligibility for the program, the department acknowledges the value brought by increased flexibility in referral pathways. The department notes that IFSS was introduced as a support measure to accompany the introduction of Child Protection Income Management. At implementation, strict referral pathways were an essential</p>

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<p>7 A needs analysis to understand the needs and drivers of neglect in each community did not occur prior to the implementation of IFSS. This lack of needs analysis had a negative impact on service providers' ability to plan, design and implement effective services.</p>	<p>component. Over time, referral pathways were broadened to include community referrals where service capacity allowed.</p> <p>The department acknowledges that a full population-based analysis and identification of all drivers of neglect was not undertaken for every community for the roll-out in 2011. Assessments of community need were a point in time assessment and could not be 'future proofed' for emerging priority and need. Understanding of the importance of the development of a robust rationale for identification of current and emerging community need is being applied to the staged improvements.</p> <p>The rationale for the selection of sites was based on consultations/local intelligence and was undertaken in conjunction with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Northern Territory child protection authorities, community leaders/members, relevant agencies and other stakeholders who had service connections to identified locations. Levels of community readiness were also taken into account in this process. Part of the IFSS redesign will be to develop a robust rationale for identification of current and emerging need for services.</p>
<p>8 High staff turnover and vacancies limit the efficiency of IFSS, particularly in the more remote communities. Reduction of staff turnover rates has occurred where:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services employ appropriately skilled, local Aboriginal staff. • Team leadership is well established and facilitates the provision of a range of structural supports to staff including reflective practice, regular debriefing/team meetings, cultural supervision and management supervision. 	<p>The department acknowledges the importance of recruiting and retaining appropriately qualified and trained staff, including employing local Aboriginal staff and the structures which support reduction in staff turn-over and vacancies. Consideration of recruitment and retention of staff is part of the phased improvements to the program.</p>

Finding	Response
<p>9 The ability of service providers to choose their own Implementation Capacity Support Service (ICSS) provider increases the likelihood of a productive partnership that will contribute to appropriate adaptation of the IFSS model and increased IFSS workforce capacity.</p>	<p>The department acknowledges the important role the ICSS provider plays in supporting initial establishment of the services and ongoing workforce support and training. The department also notes the importance of provider agency in choosing their own, department approved, ICSS provider.</p>
<p>10 For a majority of IFSS providers, critical working relationships with other agencies are not functioning as effectively as possible. Current stakeholder and IFSS providers indicate that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a lack of clarity regarding the respective roles and responsibilities of IFSS providers and child protection agencies. • Closer collaboration with agencies responsible for housing and education is likely to improve outcomes for families. <p>IFSS providers are operating largely in isolation without formal mechanisms to facilitate direct communication with the department's National Office, sharing of information and learning since the Central Implementation Team ended in 2016. While the community of practice meetings are valued, service providers would like a regular, high-level sharing and decision-making forum.</p>	<p>The department acknowledges the importance of critical working relationships and the need for more clarity regarding roles and responsibilities, closer collaboration with other service providers, and greater networking and sharing between IFSS providers and with the department.</p> <p>The department notes that, since the ceasing of the Central Implementation Team, there has not been as much opportunity for high level sharing and decision making. Consideration of how this can be achieved is part of the phased improvements.</p>
<p>Effectiveness</p>	
<p>11 IFSS services require flexible engagement strategies and sufficient time, often up to 12 months, to build relationships of trust which underlie effective work with families.</p>	<p>The department acknowledges the need for flexible engagement strategies, including enabling sufficient time and opportunity for the establishment of trust and good working relationships. Consideration of these issues are informing phased improvements.</p>

Finding	Response
<p>12 Some service providers have identified the benefits of broader community engagement, rather than focusing solely on individual families, as a strategy to build the capacity and wellbeing of the community as a whole.</p>	<p>The department acknowledges the need for flexible engagement strategies, including those focussing on families, kinship groups and communities where appropriate. Consideration of appropriate engagement strategies are a key element of the phased improvements.</p>
<p>13 Achieving outcomes for families through the IFSS program is challenging and will be limited while broader issues, beyond the scope of IFSS, such as lack of other support services, overcrowded housing and food security are not addressed.</p>	<p>The department acknowledges the interconnectedness of issues affecting families, which are beyond the scope of IFSS, and the potential for these to undermine attainment of IFSS outcomes.</p> <p>The department notes the complexity of these issues and that they are out of scope for IFSS. The phased improvements include consideration of how stronger collaboration and networking between policy makers and all relevant service providers could contribute to better outcomes overall for vulnerable families.</p>
<p>14 From the commencement of the program there have been significant, ongoing challenges to data collection, resulting in a lack of outcomes data for IFSS.</p>	<p>The department acknowledges the limitations and lack of outcomes data for IFSS to date. Consideration of how to improve data collection is part of the phased improvements.</p> <p>This will include needs assessment drawing on data and information from a range of sources to inform community and provider identification including; establishing base line need, developing better articulated outcomes for both medium and long-term outcomes and better suited outcomes measurement tools as part of the phased improvements.</p>

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<p>15 Despite the absence of reliable outcomes data, there is a strong stakeholder perception that IFSS is achieving positive incremental outcomes for children, parents and carers, and families. These incremental outcomes are crucial to the achievement of longer-term outcomes which take significant time to achieve.</p>	<p>The department notes the strong stakeholder perception that IFSS is achieving positive incremental outcomes. It is important to capture these incremental outcomes as part of accurate outcomes reporting and support achievement of longer-term outcomes.</p>
<p>16 Some IFSS providers are developing and trialling their own outcomes measurement tools in the form of goal attainment scales. These tools aim to collect outcomes data which is better aligned to the needs and goals of IFSS families.</p>	<p>The department notes that some IFSS providers are developing and trialling their own outcomes measurement tools and the department will liaise with parties to understand their effectiveness.</p>
<p>Overarching</p>	
<p>17 Throughout this evaluation, IFSS providers, as key stakeholders in the program, have contributed to the development of common criteria which can inform the ongoing implementation and outcome measurement of the IFSS program.</p>	<p>The department acknowledges the contributions made by IFSS providers to the development of common criteria which will inform the phased improvements.</p>