



2023 Policy Platform

Protecting our kids: Rebalancing investment and increasing accountability

About Fams

Fams is the NSW peak body for children and family early intervention and prevention services. We support the not-for-profit sector to build capacity and capability so it can support children and families in need.

We advocate for improved policies for children, families, communities and services.

Fams is committed to:

- Children and families receiving the support they need
- Evidence-informed and outcomes-based service delivery
- Government and sector accountability
- Influencing policy

Fams works collaboratively with:

- Government
- Policy and decision-makers
- Family and community services sector
- Non-government agencies and other peak bodies

Our Vision

Children thrive within safe, strong and supportive families and communities.

Our Mission

To support our sector to build capacity and capability and advocate for improved policies for children, families, communities and services.

We contribute to population outcomes through:

- Building skills and knowledge in outcomes-based frameworks to enable organisations to collect and use data to inform practice and collaborate to provide better results for clients, practitioners and organisations; and
- Systematic policy and advocacy to inform and enable the government to implement solutions that support vulnerable children, families and communities.

Introduction

Too often, vulnerable young people and their families in NSW are not provided with the support they need to stop them from falling into crisis.

Investment is skewed towards the acute end, which is of course needed. But if we want to stop vulnerable young people getting to the crisis end in the first place, we must invest earlier in children and families at risk. We must rebalance the system.

In addition, the other way to improve support is to introduce greater accountability into how funding is spent and greater accountability around policy

decisions – including how they are made, how they are being implemented and whether they are achieving their aims.

Fams' 2023 Policy Platform seeks to do this: Rebalance our investment in vulnerable children and their families and increase accountability of that investment and related policy decisions.

By working together to implement the common-sense reforms outlined in our Platform, we can finally drive down the number of children at Risk of Significant Harm and ensure more young people across NSW get the best possible start in life.

We look forward to working with the NSW Parliament on making this a reality.

Summary of recommendations

- 1. Increasing accountability:** Develop an overarching framework to support vulnerable children and introduce a Minister for Children with a broad focus on the first 2,000 days to oversee it.
- 2. Rebalancing investment:** Increase funding across the early intervention and prevention sector by 25 percent.



Urgent need for change

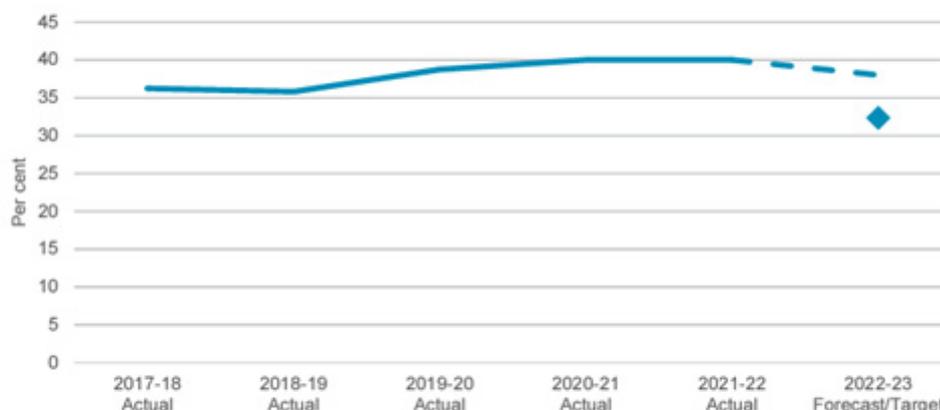
For too long, too many vulnerable children in NSW have slipped through the cracks, when earlier interventions could have prevented them from ending up in the out of home care (OOHC) system or worse.

The fact is that the proportion of children and young people reported at Risk Of Significant Harm who are re-reported within 12 months of closure of their case plan declined in the most recent reporting period.

While these numbers are headed in the right direction, another fact is that based on the current trajectory, the Premier's priority of decreasing the re-reporting rate by 20 percent by 2023 will not be met.

This is highlighted in the 2022-23 State Budget¹, as per below:

Chart 8.4: *Proportion of children and young people re-reported at risk of significant harm (ROSH) within 12 months*



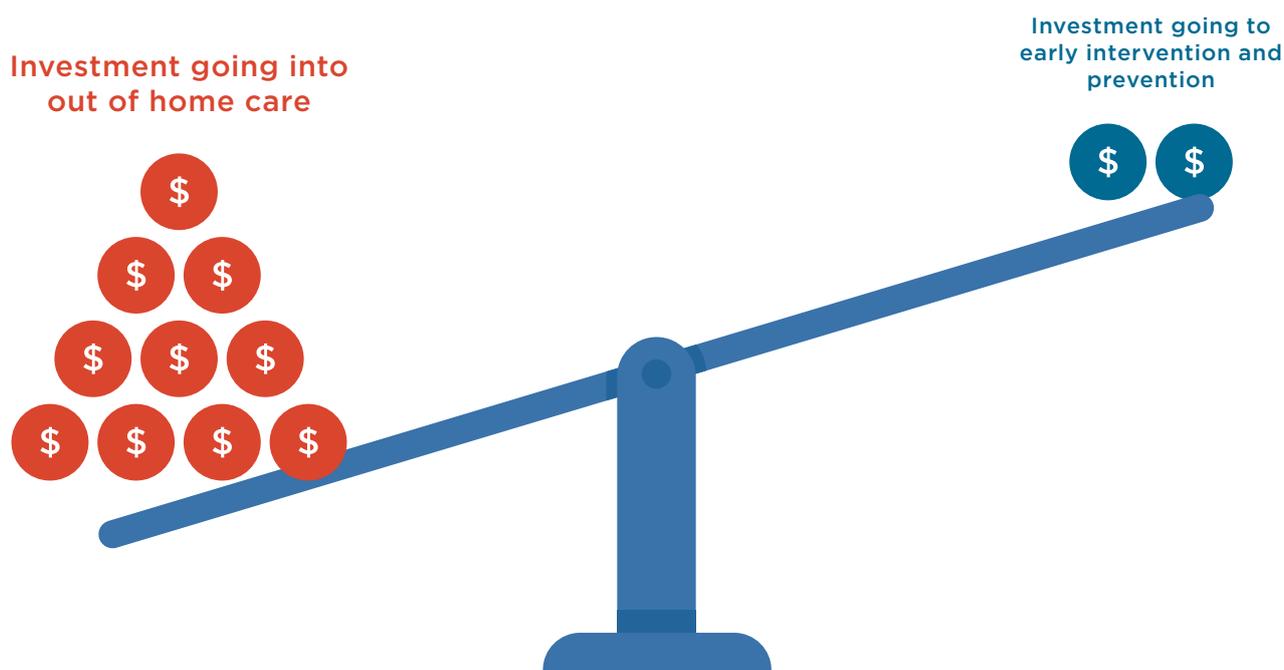
Note: 2022-23 shows the forecast as at December 2022.

Reports rose by 13.5 percent overall in the three years to 2020-21, up by more than 20 percent in some locations. For Aboriginal children, over the five years to 2019-20, there was a 40 percent increase.ⁱⁱ

While the 2022-23 State Budget allocated \$3.1 billion in recurrent expenses to the child protection system, including \$1.6 billion to

support OOHC and permanency outcomes, significantly less is allocated to the early Intervention and prevention space.

We calculate that the approximate funding going to early intervention and family preservation services is around \$322 million.



Fams supports the significant investment being devoted to the ‘crisis-end’ of the child protection continuum, such as OOHC, however this must be rebalanced with increased investment in prevention services, in particular funding that prioritises Aboriginal children.

In this regard, the Family is Culture review undertaken by Professor Megan Davis provides an important roadmap to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the OOHC care system.

However, to date, progress has been slow, piecemeal and does not sufficiently engage with and empower Aboriginal Community

Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and the workforce that supports Aboriginal children, families and communities.

While the NSW Government has embarked on ambitious reforms in this space, the balance of investment is still too heavily skewed towards the crisis end and there is too little coordination and accountability across the continuum.

The following recommendations set out how the NSW Government and next NSW Parliament can turn this situation around.

Recommendations

1. Increase accountability

- Introduce a Minister for Children with a focus on the first 2,000 days +.
- Introduce an overarching framework for vulnerable children.

Vulnerable children and their families have multiple contact points with NSW Health, the Department of Education, the Department of Communities and Justice and other government departments and agencies.

We understand that around 10 per cent of children have had no contact with any form of formal education (pre-school, long day care or similar) before their first day of Kindergarten.

The NSW Government has taken various measures to address this, including the announcement of a [Child Wellbeing Taskforce](#) in September 2021, and the \$6 billion program announced in June 2022 to introduce [universal pre-Kindergarten for all children in NSW by 2030](#), which has the potential to significantly benefit vulnerable children.

The early intervention and prevention sector is funded across a variety of potentially disjointed programs where children and families are unable to seamlessly move between the services they require, depending on the vulnerability they are experiencing.

Against this backdrop, we recommend the creation of a new portfolio and Minister for Children, with responsibility for working across and implementing this reform framework, as well as the relevant Premier's priorities. The proposal is for the Minister to operate across portfolios as the Minister for Women's Safety and the Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Violence does.

There are significant bodies of research within health and education, from academia and others which indicates the first five and a half years are critical to achieving success. Instead of having a Minister for Early Learning as is currently the case in NSW,

this new portfolio could focus holistically on children, with a specific focus on young and vulnerable children.

Currently, the first 2,000 days has a strong health focus. We need to broaden this approach to reach all determinants of a child's wellbeing.

The new Minister would not need a standalone department, but could draw and coordinate resources through the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet. The new ministry could oversee the key policy areas including:

- Establishing and managing the overarching framework for vulnerable children, including ensuring reform initiatives are coordinated and don't have unintended consequences.
- Setting and meeting Premier's Priorities, including those pertaining to protecting our most vulnerable children, with a specific focus on children at Risk Of Significant harm.
- Working across portfolios in order to achieve better support for caseworkers, and to identify and address workforce shortages.
- Reducing re-reporting of children classified at Risk Of Significant Harm, with a particular focus on Aboriginal children.
- Rebalancing the funding along the child protection continuum, so that there is focus on the early intervention measures which save money and improve lives down the line.
- Improving coordination and training with the Department of Education and primary school educators to support and monitor child safety and wellbeing.
- Working closely with sector stakeholders.

Recommendations

2. Rebalancing investment

- Increasing funding by 25 percent across early intervention and prevention programs.

Just like we do not fund hospital emergency wards at the expense of primary care investment, we should be doing more to stop vulnerable children reaching the crisis end of the continuum.

There is clear evidence and a need for more investment across the early intervention end of the child protection continuum.

Risk Of Significant Harm reports rose by 13.5 percent overall in the three years to 2020-21, up by more than 20 per cent in some locations. For Aboriginal children, over the five years to 2019-20, there was a 40 per cent increase.ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite this, our service system and funding continues to be focused on the crisis end, which means less pathways for families to connect with the right support early on.

Even a child protection notification doesn't guarantee access to services. In 2021, only a quarter of children reported at Risk Of Significant Harm were seen by a caseworker.^{iv}

A 25 per cent increase in funding for programs across early intervention and prevention will rebalance our response, and ultimately over time, reduce the quantum of funding needed for the crisis end.

This additional investment would be overseen by the new Minister for Children, who would ultimately be accountable for its rollout, targeting and efficacy. The new Minister would also be responsible for publicly reporting the funding being invested in programs across the continuum.

This is all about rebalancing the system, increasing transparency and sustaining and growing the intervention and prevention response.

ⁱ 2022-23 NSW Budget, Stronger Communities Cluster Outcomes Statement, Page 6

ⁱⁱ NSW Department of Community and Justice (2022), Annual Statistical Report 2020-21 https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/dcj.statistics/viz/ASR2020-21summarydashboa rd_16481674309410/Coverpage

ⁱⁱⁱ NSW Department of Community and Justice (2022), Annual Statistical Report 2020-21 https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/dcj.statistics/viz/ASR2020-21summarydashboa rd_16481674309410/Coverpage

^{iv} Impact Economics and Policy (2022), Ibid

Platform Endorsements

Fams has consulted widely about our election platform, within our membership and within the sector more broadly. Outlined below are some of the testimonials which we have received about this platform and our proposals.

NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS)

NCOSS is the peak body for the social services sector in NSW. With more than 400 members and a wider network of organisations and individuals who share values, NCOSS advocates to alleviate poverty and disadvantage in NSW.

The NSW Government needs to do more to help vulnerable children, and that's why we support Fams' call for increased accountability and a 25 per cent increase in early intervention and prevention services. This would make a very real difference to at-risk children in NSW, and we urge all political parties to support it.

The NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation (AbSec)

AbSec is a not-for-profit incorporated Aboriginal controlled organisation, and is the peak organisation for Aboriginal children and families in NSW. AbSec works to empower Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities impacted by the child protection system, as well as support a quality Aboriginal community-controlled child and family sector to deliver needed supports in Aboriginal communities across the state.

The National agreement calls for proportionate funding for Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations. AbSec believes Closing the Gap provides an opportunity for transformational change, and is calling for Aboriginal leadership in the design and delivery of policies, programs and services that affect them. This requires Government and sector leaders to recognise the structural changes required to bring about change, increased accountability and rebalanced investment including and not limited to increasing funding by 25 per cent across early intervention and prevention programs.

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA)

ACWA is the peak NSW body representing the voice of community organisations working with vulnerable children, young people and their families.

ACWA believes the NSW Government should do more to support vulnerable families and that is why we support Fams' call for a 25 percent increase in funding for early intervention and prevention services, with priority given to Aboriginal organisations supporting Aboriginal children and families. Along with other peak bodies that work in this area, we urge all political parties to support this investment.

We also support tackling unacceptable levels of educational disadvantage currently experienced by children and young people in out-of-home care, and join Fams in urging the NSW Government to be accountable in this area.

Contact

To discuss this Policy Platform further, please contact:

Ms Susan Watson
Chief Executive Officer, Fams
susan@fams.asn.au