



Draft TEI Program Specifications Response

Overview

Early intervention and prevention aims to support families and communities to thrive - to do everything possible to keep children safe, make families stronger and build supportive communities. The sector is hopeful the draft Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) Program specifications will support progressing this shared vision for children and families.

Viewing TEI and FCS services as essential parts of an interconnected system of care and support is welcomed. Breaking down silos to offer integrated levels of support - which can be adjusted according to a family's evolving needs will enhance outcomes.

The sector is particularly concerned to be expected to continue service delivery under the current resource constraints and seek to work with Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) as a genuine partner in supporting children and families in ways that value and respect the early intervention and prevention sector. This response to the draft specifications is driven by intentions of hope, and commitment to improving NSW's existing system of interconnected care and support services.

Fams hosted 6 online sector consultations attended by 1,233 participants and attended 21 face to face DCJ or sector led sessions across NSW.

This submission is a summary of the key findings and insights presented on behalf of these participants; the people who understand the TEI Programs at its core. It's important to note that whilst the FCS evaluation was available for review at the time of consultation, the TEI evaluation had not been released.

Service Types

- 1) Streamlining of reporting is welcomed, however reporting mechanisms need to be improved to capture the complexity of need facing services or else it may fail to adequately capture the breadth of support provided.**

Services were pleased to see the simplifying and streamlining of DEX reporting. The sector acknowledges their feedback has been heard by DCJ. Inclusion of Youth Individualised Support was welcomed to acknowledge the complex work being delivered in youth centres, outreach in schools and street work targeting disengaged young people.

Across FCS services, there is general support for increasing program timeframes, removing the weighted referral system and service type reporting removal. However,

there was some concern over removal of Family Group Conferencing which can take a lot of time and resources to deliver.

Material Aid is a service required and the inability to appropriately report data on this is a missed opportunity. Many services deliver material aid support within the Community Strengthening - Social Participation or Advocacy & Support. Data in this space is often captured in DEX as Referrals In - Secondary Reason and in Primary or Secondary Referrals out. However, the data of service delivery is not aggregated in DEX for evidence of local need.

“To capture circumstances facing our clients and holistically capture their needs... Is there a potential for a service type Material Aid to be added to DEX? So DCJ can see the evidence of our resources and service capacity to address this issue.” – Participant comment

Parenting Programs

2) Significant worries of program saturation and resource constraints bring concern despite, a general sense of satisfaction with program listings.

The sector is generally satisfied with the list of programs identified in DCJ's evidence-informed draft parenting program list. Many of the evidence-based programs highlighted by DCJ are already being delivered by the sector, so for those services the proposed transition to evidence-based programs will have minimal impact.

There is concern about the cost of maintaining staff who are trained in these programs. For services that have not yet implemented the listed programs, the upfront expenses - particularly for training across multiple programs to meet service needs, as well as costs related to playgroup training, would pose a significant challenge.

The sector welcomes the draft specifications' focus on removing barriers to service access and is eager to implement these changes. However, there is uncertainty about how the associated costs will be covered under new contracts, whether by reducing service frequency or through additional funding. Expenses such as providing transport or childcare are not feasible under current contracts without significant changes to service delivery or increased funding.

Detailed mapping and planning are needed to avoid program saturation. Services noted that families often attend multiple programs with little effect, as the programs do not meet their specific needs, leading them to seek alternatives.

Services highlighted the need for flexibility to respond to community needs in their parent programs. Currently, this is often achieved by developing in-house group programs based on emerging evidence and community feedback. For example, services have developed programs on parenting and technology use or supporting neurodivergent children. This approach encourages service innovation and ensures timely responses to community needs. The sector hopes the new service specifications will include allowances for this level of responsive program planning.

Community Playgroups and Supported Playgroups

3) While the integration of evidence-based programs into supported playgroup services is widely welcomed, there are still key concerns around service design and funding that require closer examination.

The DCJ's definitions of the two playgroup types have provided the sector with both clarity and confusion. While the criteria for each service type are now more precise, uncertainty remains about how services should best position themselves.

The sector identified that their supported playgroups offer more intensive services compared to typical community playgroups. They develop their own practice models based on community needs, client feedback, and best practice guidelines.

For many families, these playgroups offer a soft entry into more intensive support services, create opportunities for parent capacity building through brief interventions, and encourage community connections, friendships, and positive role modelling through the diverse families they bring together.

Although the sector largely supports the idea of evidence-based interventions to enhance parental capacity in playgroups, there are lingering concerns about the feasibility and practical aspects of implementation -

- Many supported playgroups serve larger numbers of families than those outlined in evidence-based models. There is concern that strict adherence to these models could hinder the playgroups' ability to respond to emerging family needs, such as crisis intervention.
- The implementation of supported playgroups in rural settings faces challenges because of small populations. By limiting who can attend, there is concern that the service may not attract enough participants.
- Many of the identified models include an in-home parent coaching component, which is considered crucial for achieving the model's outcomes. While services are interested in exploring this component, they are uncertain about how it could be funded given the current budget constraints.
- The non-threatening, gentle rapport building of supported playgroups is seen as a strength and pathway to engage with some of the most isolated families. Services have raised concerns that delivering smaller more programmatic focused supported playgroups may impact this.
- There is concern that there are not enough options within the list of evidence-based programs that have been developed in Australia. This is particularly true in relation to the school readiness program Kids in Transition to School as it does not align to the NSW education system or Australian school culture.

A potential solution is to align supported playgroups with the best practice guidelines for playgroup and develop curriculum in line with the Early Years Learning Framework, with services embedding Parent Capacity Building within their model, informed by an evidence-based model identified in the DCJ list.

Client Complexity and Demand

- 4) Greater flexibility is only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to adequately addressing increasingly complex client and communal need.**

Existing reform efforts recognising client complexity are welcomed, such as:

- Open and flexible timeframes are welcomed by services delivering Counselling or Family Capacity Building
- Inclusion and focus on child, family and youth mental health
- CALD community inclusion
- Mentions of trauma informed responses

The sector values the provision of quality care and support for children and families. Increasing complexity, compounded by a requirement of more intensive support, cannot be adequately serviced with existing resources or funding.

The sector is attempting to balance client expectations and meet need under immense pressure of additional influences such as natural disaster, a cost-of-living crisis, mental health, family and domestic violence and other intersectional complexities.

"We have long waitlists with no one to refer families too. Complexity of having to "hold" clients as cannot get referrals. We feel stuck."

"Families are often falling way beyond the poverty line. They are in the services for longer"

- Participant comments

Targeted supports for young parents are listed within the draft specification and welcomed. During our consultation, some services referred to increased numbers of older caregivers accessing services. Options may need to be adapted to meet this cohort.

Core Components Delivery

- 5) Core Components present an opportunity to improve services but needs clarification.**

Core components are recognised as fundamental to the provision of holistic, wraparound support for children and families.

Our clients are frustrated by waitlists and confused by referral pathways. We don't have capacity to assist. – Participant comment

All elements within the TEI service system must work together to deliver the Core Components as intended including DCJ CPO's, District Commissioners and service agencies.

"If TEI is about working with our most vulnerable, then we need to get real about the sort of models that will get them to engage and not stigmatise". – Participant comment

Connected pathways and diversity of services are needed better outcomes for children, families and communities. Services spoke to the need of scope to develop their own responsive programs based on understanding emerging needs.

Common Assessment Tool (CAT)

6) Greater communication of process, transitions and tailored versions needed to ensure client-centred approaches are championed.

The CAT is generally seen as a solid resource that has been designed alongside providers and tested with families. Further expansion of this framework and tool to meet the needs of CALD, young people and other diverse groups is needed.

The need for implementation support was also raised.

Program Logics

7) Support welcomed, but avoidance of duplicitous process is key to reducing administrative burden.

TEI providers acknowledge that the diversity of their offerings means the development of their own program logic is a requirement. With that said, impactful program logics require substantial time and resources. Assistance from DCJ could alleviate some of the unnecessary duplication and reduce stressors experienced by the sector.

The addition of cultural competency and wellbeing requirements reflect the sector's ongoing commitment to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

Additional support to meet these requirements, particularly for non ACCO (Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation) services, is encouraged and welcome.

"Cultural competency is so important to us, and we're excited to see this in the specs" – Participant Comment

Embedding Evidence

8) Innovation and flexible responses to need must be valued in conjunction with evidence-based practice.

Consultation participants were pleased to see a broad range of evidence-based practice. The sector sought clarification over transition timings and how to include models or programs from the evidence list. Despite satisfaction with the embedding of evidence, questions were raised about the need to safeguard opportunities for innovation, particularly when delivering to specific cohorts.

CALD Communities

9) Recognition of culturally specific requirements and commitments to culturally safety are welcomed. There must be recognition of the unique context of Australian CALD communities.

Services must be resourced adequately to ensure equitable access to additional supports needed by CALD communities such as translation services.

A particular concern was missing demographic info to identify local need and service delivery in DEX which does not capture data on CALD backgrounds for people born in Australia but have parents who are born overseas.

***"In our community we work with families from Middle Eastern backgrounds – these families experience complex cultural dynamics we are trying to address but the young people who attend our service are not captured in our DEX demographics."** – Participant comment*

The sector expressed a desire to see more Australian-developed programs designed specifically for CALD communities.

Sector Sustainability

10) Sustainability must consider changes to population growth and demographic changes in our future planning.

Regions have experienced significant demographic shifts in the last 5 years. Funding envelopes need to address demographic change and be prepared to adapt to emerging shifts in the future.

Organisations using community spaces are experiencing increased rental stress as venue hire is a considerable revenue stream for those providing these spaces.

We are unsure if we will be able to meet our contract outcomes because we now need to find an extra \$30,000 deliver our supported playgroup in our usual space". - Participant comment

Universal access to crucial support and care is being challenged by this emerging and increasing barrier. Some agencies are now needing to charge minimal fees to cover important engagement mechanisms such as catering and accessible venues.

Training

11) : Increasing costs and staffing constraints impact the ability for services to provide quality and ongoing professional development.

Initial training costs may seem small, however there is a great impact on service budgets when needing to train multiple staff or pay for travel or accommodation. Online training is not always appropriate for regional and remote services, nor does it always meet the same training outcomes as face-to-face opportunities.

The implementation of Child Safe Standards across the sector is generally seen as positive. However, the requirement for additional resourcing to meet or maintain these standards is a consistent concern. Other sectors such as Homelessness and Housing have access to free training opportunities. Some participants expressed desire to see centralised and accessible training resources made available across similar sectors.

Sector Wellbeing

12) Burnout, safety, staff retention and staff wellbeing are areas of considerable concern for the sector. Staff wellbeing must be integrated and strongly considered within contracts.

The impact of vicarious trauma, especially with the increasing complexity of clients, has been consistently observed by participants. There is of particular concern with early-career professionals who may not be supported or appropriately trained due to resource constraints and funding limitations.

It is acknowledged that attracting and retaining highly specialised and professional skills within the sector is becoming harder within the constraints of the SCHADS Award.

Organisations are unable to meet salary expectations within the funding envelope exacerbating demands on the existing workforce and lengthening staff vacancy periods.

Providers are concerned about the ability to adequately meet their moral, ethical and legal responsibilities to create and maintain psychologically safe work practices when funding and resources do not allow for this.

“There are people who have big hearts and want to help coming into the sector, but turning over as quick as they come because of poor wellbeing and increasing challenges faced by children and families, what is the rationale and evidence to not increase the TEI funding for the next 5 years?” – Participant Comment

Conclusion

Fams is committed to working together with the sector and DCJ to build a stronger, more responsive, child and family centred system and do all that we can to keep children safe and together with family.

We recognise the need for culturally safe and informed practice. We acknowledge the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to lead and be listened to when discussing program and practice design.

At the time of writing this submission, the Interim Evaluation Report had not been released.

As the peak body for Targeted Early Intervention and Family Connect & Support, Fams looks forward continuing our dialogue to realise positive systemic change for children, families and communities.