



## Targeted earlier intervention programs: Submission to the NSW Government

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## 1. Introduction

The Benevolent Society commends the NSW Government on its commitment to work with the non-government sector to review and improve the design and delivery of current targeted earlier intervention programs.

As the consultation paper highlights, evidence based early interventions are critical for preventing the escalation of problems to crisis point and taking pressure off the tertiary end of the child protection system. They help redress vulnerability, set children up for success and break cycles of family dysfunction and statutory intervention that can span multiple generations.

While we note that the consultation paper explains that the reform of the Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI) program will be within existing resources, The Benevolent Society is strongly of the view that significantly increased investment is not only needed but over the long term will be cost effective.

The total budget for TEI is close to \$150 million. While significant, this amount represents only a fraction of the total \$1.75 billion child protection budget. It is critical that services are funded along the child protection continuum and that a greater proportion of funds are directed towards early intervention.

In view of the fact that the Brighter Futures program is now working with families with complex needs and families where children are at risk of significant harm, it is essential that there are well resourced prevention and early intervention services. The critical role these services play in preventing the escalation of problems and providing soft entry points for vulnerable families to more targeted supports cannot be underestimated.

The Benevolent Society has commissioned the Parenting Research Centre to examine the role of key early interventions – parenting and family support, supported playgroups, nurse home visiting - in improving outcomes for vulnerable children. Their findings will be available in early 2016.

## 2. About The Benevolent Society

The Benevolent Society is Australia's first charity. We're a not-for-profit and non-religious organisation and we've helped people, families and communities achieve positive change for 200 years.

We help people change their lives through support and education, and we speak out for a just society where everyone thrives.

The Benevolent Society helps the most vulnerable people in society, and supports people from all backgrounds including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. We believe that building stronger communities will lead to a fairer Australia.

Our focus is to foster wellbeing throughout life – from infancy to older age – with services that:

- prevent problems or reduce their negative impact
- tackle problems early before they become entrenched
- help people use their strengths to solve their own problems
- give priority to people experiencing social and financial disadvantage.

The Benevolent Society delivers a diverse range of services as part of the TEI program across the Sydney metropolitan, Hunter and Central Coast regions including: domestic violence services, parenting programs, supported playgroups, a community hub and an Aboriginal early years project, which has been very effective in engaging with the Aboriginal community and connecting them with child and family support services and early childhood education and care.

**Snapshot**

- The Benevolent Society is a secular non-profit organisation with 985 staff and 614 volunteers who, in 2014, supported more than 84,110 children and adults primarily in New South Wales and Queensland.
- We deliver services from 55 locations with support from local, state and federal governments, businesses, community partners, trusts and foundations.
- We support people across the lifespan, delivering services for children and families, older people, women and people with mental illness, and through community development and social leadership programs.
- Our revenue in 2013/14 was \$143 million.
- The Benevolent Society is a company limited by guarantee with an independent Board.

### 3. Service system design

As an amalgamation of several previous initiatives, the TEI includes a broad range of services that may or may not still reflect the needs in a community and the latest evidence around the best practices and programs for supporting vulnerable children, young people and families.

Going forward, it is essential that there is greater clarity around the purpose of the program and that it includes evidence-informed practices and services. It is equally important that the program is responsive to community needs.

Key to a responsive service system is local planning and decision-making. We support FaCS' shift in this direction as well as the increase in co-design practices. To guide service planning, it is essential that each region has a strategic plan developed in consultation with the NGO sector, key staff within FaCS including housing, state government agencies including health and education, the Federal Government, clients and communities. The plan should reflect the needs of the community as well as service gaps. It should also build on, rather than duplicate, initiatives such as Communities for Children.

There also needs to be consistency across the TEI program in relation to funding cycles to assist with planning as well as building and maintaining partnerships in the community. Joint planning should not be a one-off process. It's essential that there is ongoing communication and collaboration to ensure the program reflects emerging issues.

So that the service system is truly client-centred and responsive to the needs of individuals and families, the service guidelines need to be more flexible in relation to age criteria, geographical boundaries and length of engagement. NGOs need to be given the necessary autonomy and decision-making authority to effectively support individuals and families. For example, it is more effective if programs are able to work with the whole family and not just those who fall in the target age bracket. Similarly, many families experience frequent home relocations due to factors such as housing instability or because they're fleeing domestic violence. It is important that, where feasible, we can continue to work with these families even if they have moved out of the service catchment so that they remain engaged with the service system and get the support they need.

Research shows that programs of less than 12 months are generally ineffective at improving outcomes for disadvantaged children and families.<sup>1</sup> Programs therefore need to be funded for a minimum of 12 months and there must be some flexibility to continue to work with families until their needs have been met.

It remains important that the TEI program builds on a platform of universal services, such as child and maternal health services, playgroups, home visiting and early childhood education and care that all families have access to. The role these services play in addressing problems early and providing soft entry points to more targeted supports is critical in preventing the escalation of problems.

## 4. Service delivery

Ongoing and regular communication between FaCS and the NGO sector is critical for promoting collaboration and effective service delivery. There needs to be regular regional coordination meetings to ensure services continue to meet the needs of clients and the community. It's important that these meetings are meaningful and not tokenistic and include representatives that have the knowledge, skills and authority to participate effectively.

Within the Brighter Futures program, the development of MOUs that outline how FaCS and the NGOs will work together to support families has been effective in promoting collaboration. The process of jointly developing the MOU has been critical to its success. A similar approach should be followed for the TEI program.

When working with individuals and families, adopting a client-centred approach means ensuring people get the help they need, when they need it. Many of the families we work with have multiple issues and it is essential that wraparound supports are available to prevent the escalation of problems. Appropriate referrals are reliant on knowledge of what's available in each area, however a comprehensive service directory is not available. We would strongly encourage FaCS to play a leadership role in mapping the availability of services provided by NGOs (state and federally funded) and other government agencies (FaCS, Health, Education). Up-to-date information on the range of services being provided in an area, which is accessible to all service providers, is critical to effective service planning and delivery.

The lack of appropriate services to refer to is another challenge. Mental health concerns touch the majority of our clients and impact their capacity for change and yet there are few services available, particularly early intervention services. Services for children in families affected by mental health issues are also needed, specifically developmental services that provide paediatric assessments, speech pathology, psychological and therapeutic interventions. There is also a considerable need for domestic violence services, including programs for perpetrators.

Before families are in a position to engage with services, they often have some immediate needs that must first be met. The absence of brokerage funds in the TEI program makes this difficult. It is essential that the new program includes some funds, either within individual programs or at a regional level, to pay for such things as the repair a washing machine or assisting with rental arrears. Often a relatively small amount of money can help to ensure a family's basic needs are met and prevent the escalation of problems. Using brokerage to pay for child care can be also one of the most effective strategies for keeping children safe.

The voluntary nature of the TEI program tends to mean that individuals and families who participate are motivated to change and are more likely to achieve positive outcomes. If the intention of the program truly is to prevent the escalation of problems, there must be substantial investment in prevention and early intervention services which have been shown to be both more effective and cost efficient in improving outcomes.

## 5. Program improvement

The development and implementation of a Resilience Practice Framework (RPF) across all our child and family services has been critical for improving the way we work with clients. The Framework identifies six domains of a child's life that contribute to resilience: secure base, education, friendships, talents and interests, positive values, and social competencies (based on the work by Brigid Daniels<sup>ii</sup>) and includes 47 evidence-informed practices which research shows contribute to five outcomes: 1. Secure and stable relationships, 2. Increasing self-efficacy, 3. Increasing safety, 4. Improving empathy, 5. Improving coping skills.<sup>iii</sup>

To complement the RPF, a Resilience Assessment Tool has also been developed to assist practitioners to undertake comprehensive family assessments and support decision making. Since implementing the RPF in 2010, evidence suggests that it is directly leading to improved outcomes for the children and families. A

more formal evaluation of the framework is now underway including an outcomes analysis and comparison with the Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children (LSAC) dataset.

A commitment to ongoing research and evaluation is essential for ensuring that we deliver evidence-informed programs that achieve their intended outcomes. Critical to this is the consistent collection, entry (via a single portal) and analysis of data. It is essential that this is a two way process.

TBS strongly supports the proposed shift towards measuring client and community outcomes rather than just service outputs. The data currently being collected is not capturing the richness of what is working on the ground. We encourage the development of shared outcomes frameworks and measurement tools. It is, however, essential that these are developed in consultation with the NGO sector and clients.

Consideration also needs to be given to the appropriateness of outcomes frameworks and measurement tools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities as well as how they will be administered, for example their availability in different languages and/or involvement of interpreters.

It is also worth noting that there is the risk that having standardisation will lead to such broad outcome domains that they become meaningless. Community organisations, therefore, also need the ability to tailor sector wide outcome frameworks and tools to suit the unique needs of each organisation.

It should also be noted that an outcomes framework in itself is not a comprehensive evaluation framework. Collecting data solely on outcomes will not explain how/why a program did/didn't work or who the program works best for and in what circumstances. Therefore, it is essential that NGOs have access to systems that allow them to generate detailed information about their clients and patterns of service usage/pathways.

## 6. Program support

Across the board, there needs to be far better communication and collaboration within FaCS, between FaCS and other state and federal agencies, and with the NGO sector to ensure a more seamless service system for children and families, and more effective planning and resource management. The reform process is an ideal opportunity to develop a framework for ongoing communication and collaboration.

The current service system is fragmented, undermining the sector's capacity to support vulnerable children, young people and families. Research shows that the parents in most need tend to be the ones who are least likely to access support services.<sup>i</sup>

Integrated service delivery is central to The Benevolent Society's service delivery model. As many vulnerable families have multiple and complex problems, a multidisciplinary multi-service approach is often necessary. Integrated services, when well led and supported, enable families to receive the help they need, when they need it, without having to go to several services, undergo multiple assessments and retell their story many times.<sup>iv</sup> Ideally they should be able to access the support they need from one location.<sup>i</sup>

The community hub we are operating on the Central Coast, as part of the TEI program, is proving very effective in providing co-located non-stigmatising universal services and targeted supports which are responsive to community needs. The incorporation of playgroups in the model is particularly effective for providing soft entry points to additional supports.

As discussed elsewhere FaCS is ideally placed to promote greater integration within the sector through joint planning, the development of common outcomes framework and assessment tools to promote a shared language and mapping of the service system. FaCS should also play a facilitation role in bringing together NGOs in a region to address a particular issue.

There is also a need for sector development. Providing training to the sector would promote a shared knowledge and understanding of key issues affecting the people we work with. Training about trauma informed practice, domestic violence (working with perpetrators, technology safety) and the early learning framework would be particularly useful. Ongoing training is important as the NGO sector is increasingly working with families with complex needs.

There is considerable scope to make better use of technology to support us and our clients. As discussed, a service directory would be an invaluable tool for planning and referral. Having a central location where information can be shared by agencies would also be a very effective way of promoting collaboration and ensuring the needs of a family are being met. The introduction of 'Patchwork' within FaCS appears to be a promising initiative in this area and should be rolled out across programs and the NGO sector.

Developing a mobile app for clients that similarly records information about the services they are involved with would be a useful way of maintaining ongoing and regular communication between both parties. It is essential, however, that any associated data costs are not met by the client.

## 7. The reform – how we manage the reform process

Ongoing communication by FaCS with the sector about the reform process is crucial. To assist with our internal planning processes it we would be particularly interested in the findings of the consultation, information about decision-making processes and timeframes as well as any implications for current contracts and funding arrangements.

Communication should be at multiple levels to ensure key people throughout the organisation are kept up-to-date on the reform process. We suggest FaCS communicates with us via the Peak organisations and the Early Intervention Council. At a regional level, communication should be via the FaCS District Directors and Community Program Officers and the Benevolent Society's Regional Directors and Contract Managers.

FaCS should also communicate with central office staff, specifically the Executive Directors, Community Services and Social Policy and Advocacy.

It would also be useful if the FaCS website included regular updates of the reform process at both a state and regional level and that a series of regional events are arranged as has been the case throughout the consultation process.

It is essential that NGOs and representatives from housing, health and education are actively involved in local planning. Representation from the Federal Government is also important so that state funded services complement, rather than duplicate, initiatives such as Communities for Children.

Planning should also involve consultation with clients, for example via client reference groups. One way to increase the use of services by vulnerable families is to engage them in the planning and delivery of services, a strategy that helps ensure that the services are located, designed, staffed and run in ways that they are comfortable with.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Moore, T. and McDonald, M. (2013). *Acting early, changing lives*.

<sup>ii</sup> Daniel, B. and Wassell, S. (2005). *Resilience: A framework for positive practice*.

<sup>iii</sup> Antcliff, G., Daniel, B., Burgess, C. & Sale, A. (2011). *Resilience Practice Framework*.

<sup>iv</sup> Moore, T and Skinner, P. (2010), *An integrated approach to early childhood development*.