INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The Public Service Association of New South Wales is the union that represents all staff in Community Services. The union has approximately 2800 members in the Agency and is negotiating policy and structural reform arising from the implementation of Keep them Safe (KTS).

The PSA welcomes the report of the University of New South Wales, Social Policy Research Centre’s Evaluation of the Brighter Futures Program (the Evaluation) and we support its findings.

In particular, we welcome the finding that the program reduced the chance of participating families being reported to Community Services and we strongly support the recommendation that the Brighter Futures Early Intervention Program (the Program) continue as a program jointly delivered by Community Services and the non-government sector.

The joint Brighter Futures program was initiated on an evidence based model to reduce the number of children entering the costly child protection and Out of Home Care systems in NSW. The Evaluation demonstrates success in this desired outcome, in particular from the involvement of Community Services Casework.

Highly qualified staff with strong experience across all streams of child protection are central to this success and enabled Community Services to deliver a high quality service to its clients.

Maintaining Community Services’ role in the implementation of this program also benefits the whole of the child protection system in a number of ways including assisting with staff morale and retention. What’s more, our own members working in the Program tell us that they are able to draw on the skills and experience gained by working in other streams of child protection and vice versa. This is particularly helpful when one considers that the Evaluation identified many families in the Brighter Futures program had also been through other streams of child protection within the Agency.

However we believe there is room for improvement to ensure that more families are able to access the program. Similarly, the tools for assessing suitability could be refined to better target those families with more complex and acute needs, who would benefit from participating in the program but do not require statutory intervention.
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BENEFITS IN CURRENT PARTNERSHIP MODEL

Retaining the current joint approach strengthens the potential for greater collaboration between the sectors if each were allowed to build upon their respective strengths and field of experience. As identified in the Evaluation, Community Services *Brighter Futures* teams work more within a child protection model of intervention practice whilst Lead Agency teams work more within a Family Support model of intervention practice. The different approaches bring value to the program by recognising the diverse needs of the client base.

Abolishing the current joint delivery model in favour of a model which sees the program delivered only by the non-government sector denies these relative strengths and is in fact an abolishment of the current program with its now proven success record.

The *Brighter Futures* experience viewed within the context of the roll out of *Keep Them Safe (KTS)* and its objectives to improve collaboration between the sectors places the spotlight on the importance of strategies to achieve these objectives and foster positive organisational cultural change. The Evaluation recognised the importance of Community Services’ ongoing involvement and leadership role in such a critical program.

The *Brighter Futures* program broke new ground and established a foundation for the government and non-government sectors to work together more effectively and efficiently in supporting communities and families as well as protecting children. The evaluators recognised this need and stated that “genuine collaboration ... is so critical to easing the burden on the child protection system in the long term.” (p.91)

Considerable investment has already been made into this proven program and the Evaluation demonstrates that *Brighter Futures* under its current partnership model has been successful in many ways.

For instance the Evaluation lists benefits to include:

- Those children from families who successfully completed the program were less likely to be placed into Out of Home Care than children from a comparison group of families who declined the program.
- A reduction in risk of harm reports for families that had participated in the program, in particular for Community Services’ *Brighter Futures* families. This reduced the long term financial burden on the child protection system.
- An improvement in organisational systems and partnership between the sectors over time.
- Improved morale of Community Services’ staff, who enjoyed working with families in a holistic fashion.
- Improved image for the Community Services Department with both the community as a whole and with individual service users.
- That the different approaches and strengths of Community Services and the Lead Agencies offer flexibility which benefits the program and recognises the diverse client base.
• Important benefits in health and other sectors such as juvenile justice. For instance, on page 174, the report notes that, “to a large extent, the potential longer-term benefits of early intervention programs are associated with what are often termed ‘avoided costs’. For example, previous research on early intervention has found that it can reduce the likelihood of criminal activity amongst the population. Quantifying this benefit over the longer term means that we need to estimate the costs associated with crime to estimate how much society could potentially save if such crime can be prevented.”

IMPORTANCE OF RETAINING COMMUNITY SERVICES INVOLVEMENT

The evaluators placed high importance on workforce sustainability. They recognised the leadership role that Community Services staff took at a local level and saw Community Services as the organisation better placed to embed effective partnership strategies at an organisational and program level. This in turn increased the workforce stability in both sectors.

This stability would be threatened should Community Services no longer play a role in delivering the Brighter Futures Program. There are a number of reasons for this, but a core theme that came to us from members is that working in Brighter Futures rejuvenated interest in their work and increased the likelihood of their remaining in the child protection sector.

Other unquantified benefits would also be lost. For instance, members have told us that working in the program improved their morale as it gave them the chance to help willing families stay out of the statutory system. This in turn, provided them with valuable experience on how to work as equals with families in other streams of child protection.

Furthermore, the wage disparity between the government and non-government sectors would mean that experienced and qualified staff could be lost from the child protection field altogether. This is because staff who no longer want to work in the statutory streams of child protection but need to maintain their income, look for opportunities in other fields of work. A huge expense and investment in staff recruitment, development and training within Community Services would therefore be wasted if this program ceased to be delivered by Community Services.

There are other cross program benefits between early intervention and statutory intervention which were not part of the evaluation.

For instance, many of those cases identified as not having completed the program did move into statutory intervention streams. However their involvement was still useful in that the information available from their participation in Brighter Futures allowed for a more comprehensive assessment and timely intervention.

These benefits were reported to the PSA by members and we would request that consideration be given to evaluating these benefits in the future operation of the program.
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Target groups

One of the findings of the Evaluation was that participant families entering the program with acute issues such as parental drug and alcohol, mental health and/or domestic violence problems were not managed well. This is not surprising as generally, caseworkers are not specifically trained in these issues and many caseworkers report inability to access appropriate services. However, there were successes with this group, mainly with the Community Services sites. The critical point is that there is now a more detailed evidence base identifying exceptions to the general problems with management of these issues.

These high and multiple needs families are arguably, the greatest consumers of resources in the child protection field. Much work needs to go into correctly targeting those families with complex needs who can work with Community Services without the need for a statutory intervention. PSA members working in Brighter Futures report a high level of satisfaction and success with regard to achieving this goal. The PSA places great credibility on these anecdotal success stories as the same members have been equally forthcoming about work practises that haven’t been delivering results. It is also consistent with what the evaluation has identified. Community Services should be allowed to continue with, and improve upon, this important work.

An examination of the Evaluation results would also assist to identify the most suitable target group for the non-government sector within the parameters of the existing framework and evaluation.

Data Collection

A key recommendation of the Evaluation report is that:

“*There should be no differences in the data collection requirements, data input field options, data accessibility and mode of program operation between the government and non-government service providers.*”

The PSA agrees that we need consistent, measurable data collection standards across both sectors. What needs to unify the two service delivery sectors and their different target groups is a common evaluation framework that meets both evaluation and funding needs.

The PSA understands that the non-government sector employees spent around half the time on data entry as Community Services employees. There is therefore clearly a need:

- For the non-government sector to collect more data to assist evaluation and ensure accountability.
- To identify ways which Community Services staff can reduce the time they spend on data entry to ensure that resources spent on collecting data is delivering meaningful information.
The link between the two sectors needs to be a new evaluation project. A key to achieving consistent data is not to limit what the services do but develop a dynamic evaluation framework based on the common goal of reducing child abuse. Data should be collected on the effectiveness of a range of programs to better determine what approach works best for each client.

PROGRAM SETTINGS – REFERRAL PATHWAYS

The PSA supports the recommendation that the entry pathways into the Brighter Futures program be revised. Our members identify the following issues with the existing system:

- That there are problems with the Mandatory Reporters Guide (MRG) and the Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool in that they can be easily weighted to give a certain outcome. There should therefore be an option for Brighter Futures suitability in the MRG.
- Early Intervention caseworkers identify that there are many instances of suitable families desperate for Brighter Futures services who are not getting through the mandatory SDM. Given the downstream cost benefits of Brighter Futures the number of families entering the program should be increased.
- The establishment of the BFAU has proven to be an obstacle in the pathway for suitable families and an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy. Significantly the centralisation of this function has also contributed to the marked reduction of suitable families accessing the program. This is demonstrated by the low number of referrals approved by the BFAU. The more effective pathway for families reported to Community Services through the Helpline was direct transfer of reports to the local Community Service Centre (CSC). This was the original pathway in which casework staff streamed suitable families into the Brighter Futures program, whether to Community Services or a Lead Agency.
- There needs to be a reassessment of eligibility versus suitability for the Brighter Futures program in order to more effectively identify and engage suitable families.

INTAKE

The PSA submits the following regarding intake:

- A consistent process for intake and screening needs to be established to ensure that it is not used to fill the gap between early intervention and child protection.
- Intake of the Brighter Futures program could be managed in a collaborative way between Community Services and the Lead Agencies. Some CSCs meet regularly with their community partners to jointly decide allocation of eligible families.
- PSA Members in the Brighter Futures program generally support an early intervention intake presence on the intake team. This leads to better streaming and less cases returned as not meeting the threshold.
- Reverting to a locally based system will allow the pathway to take into account local factors such as available resources, staffing, waiting lists, local knowledge, prioritisation and local service availability.
SERVICE MODEL

Members felt strongly that the Brighter Futures Program Service Model should remain at the current ratio of 59% Community Services to 41% Lead Agencies for all clients in the program. Nevertheless, there should be no reduction in the number of early intervention caseworkers in Community Services.

COST FACTORS

The Evaluation identified that the non-government sector delivered the program in a more cost effective manner. It also identified that the non-government sector generally dealt with less complex and less resource intensive families.

However, this would not remain the case should the whole of the program be delivered by the non-government sector. This is because the more acute and complex needs families managed by Community Services were more resource intensive. This point was also noted in the Evaluation Report.

Table 16.3 of the Report shows that on average, Community Services managed families received around 104 hours in the first year of program participation, whereas Lead Agency managed families received around 50 hours.

The report also shows that child care costs are lower for Lead Agency managed families compared to their Community Services counterparts. This is explained by the fewer number of hours of child care received by Lead Agency Families.

The amount of brokerage expenditure is reasonably even over time, but there were some differences between Lead Agency and Community Services managed families with the latter receiving more support through this program component.

Other Factors Impacting on Cost Differentiation Between the Sectors

- Community Services caseworkers tended to visit clients in pairs, at least for the first few visits, whereas Lead Agency caseworkers were more likely to visit clients alone.

- Generally, Community Services caseworkers were paid significantly more than Lead Agency caseworkers.

- Community Services caseworkers had higher administrative burdens as they operated similar processes to child protection workers in other streams. This resulted in a lower caseload for Community Services caseworkers.

- Lead Agencies tended to implement a family support service orientation, whereas Community Services caseworkers were oriented more towards a child protection focused service model.

Some of the factors influencing unit costs are likely to change in the short to medium future. For example, unit costs for Lead Agency managed families will increase should
changes to the SACS Award be changed following the equal remuneration case. Conversely, unit costs for Community Services managed families are likely to decrease if the data collection burden is reduced for Community Services caseworkers to the same amount of data as their Lead Agency colleagues.

The above cost factors also demonstrate that the cost differentiation is partly the result of the higher quality of service delivered by Community Services to families with more acute and complex needs. This level of service is supported by the fact that Community Services staff are required to hold tertiary qualifications.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion the PSA submits that:

• The unit cost differentiation between the sectors is likely to diminish once data entry and wage differentiation is addressed.

• The success of the program is a result of its model of joint delivery and abolishing this will reduce its effectiveness.

• The current collaborative model should be retained at the 59 to 41 percent delivery ratio.

• There should be no reduction in the number of Community Services early intervention positions.

• Intake for the program should be managed at the local CSC centre in collaboration with Lead Agencies.

• The program delivery should be structured to recognise that Community Services and Lead Agencies draw their strengths from their relative child protection and family support fields when delivering the program to their client families.

• These relative strengths add value to the program, recognise the diverse needs of the client base, and have the potential to provide the flexibility the program requires.

• To achieve the recommendation for wider cross-agency involvement in the program, the evaluation framework needs to be expanded in a manner that provides those agencies with valid data on which the benefits of their involvement can be assessed.

• The two sectors should work more closely on the refinement of the evaluation process to ensure it is more rigorous and meaningful. The framework for the delivery of the program needs to be more specific in terms of goals and evaluation but more flexible in terms of delivery of service.