



Family Connect & Support Evaluation – Aboriginal Sector Consultations

Background

The Research Centre for Children and Families (RCCF), in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney, has been commissioned by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to conduct an evaluation of the Family Connect and Support (FCS) program. The evaluation is examining the impact and outcomes of the program since it was transferred from the Family Referral Service (FRS), managed by NSW Health, to DCJ in January 2021.

RCCF partnered with Curijo to ensure that the evaluation questions and methods are culturally sensitive and meaningful, so that Aboriginal and culturally diverse families and agencies felt safe to participate.

Aboriginal Participation Plans

DCJ requires FCS providers to develop an Aboriginal Participation Plan (APP) for their district of coverage - the intention being that these will serve as a living document that is adaptable to individual community circumstances. APPs also outline the steps FCS providers are taking to build the cultural competence of their staff through education and training programs and participation in local cultural events or forums. The APPs are reviewed quarterly by the provider, and annually by DCJ through the contract management process.

The APPs are meant to be developed in consultation with local Aboriginal organisations and stakeholders and DCJ representatives. Some Aboriginal agencies interviewed through this evaluation, commented that they had not been consulted in the development of local APPs. A lack of meaningful engagement undermines the strength of the APPs, which includes the identification of who is responsible for leading each initiative, linked to timeframes and status updates.

Aboriginal sector consultations

Online consultations were held with organisations that make inbound referrals to FCS or receive outbound referrals from FCS. Consultations were held via videoconferencing and were recorded and auto-transcribed. Ten interviews were conducted with Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Of the 52 ACCOs contacted, 39 did not respond or provide a reason for not participating. Three ACCOs who expressed an initial interest, declined on the basis that they had not received referrals from an FCS provider.

Key findings

- Aboriginal organisations value relationships and personal connections with other agencies.
- Aboriginal services offer an important knowledge base of the formal and informal community services and supports for families.
- FCS agencies should engage with the sector as soon as Aboriginal families are referred, rather than wait until the family is in crisis.
- Aboriginal interagency forums are an effective forum for case coordination and collaboration.
- Aboriginal services can assist FCS caseworkers with Aboriginal family finding.
- Many Aboriginal families feel shame and distrust, as a result of past policies and practices, which may make it difficult for them to seek support. Aboriginal staff made the effort to build trust with families and showed them that support services could help them.
- Community family events offer an opportunity for local agencies to get to know each other and form connections with families, helping to develop trust with Aboriginal services and communities.
- Providing practical help to Aboriginal families, such as obtaining birth certificates for school enrolments, builds trust so families feel confident to seek help with 'bigger issues'.
- A strength of FCS program was that it was seen as inviting families to change, rather than punishing them for their circumstances.
- Strong connections provide better support for Aboriginal families.

Who participated

Southern NSW region – 2 agencies

Illawarra / Shoalhaven region – 1 agency

Sydney and Blue Mountains region – 2 agencies

Mid North Coast region – 1 agency

Central Coast, Hunter, New England region – 2 agencies

Western NSW / Far West region – 2 agencies

“It’s actually been really good. We’ve had some mothers who ... have that support and be able to close their child protection files. We’ve also helped a few that have transferred into different regions, for housing, and then been able to get their kids back in [as they are in] a safer location.” – Aboriginal Service provider #1

“Yeah, we’ve worked very closely [with FCS] with keeping families together. Which has been really, really good. But again, it’s taken me a long time to open those doors and sort of go ‘Okay, this is our client. This is how we’re going to keep them together’... They’ve been fantastic once that door is open... Yeah, those interagency meetings need to happen and be more frequent.” – Aboriginal Service provider #6

“I really do think they have an impact. It is an early intervention program and we said for years that we need more money to invest in the early intervention sector and especially for Aboriginal people.” – Aboriginal outbound referral stakeholder

Aboriginal sector consultations overview

Consultations were conducted with 10 Aboriginal service providers to gauge service provider and stakeholder perceptions and satisfaction with the FCS program. Overall, the findings from the consultation with Aboriginal service providers were consistent with the other FCS consultations. There was general agreement that the FCS program was valued by the sector and provided support needed by families.

Some of the Aboriginal services that participated in the consultations had been involved with the FRS program and had experienced the transition to FCS. They commented that the changes implemented with the move to FCS had resulted in the program entry criteria being less rigid, and FCS providers being able to offer a broader range of support to families. This included case coordination as well as referrals to other services. They considered that the move to longer timeframes under FCS, and being able to offer case coordination, contributed to the families receiving greater benefit from the FCS program.

The sector expressed the view that it was important that FCS providers followed up with families after referrals to assist them with accessing support services. Brokerage funds and active holding were highly valued components of the FCS service. Brokerage and active holding were seen to provide sufficient support to help families to get back on their feet, but not too much for families to become dependent on the service.

Some of the other themes to emerge from the discussions are summarised below.

Interagency collaboration

One of the recommendations from the consultations was that FCS providers attend the Aboriginal interagency forums in their catchment area. These forums offered an effective platform for the facilitation of case coordination and collaboration with Aboriginal families. Attending these forums helped to foster relationships between agencies and allowed staff to get to know each other. Some Aboriginal services expressed that they noticed a significant improvement in FCS knowledge and engagement with community. They appreciated the efforts FCS providers made to train staff in culturally safe practice. Interagency meetings were a good forum for exchanging information, both about families and what services could offer.

Aboriginal services commented that when FCS agencies had Aboriginal staff, they were more likely to appreciate the community obligations of Aboriginal people and the importance of cultural sensitivity and safety when working with Aboriginal families. It was also raised that when there was only one Aboriginal worker in a service, they were more likely to burn out if they did not have the support of co-workers. It was important to note that one person cannot speak for a community.

Some Aboriginal services reported that they had not been contacted by the FCS provider in their area and they were unaware that they were included on FCS APP. This suggests that there may be a need to verify the authenticity of the APPs and the actions of FCS providers to implement them.



Image: Family Group

“We have Aboriginal staff that we're able to approach and ask for advice and I think everyone that's employed in our team has such respect for Aboriginal culture. That sort of shines through all the work that we do.” – FCS staff

“Recently we had Reconciliation Day at our preschool... and we put on a really awesome day. So, they actually approached me and said, we [FCS provider] would like to do something for the kiddies. I think they provided the cake and some food and some activities, you know, that sort of stuff and we just all pull it together. And we're already now in talks about what we're gonna do for Children's Day in August.” – Aboriginal Service provider #10

“When we talk about engagement with families, they're very participatory in that. We do a lot of things like we'll put on community Christmas parties. They'll put on movie nights in the park with the great big screens. They'll do things for child protection week. They'll do stuff for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander week, so they are very proactive within the community ... it advertises who they are and gets them out to be known. And that's with all of their workers, it's not just their Aboriginal workers. So, I would say they were very proactive in that regard.”– Aboriginal inbound and outbound referral stakeholder

Referral process

Services that offered therapeutic programs to Aboriginal families valued the assistance FCS could offer to families experiencing issues with housing or household financial pressures. Some agencies praised the FCS central intake process, as providing a reliable and rapid response. The Common Assessment Tool (CAT)¹ was mentioned as an initiative that helped to draw out the range of issues families were experiencing.

Good communication with FCS agencies was highly valued and facilitated ease of two-way referrals. It is important for Aboriginal providers to know who they are working with.

The participants raised the complexity of the many different needs that Aboriginal communities have. They commented that a strength of FCS is the preparation of case plans individually tailored to the family needs.

Community engagement

The impact of past policies and practices continues to have repercussions for Aboriginal communities. Some participants expressed the view that Aboriginal families may avoid FCS providers because they are funded by DCJ. They stressed that early engagement with Aboriginal organisations can help to bridge this divide, to build trust with Aboriginal family members.

In regional and rural areas, it was considered important that FCS providers proactively engage with other programs offering family services. For example, Aboriginal women have to leave Country to attend maternity and birthing care. They recommended that FCS caseworkers attend these clinics as a way to introduce themselves to families and provide information about the services available. Pre-school centres were also considered to be useful places to meet with mothers and provide information about supports available. Engaging in this type of outreach was also a way to reduce the need to travel long distances to smaller towns to meet with families.

Having FCS coordinators attend community functions, such as social tenant barbeques or child activity events during school holidays, provided opportunities to form informal networks and build trust with community.

Benefits from collaboration

Aboriginal stakeholders provided positive feedback about how FCS services were able to work with Aboriginal families using culturally safe practices. They emphasised that this was a feature of FCS providers who have Aboriginal workers in key roles including intake and triage, casework and management. FCS services that have Aboriginal staff were better able to build relationships with local Aboriginal communities and develop referral pathways. They were more likely to participate in proactive outreach activities to build trust with Aboriginal communities.

Some FCS providers also leveraged the knowledge and expertise of staff in Aboriginal organisations to fill gaps in their cultural capability. Aboriginal participants commented that they provide useful assistance to FCS caseworkers for Aboriginal family finding and genealogy. There was agreement between Aboriginal organisations and FCS providers that fostering good relationships contributed to families receiving culturally safe FCS services.

¹ The FCS Common Assessment Tool was developed through a co-design process lead by Curijo in 2022/23. It aims to embed Aboriginal Voices into the assessment process and support greater consistency in intake and assessment for families who access FCS. A preliminary version was rolled out for user testing in mid-2023 and the final version will be implemented amongst FCS providers from November 2023.

“There's very little Aboriginal support in the [regional] area....There's not a lot of referral pathways for Aboriginal people here, especially children and there are some pathways for Aboriginal programs over in [another regional area] like counselling, men's groups, things like that, but they're few and far between.” – FCS staff

“We have lots of high-risk vulnerable families that just need the support... need the assistance... A lot of the Indigenous families are too shamed to put their hand up and ask for that support... Which obviously makes life really tricky.” – Aboriginal Service provider #6

“A lot of cases only come past my desk once, it's really bad or it's a child protection case, ... they've tried referring to these services and then, once they hit my desk, it's sort of like this is your last chance ... you know.” – Aboriginal Service provider #3

Barriers and challenges

Some of the Aboriginal service providers thought there was room to improve the referral pathways between their programs and the FCS providers. Outcomes for Aboriginal families could be improved if referrals to their service were made earlier with some Aboriginal services stating that the FCS agency should have sought their assistance earlier in the referral process. The lack of proactive engagement with these services resulted in families not being contacted until the family was in crisis. Aboriginal services would prefer to be working with the family from the beginning to avert an escalation of issues which could lead to a higher risk of the Aboriginal family entering the child protection system.

Regions that had strong relationships with local FCS providers were able to work collaboratively in supporting families, however some regions require the strengthening of cultural capability of staff, building of relationships with local Aboriginal organisations, improved referral processes and enhanced timeframes to better support Aboriginal families.

Concerns were raised about the barriers created for families by geographical boundaries, particularly in regional and rural areas. The comments of Aboriginal agencies reflected the issues raised across all sector consultations, that is, the lack of availability and long wait lists for many early intervention services. Service access is even more challenging in regional and rural areas where they are delivered within specific areas, which can create ‘dead zones’ for families who are outside of the catchment area. Many of the types of supports that families require are not available due to geographic gaps in service delivery.

A finding from the consultations, consistent with the other stakeholder consultations, was the view that the greatest challenge for FCS is the need for greater investment in early intervention programs. For example, programs like Brighter Futures are often at capacity and unable to accept new referrals. The number of families experiencing complex issues required a wide range of service responses, delivered with community input, and tailored to local environments. Consistently identified service gaps included: housing; mental health services (psychologists and counsellors); domestic and family violence services; intensive family case management; paediatric and allied health for children including speech therapy; and clinical assessments for neurodevelopmental conditions (e.g., autism spectrum disorder).



Image: Children making handprints

Acknowledgement of Country

The Research Centre team acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians, whose lands, winds and waters we now all share, and pays respect to their unique values, and their continuing and enduring cultures which deepen and enrich the life of our nation and communities.

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For more information

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