

Deep dive
#3

Learning from evaluations

*What have we learned and how has the
child protection system responded?*

Acknowledgements

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians across the lands, seas and skies where we walk, live and work.

We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as two unique peoples, with their own rich and distinct cultures, strengths and knowledge. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across Queensland and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

The QFCC would like to acknowledge the generous support and assistance provided to us in completing this study. In particular, we thank the agency representatives who agreed to speak with us about the evaluation work occurring within their agency as well as ways in which evaluation findings are being used to inform reform progress. Since 2016, several Queensland organisations have carried out evaluations of the services and initiatives they deliver as part of the Queensland child protection reforms.

In conducting this study, we found clear evidence of many high-quality evaluations of reform initiatives being conducted throughout Queensland. These evaluations have, in some cases, been conducted in-house by agencies themselves or by external parties such as academic experts. There is an encouraging increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led evaluations. It is encouraging to hear about ways in which important evaluation findings have been taken on and used to improve service delivery and facilitate change.

The Queensland Family and Child Commission

The QFCC is a statutory authority of the Queensland Government. Established in 2014, it oversees the child protection and family support system. Through awareness, advocacy and accountability, the QFCC seeks to give practical effect to the rights of all children and young people in Queensland.

About this report series

The findings of the QFCC's evaluation of outcomes achieved through the Queensland Child Protection Reform Environment are described in a series of four reports.

Overall evaluation findings are presented in the report, *Measuring what matters: Evaluating outcomes achieved through the Queensland Child Protection Reform Environment (2014–2020)*.

There are also three reports describing the results of 'deep dive' studies into areas of significant reform investment in more detail. These reports should be read in conjunction with *Measuring what matters*:

- **Deep dive #1: Investing in family support services**
Has it reduced demand on the child protection system and improved outcomes?
- **Deep dive #2: Respecting the workforce**
How did the Queensland Child Protection Reform Environment impact the frontline Child Safety workforce?
- **Deep dive #3: Learning from evaluations**
What have we learned and how has the child protection system responded?

All links provided in the reports were correct at publication. All documents are available online via the QFCC website: www.qfcc.qld.gov.au

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Executive summary

Introduction

In July 2013, the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (the Inquiry) released its final report. It concluded that:

... despite the hard work and good intentions of many and the large amounts of money invested in it since 2000, [the child protection system] is not ensuring the safety, wellbeing and best interests of children as well as it could or should.¹

Its recommendations challenged the entire child protection sector in Queensland to do better on a wide range of issues. The sector responded with actions and initiatives designed to make a real difference to children and families. We are more than halfway through the 10-year reform program that was established in response to the Inquiry.

We now need to evaluate the services and initiatives that have been put in place to find out whether the reforms are having the anticipated effect. But the evaluations must be done well. The Inquiry identified that evaluation of the child protection sector was inadequate, and that oversight activities such as performance monitoring tended to focus on fault and punishment rather than on opportunities for learning.

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) is responsible for leading evaluations of the reform program at the program level, that is, evaluating the whole program rather than its individual components. This study is about examining evaluations that have been conducted over the reform period by agencies and organisations delivering services (to children, young people and families) which are targeted at achieving reform objectives.

This study forms part of the report series for *Measuring what matters: Evaluating outcomes achieved through the Queensland Child Protection Reform Environment (2014–2020)*. It aims to examine the extent to which reform initiatives have been evaluated, how they have been evaluated and how the evaluations have been used.

Methods

We asked agencies to provide us with their evaluations of reform initiatives. We reviewed the 19 evaluation reports (or in some cases, summary reports) received to identify when and how evaluations have been conducted over the reform period.

We then focused on four evaluations that:

- were likely to influence outcomes for a wide range of children, young people and families, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
- examined initiatives providing support at important transition points in the child protection system, such as entry or exit points.

The four we chose were evaluations of:

1. the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Led Decision Making trials
2. the Child Protection Joint Response Team trial
3. the reforms aimed at improving child protection matters in Queensland courts
4. Next Steps After Care Services.

For each of these four evaluations, through a review of the evaluation reports and stakeholder consultations, we examined the way in which the main findings had influenced reform progress. We also considered any facilitators and barriers to using the findings.

Finally, we asked agencies to provide us with details about their future plans for evaluating reform initiatives. We wanted to examine the extent to which agencies were intending to evaluate reform activities now they were better established and they were able to collect and report on more mature data. We noted that a number of planned evaluations had been postponed due to COVID-19.

Findings

Several evaluations occurred early in the reform period, but evaluation activity has tapered off in the years since. The majority of these early evaluations were pre-implementation or baseline reviews focusing on how the initiatives were established rather than on outcomes. Overall, the 19 evaluations we reviewed focused on determining whether the initiative was implemented as intended and working as anticipated. Some sought to identify the challenges and strengths for each trial location, some wanted to determine whether the initiative should be rolled out across the state, and others set out to establish a comparison point for future measures.

Only nine evaluations considered the impact and outcomes of the initiatives they evaluated and only one considered return on investment. When the studies had intended to examine outcomes and consider return on investment, the required data was not readily available. This reflects the relative newness of the initiatives but also represents an area for improvement. Some evaluations were conducted before the initiatives had time to become established or outcomes could be realised. Future evaluations will be able to collect and report on more mature data. Importantly, however, we also found the system is not well set up to formally measure outcomes.

Across the four evaluations we examined in more depth, all collected data in a variety of ways, most including interviews and/or focus groups with stakeholders and analysis of case files, documentation and administrative data. Some included site visits and used pre and post surveys. The findings are described in the appendices.

For these four evaluations, we were particularly interested in what has happened since they were completed, because this gives an indication of the value of the evaluation. We found that all four have had an impact, leading to, for example:

- expansion of the coverage or scope of the initiative
- development of more consistent processes
- more training on specific issues, to address concerns and improve results
- redesign of the initiative.

Major changes have occurred as a result of some of the evaluations. Others have directly influenced policy and legislation.

In terms of future plans, all agencies who had to postpone their evaluation plans due to COVID-19 reported that they were planning to resume work on these activities. While many of the proposed evaluations were in line with future evaluation priorities identified by stakeholders, there were some reform activities highlighted as priority areas for future investigation that have not yet been targeted for evaluation.

Conclusion

While some evaluations of reform activities are having an impact, there is room for improvement. Now that reform initiatives have had time to become more established, agencies need to determine whether they are achieving what they set out to achieve. To do this in a way that enables the whole sector to learn, they should:

- prioritise evaluations of programs with significant financial investment and potential for change
- include the perspectives of their clients and target groups in their evaluations
- measure the outcomes and the extent of the changes
- publish their findings widely
- continue to improve—not just in terms of the initiative, but also in terms of evaluation itself.

Even prior to COVID-19 and its impact on the economy, the funding available for child protection and family support was limited. We must understand what is working in order to ensure we expend our resources on the approaches that will deliver the best outcomes for children, young people and their families.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This study is part of the Queensland Family and Child Commission's (QFCC) evaluation of the outcomes achieved through Queensland's Child Protection Reform Environment—*Supporting Families Changing Futures*. The reform program was developed in response to the recommendations of the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (the Inquiry),² which has resulted in substantial, ongoing changes across Queensland's child protection and family support system. Our overall evaluation findings are presented in our report *Measuring what matters: Evaluating outcomes achieved through the Queensland Child Protection Reform Environment (2014–20)*.

This study is one of three 'deep dives' into the impact of significant government investment into specific areas of reform. It is part of the report series that should be read in conjunction with our *Measuring what matters* report.

The Inquiry found that the government's capacity to evaluate child protection practice and models of secondary services^a was inadequate.³ The Inquiry also found that there was a punitive culture surrounding evaluations, and that oversight activities such as performance monitoring and auditing, although important, tended to focus on finding fault.⁴

This was despite an expectation by stakeholders that evaluative research would be used to inform continuous improvement, and that an evaluation would make a set of recommendations and have tangible targets, which could be monitored.⁵

The Inquiry recommended that each agency with child protection responsibilities develop an evaluation framework to enable the outcomes of the reforms to be assessed, and that each department with child protection responsibilities '... undertake and source research to inform policy and service delivery, identify service gaps and better understand the interface between children, young people and the service system'.⁶

A shift to a more positive evaluation culture was considered achievable by '... governance that establishes a climate of inquiry, innovation, learning and continuous improvement'.⁷

As we are more than halfway through the reform program, many agencies have begun or completed evaluations of reform programs and initiatives. This makes it an opportune time to consider the role of evaluation within the reform environment, and the extent to which evaluative research is being used to develop policy, programs or systems thinking.

This study aimed to document the extent of evaluation activity that has occurred across the reform program. By selecting four evaluations as case studies, it also aimed to understand how the system has responded to evaluation findings, whether there is evidence of system learning and continuous improvement, and identify opportunities to improve how evaluations are conducted and used in future.

1.2 The importance of evaluation in the child protection reform context

Evaluation plays an essential role in the implementation, development and assessment of government and non-government programs. It is more than just the collection of information and data. It is about systematically assessing what is being done to arrive at a judgement about the 'worth, merit or value' of a program.⁸ It is a vital part of policy development and program management.

Good quality evaluations provide a strategic management tool for organisations. When used effectively, evaluation can promote an organisational culture of learning and enhance an organisation's accountability for the evaluation's results.⁹ The continual questioning of what we are trying to achieve and how we are performing enables us to learn and improve what we do, ensuring that decision making is based on the best available evidence.

Organisational culture and leadership are key determinants of an organisation's evaluation capacity.¹⁰ In a healthy organisational culture, people actively seek information about performance in order to improve the delivery of programs and services.¹¹ However, it is not enough to just evaluate; government must use the information from program evaluations and reviews to facilitate change and improve service delivery.^{12,13} Based on research for this study, this does not always happen.

There is increasing awareness and concern—including from the Australian Productivity Commission—that client outcomes and expenditure across government are often not measured or monitored enough¹⁴ and that significant recurrent expenditure is allocated to programs which have not been evaluated. This is despite parliament being accountable to the public for the effective financial administration and management of public sector agencies. In Queensland, this is spelled out in the *Financial Accountability Act 2009*.¹⁵

Measuring outcomes for children and families through evaluations—such as whether more children are able to remain safely at home—allows us to monitor the effectiveness of government-funded programs and services. This helps build an evidence base about what works and also assists in making decisions about where funding should be targeted.¹⁶

A recent New South Wales report estimated that 67 per cent of programs for vulnerable children and families have not been evaluated, and that a total of \$302 million per annum is spent on programs for which the effectiveness is unknown.^{17,18} In Queensland, very few programs delivered to vulnerable children and families are evaluated. This means that, similar to New South Wales, a considerable amount of funding is being allocated to programs and services for which we have no evidence of impact.

A significant amount of time and money has been devoted to designing and implementing initiatives in the child protection reform environment. We need to know what is making a difference and what is delivering the best results for Queenslanders.

a Where the safety and wellbeing of children and young people can be assured, secondary services provide support to families experiencing vulnerability, such as family relationship or parenting difficulties.

1.3 Features of evaluations

The three most common types of evaluations are:

- **process** (or implementation) evaluations, which examine the nature and quality of implementation of an intervention. A process evaluation can ensure a program is working as intended and/or whether a new set of activities is required to respond to any identified needs, risks or opportunities
- **outcomes** and impact evaluations, which examine the results of an intervention. An outcomes evaluation can determine the effectiveness of initiatives and whether they are achieving their objectives
- **value-for-money** (or return on investment) evaluations, which examine the relationship between the cost of an intervention and the value of its positive and negative impacts.¹⁹ Return on investment evaluations can be used to inform budget decisions to target government investment to ensure that every dollar spent makes a difference.²⁰

Evaluations often include components of more than one of these, providing a range of insights to assist stakeholders and inform decisions.

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to evaluation, there are better practices that should be followed. Features of robust evaluations²¹ include:

- clear and measurable program objectives
- a mixed method design to gather a mix of qualitative and quantitative data
- stakeholder involvement in the development and implementation of the evaluation (including the involvement of the program or service users), which will assist with determining what information and data is needed
- an independent evaluator, which provides legitimacy to an evaluation and reduces any conflicts of interest.

Evaluations will commonly include a theory of change which explains how the activities being evaluated (such as a new program or policy) are likely to contribute to the intended impacts.²²

Robust outcome or impact evaluations should include baseline assessments before children, young people and families begin a service as well as after service delivery, in order to effectively measure change and impact.^{23,24}

The Queensland Government Program Evaluation Guidelines also recommend that evaluations should be timely, reliable, useful, and relevant to decision makers and stakeholders.²⁵ Evaluating significant programs or services that have an impact on outcomes for a wide range of children, young people and families in contact with the child protection system produces the most valuable information for government.

Finally, for an evaluation to be useful, it should be shared with relevant stakeholders.²⁶ The benefits of sharing evaluation findings include:

- facilitating an informed public debate about the issues we face
- allowing the evaluations themselves to be evaluated against scientific principles so assessments can be made about issues that need attention
- substantially enhancing the chance of sound decision making.²⁷

If a full report is unable to be released in consideration of the privacy of and sensitivities of participants, a summary of findings and learnings should be shared.

1.4 Aims and objectives

This study was not intended as an audit of agencies' evaluation frameworks. Rather, it examined evaluations conducted to date to understand what has been learned, how the system has responded to findings, and what have been the key changes, if any, since the evaluations were conducted.

Therefore, the aims and objectives of this study were to:

- 1 Document the extent of evaluation activity to date
- 2 Understand how evaluations have influenced progress with reforms, including any facilitators and barriers to using evaluation findings
- 3 Identify agencies' future evaluation priorities.

2 Method

The methods used in this study included:








- a desktop review of evaluation reports and findings
- stakeholder consultations.

Human Research Ethics Committee approval was obtained^b for methods involving data collection from human participants. Data was collected in accordance with this approval, and no ethics complaints were received.

2.1 Review of evaluation reports and findings

Initially, we asked government reform partner agencies to provide us with evaluation reports about the programs and initiatives developed in response to the recommendations of the Inquiry. We received 19 evaluation documents. We then prepared a summary of aims, objectives and findings of the evaluations. These summaries were reviewed against the criteria described in Table 2-1 to select four evaluations as case studies to be subjected to further analysis.

Table 2-1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for case study selection

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
 <p>The evaluation is of a program or service within the scope of the reform program that is likely to influence outcomes for children, young people and families.</p>	 <p>Insufficient time has passed since the evaluation was completed to enable findings to be considered or applied.</p>
 <p>The evaluation examines outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.</p>	 <p>The evaluation examines programs or services which are key areas of investigation for other parts of the QFCC's Outcomes Evaluation, <i>Measuring what matters</i>.</p>
 <p>The focus of the evaluation is on programs or services that have an impact on a wide range of children, young people and families in contact with the child protection system.</p>	 <p>The focus of the evaluation is on programs or services with a limited impact for children, young people and families in contact with the child protection system.</p>
 <p>The evaluation examines programs or services that provide support at key transition points within the child protection system, such as entry to or exit from the system.</p>	

2.2 Stakeholder consultations

We consulted with the agencies who commissioned the four evaluations selected as case studies. We spoke with officers from three agencies via a videoconference. Officers from the fourth agency provided a written response.

The purpose of the consultations was to understand the key learnings from each evaluation, what changes the evaluation had influenced, and what the barriers and facilitators were to using the evaluation findings. Additionally, as part of our broader evaluation, we asked all reform stakeholders for their views on evaluation, including future priorities.

2.3 Limitations

Limitations of this study were:

- In some cases, we were unable to access full evaluation reports, as only summary reports were available.
- The perspectives of stakeholders who participated may differ from those who were unable to take part.
- Staff turnover that has occurred during the reform period may have affected historical organisational knowledge and, therefore, our ability to gain full insight into areas of interest for this study.

^b Approved project reference numbers HREC/17/QTHS/47 and LNR/2019/QTHS/51525.

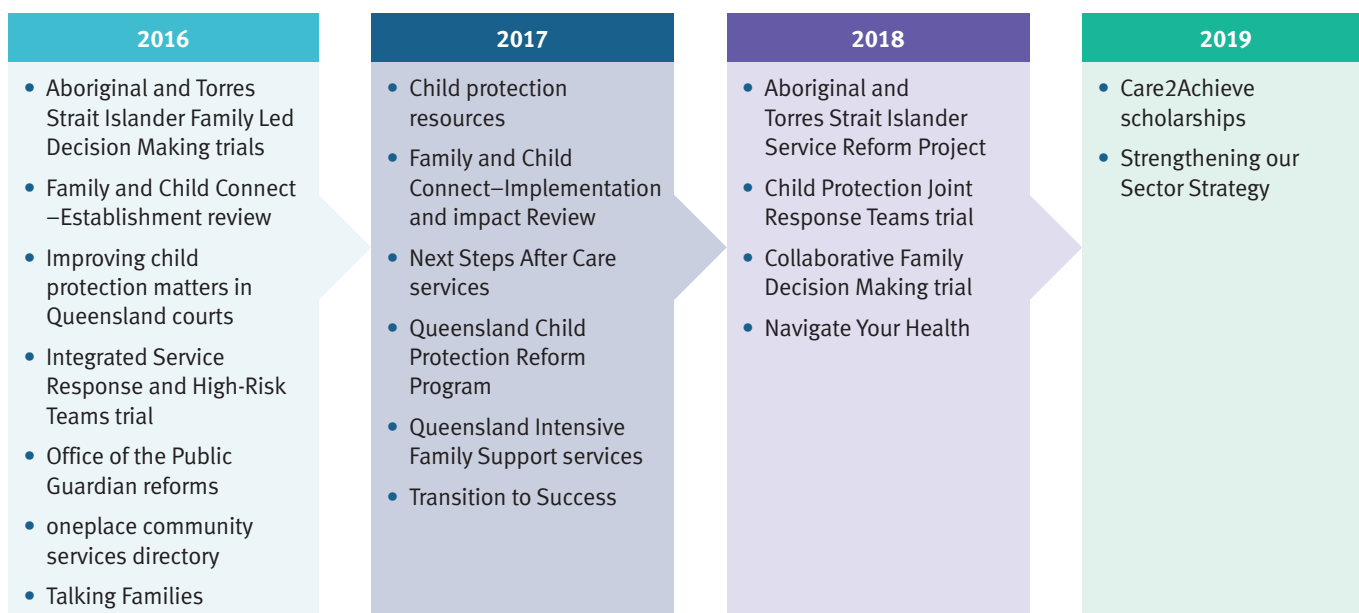
3 Findings

3.1 Timeline of evaluation activity

Three years into the reform program, QFCC’s report on its Implementation Evaluation of the Child Protection Reform Program highlighted that only a small number of evaluations of reform activity had been conducted. The report found that, of those evaluations which had been conducted, the majority were pre-implementation or baseline reviews that focused on the establishment of the services rather than on the outcomes achieved.

Figure 3-1 shows the timing of when the evaluations shared with us began. This timeline shows that, after an initial flurry, evaluation activity has slowed down significantly as the reform program has progressed.

Figure 3-1: Timeline of evaluations of reform activities



3.2 Summary of evaluation activity to date

Table 3-1 contains descriptions of the 19 child protection reform programs and services subjected to evaluation that were shared with us for this study. The first four evaluations in the table were selected as case studies. These were the evaluations of:

- the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Led Decision Making trials
- the Child Protection Joint Response Team trial
- the reforms aimed at improving child protection matters in Queensland courts
- Next Steps After Care Services.

More comprehensive summaries of the four case studies are included in the appendices of this report.

The table also shows that all 19 evaluations reviewed for this study focused on process and implementation issues. Nine considered impact and outcomes (an additional three planned to, but it was not possible), and only one considered

return on investment (another planned to, but it was not possible). For the evaluations where it was not possible to examine outcomes and return on investment, researchers were unable to collect or access the required data in a timely way.

While this reflects the stage of the reforms and when the evaluations were conducted, there should be an increased focus on impact/outcomes and return on investment evaluations as the programs and services under the reforms become more established.

As noted earlier, for evaluation findings to be used outside the agency that commissioned the evaluation and influence the broader sector and the general community’s understanding of what works, all evaluations should be published in some form. However, Table 3-1 shows that only seven of the 19 reports are publicly available, and two of these are summary reports. This is a significant issue. Failure to share evaluation findings broadly is a lost opportunity to contribute to the body of knowledge about what works in child protection and family support.

Table 3-1: Description of programs and services subjected to evaluations shared with us for this study

Initiative subject to evaluation	Includes the voices of children, young people or families	Public report	Evaluation focus	Evaluation type		
				Process/implementation	Impact/outcomes	Return on investment
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Led Decision Making trials <i>(Case study)</i>	●	Full report	Child Safety, in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, designed this program to improve experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander family led decision making. Evaluation measures included outputs (number of meetings, number of hours of service delivery, number of participants, and dollar amount spent on the program) and measures of satisfaction (with the meetings and the process). Outcome measures included number of families who benefited from improvements in safety, cultural connectedness and improved life skills. The researchers noted measures were only administered post-trial and suggested that additional data collection was required to determine whether the trials have worked. They also noted that internal databases and information systems did not provide adequate data to conduct a return on investment analysis.	●	●	○
Child Protection Joint Response Team trial <i>(Case study)</i>		Summary report	The trial focused on improving coordinated police and Child Safety responses to criminal matters involving a child in need of protection, where action was required from both agencies. The evaluation examined stakeholder satisfaction and whether the joint response model was implemented as intended. Identified improvements included more cross-agency consistency, communication and collaboration, decreases in response times and a reduction in families being interviewed multiple times.	●		
Improving child protection matters in Queensland courts <i>(Case study)</i>	●	Full report	The evaluation examined reform recommendations around courts, including the establishment of the Director of Child Protection Litigation, a Legal Aid funding review and Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal reforms. These reforms sought to achieve fair, timely and consistent outcomes in court processes. The evaluation examined whether the courts and tribunals were operating as intended and any barriers or facilitators to successful operation. Stakeholders (parents, foster and kinship carers ^c) provided feedback on the operation of the courts and tribunals, and perceptions of cultural competence were also examined. Outcomes in terms of court efficiency (clearance rates) and rates of legal representation for parents, children and young people were examined. This was a baseline assessment conducted early in the reform period.	●	●	
Next Steps After Care services <i>(Case study)</i>	●		Next Steps After Care provides a range of support to young people (aged 15 to 21 years) leaving care, including assistance with housing, employment and budgeting. The evaluation examined if the model was being implemented as intended and was meeting the needs of young people, and if service providers were operating collaboratively. Measures included client satisfaction with the model. The researchers noted that a lack of baseline data about the needs of young people and a lack of outcome measures (e.g. how many of its participants had experienced improved housing, health, employment, education or relationship outcomes) meant the evaluation was unable to comment on the effectiveness of Next Steps After Care.	●	○	

- Indicates that this evaluation included the voices of children, young people or families. ● Indicates that this type of evaluation was completed.
- Indicates that this type of evaluation was planned but was unable to be completed, usually due to the evaluators' lack of capacity to access the required data in a timely way.

c When children are no longer able to live with their families and enter the child protection system, they are usually cared for by foster or kinship carers. Foster and kinship carers provide a safe and secure family environment for children. When care is provided by a person outside of the family this is known as foster care. In some cases, someone in the child's extended family or a family friend may become their primary carer. This arrangement is called kinship care.

Table 3-1: Description of programs and services subjected to evaluations shared with us for this study (continued)

Initiative subject to evaluation	Includes the voices of children, young people or families	Public report	Evaluation focus	Evaluation type		
				Process/implementation	Impact/outcomes	Return on investment
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Service Reform Project	●		The Service Reform Project aimed to improve service systems that deliver support to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and families by working with discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to involve them in developing culturally appropriate responses and services. The evaluation explored whether the project was being implemented as intended, factors contributing to successful service delivery, and any challenges faced, such as a lack of community awareness of the range and type of services available and a lack of support and training available for workers.	●		
Care2Achieve scholarships	●		Care2Achieve provides scholarships to assist young women leaving Queensland state care to access higher education, either through university or TAFE. The evaluation involved multiple stages and began by reviewing the recruitment process (including enablers and challenges). It also examined long-term program outcomes (completion rates, experiences of tertiary study, and how the program has supported successful study and challenges) through annual interviews and a 'destination survey', which was completed by program participants.	●	●	
Child protection resources			These resources are information kits for children, young people, parents and professionals, developed to help them to understand their rights and how the child protection system works. The evaluation focused mainly on outputs (e.g. number of website visits and number of resource kits distributed and displayed) and perceptions of resource usefulness. Measures of long-term outcomes for users of resources were not examined (e.g. whether children and families better understood their rights and were more empowered).	●		
Collaborative Family Decision Making trial	●		This trial aimed to improve families' experiences of family group meetings by strengthening their involvement in decision making processes about the safety and wellbeing of children when they are in contact with the child protection system. Evaluation measures included outputs (number of meetings, number of children, number of participants, and dollar amount spent on the program), measures of parent/guardian satisfaction with the meetings and the process, and practitioner satisfaction with the process and training. The researchers reported they were unable to use the Child Safety database (Integrated Client Management System—ICMS) to determine whether the strategy was having an impact on the child protection system or any long-term outcomes.	●	○	
Family and Child Connect—Establishment review			Family and Child Connect is a community-based referral service for people with concerns about children that do not require a response from the tertiary system (Child Safety). This review examined whether the Family and Child Connect model was being implemented as intended, strengths of the model, and any challenges faced (e.g. a need for more training and assessment tools).	●		

- Indicates that this evaluation included the voices of children, young people or families. ● Indicates that this type of evaluation was completed.
- Indicates that this type of evaluation was planned but was unable to be completed, usually due to the evaluators' lack of capacity to access the required data in a timely way.

Table 3-1: Description of programs and services subjected to evaluations shared with us for this study (continued)

Initiative subject to evaluation	Includes the voices of children, young people or families	Public report	Evaluation focus	Evaluation type		
				Process/implementation	Impact/outcomes	Return on investment
Family and Child Connect—Implementation and impact review	●		This later evaluation of Family and Child Connect examined whether the service was being implemented as intended, was fully established in each region, and was supporting the development of local level alliances (which identify the family support needs of local communities, and how to meet them). It also examined whether families had access to a better range of services and if the number of families engaging was increasing. The evaluation occurred early in the rollout of Family and Child Connect and noted significant limitations in data availability for assessing the impact of the service, including a lack of reporting on subsequent entries to the child protection system and other outcomes for children and families. An outcomes assessment was planned, but due to data limitations, was not possible.	●	○	
Integrated Service Response and High-Risk Teams trial		<i>Summary report</i>	The trial focused on developing a coordinated cross-agency response (involving government, non-government and community groups) and ‘high-risk teams’ to support victims of domestic and family violence and provide opportunities for perpetrators to change their behaviour. The evaluation explored implementation progress including improvements in cross-agency relationships and information sharing and in the understanding of each agency’s role. Preliminary feedback on outcomes from participants was collected. Decreases in response times and more targeted responses for victims were identified.	●	●	
Navigate Your Health	●		Navigate Your Health is a partnership between the Queensland Government and Children’s Health Queensland to help children in care access health checks and referrals to services that meet their health needs. The evaluation included a number of output measures, including the number of children and young people who received a health assessment, the timeliness of the assessment and the number who have a health management plan. A small number of outcomes were examined, including increases in immunisation rates, increases in access to oral health and specialist paediatric services and improved cross-agency partnerships.	●	●	
Office of the Public Guardian reforms	●		The evaluation examined whether reform recommendations for the establishment of the Office of the Public Guardian were being implemented as intended. This included process issues such as whether community visitors ^d were more focused on vulnerable children and young people. The evaluation also examined early outcomes for children and young people (collecting baseline data on their engagement with the community visitor process, and how informed they were about their rights and what was happening to them). The evaluation also explored the effectiveness of child advocacy hubs, and insights from this were used to halt future progress on that initiative. Outcomes of the introduction of Child Advocate Legal Officers were examined but this occurred early in their implementation so many participants could not comment on their effectiveness. This was a baseline assessment conducted early in the reform period.	●	●	

- Indicates that this evaluation included the voices of children, young people or families.
- Indicates that this type of evaluation was completed.
- Indicates that this type of evaluation was planned but was unable to be completed, usually due to the evaluators’ lack of capacity to access the required data in a timely way.

^d Community visitors provide support to children living in foster or kinship placements, residential care facilities, youth detention or adult correctional centres, disability services or mental health facilities. Their role is to ensure that the concerns, views and wishes of children and young people are listened to and seriously considered.

Table 3-1: Description of programs and services subjected to evaluations shared with us for this study (continued)

Initiative subject to evaluation	Includes the voices of children, young people or families	Public report	Evaluation focus	Evaluation type		
				Process/implementation	Impact/outcomes	Return on investment
oneplace community services directory			oneplace is an online community services directory for parents, families and professionals looking for support services. The evaluation’s main focus was on outputs (e.g. number of website visits and number of organisations registered) and perceptions of resource usefulness and user friendliness.	●		
Queensland Child Protection Reform Program		Full report	This system-wide evaluation examined whether Queensland’s child protection reform policies, practices and services were being implemented and operating as intended. Stakeholder perceptions of progress and satisfaction with the reforms and suggestions for improvement were examined, as were changes in access to services and training. The evaluation explored changes in child protection outcomes data and noted the limited evidence of outcomes due to the evaluation being carried out early in the reform journey.	●	●	
Queensland Intensive Family Support services			Intensive Family Support (IFS) services provide support to vulnerable families with children who are involved in or at risk of becoming involved with tertiary child protection services. The evaluation examined the rates and length of service engagement, types of needs addressed, and challenges for service provision. It measured rates of entry and re-entry into the child protection system after participating in an IFS service and collected feedback from a small sample of staff. The researchers noted the absence of robust quantitative administrative data on outcomes and that the current assessment tools available to service providers did not allow them to determine whether they were making a difference for families.	●	●	
Strengthening our Sector Strategy			This is a sector-wide workforce planning and development strategy to increase collaboration and build capacity across the child and family support system through the provision of tools and information. The implementation review documented the processes used to develop the tools and information, reported on strategies used to promote their dissemination, and provided general feedback from the sector on their uptake and usefulness.	●		
Talking Families	●	Full report	Talking Families is a public communication strategy that uses a social marketing approach to encourage uptake of early intervention and support services. The initiative includes a website and Facebook page and, more recently, the development of a school-based Talking Families program. This report provided a baseline assessment of Queensland families regarding parenting concerns, parental vulnerability, parental confidence, seeking help (including barriers to seeking help), access to support, and service use. The information collected was used to inform social media marketing messaging. It also provided baseline data for future evaluations.	●		

- Indicates that this evaluation included the voices of children, young people or families. ● Indicates that this type of evaluation was completed.
- Indicates that this type of evaluation was planned but was unable to be completed, usually due to the evaluators’ lack of capacity to access the required data in a timely way.

Table 3-1: Description of programs and services subjected to evaluations shared with us for this study (continued)

Initiative subject to evaluation	Includes the voices of children, young people or families	Public report	Evaluation focus	Evaluation type		
				Process/implementation	Impact/outcomes	Return on investment
Transition to Success	●	Full report	The Transition to Success program is a vocational training and therapeutic service that aims to prevent vulnerable young people from reoffending or entering the criminal justice system. The evaluation examined outcomes for young participants including education, employment, training, rates of reoffending and nights in custody. It also examined stakeholder satisfaction with the program. Cost-benefit analysis found every \$1 spent on the program resulted in \$2.57 of benefits. The benefits (avoided costs of custody, avoided costs of supervision and avoided costs of crime) were driven by the reduction in offending outcomes in the treatment group (with a youth justice history) relative to the comparison group.	●	●	●

- Indicates that this evaluation included the voices of children, young people or families.
- Indicates that this type of evaluation was completed.
- Indicates that this type of evaluation was planned but was unable to be completed, usually due to the evaluators' lack of capacity to access the required data in a timely way.

3.3 Using evaluations

In the following pages we examine four evaluations in more detail and describe how they have influenced reform progress. We also identify facilitators and barriers to using evaluation findings.

We found that findings from all four evaluations have directly and positively influenced program and practice change. One program's evaluation findings also influenced legislative change.

Stakeholders identified a number of facilitators and barriers to using evaluation findings. Common facilitators included the selection of independent and external evaluators and the ongoing, strong engagement of stakeholders. As outlined in Section 1.3, these are both features of robust evaluations.

Identified barriers included a lack of information about the influence of the local context and a failure to adequately plan for evaluation during implementation.

We sometimes experienced difficulties in identifying the right people to speak to about how evaluation findings had been used. This may indicate that the purpose for the evaluation, the evaluation report and perhaps even the fact that the evaluation had been conducted was not shared within the commissioning organisation, let alone with stakeholders or others in the sector.

3.4 Snapshots

This section focuses on how the findings of the four case study evaluations were used and on barriers and facilitators to the use of findings. More detailed information about the four case study evaluations can be found in the appendices.

Case study 1

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Led Decision Making trials evaluation

Evaluation conducted: April 2016–June 2017 • Report published: October 2017

This evaluation focused on the implementation and early outcomes of the Family Led Decision Making trials. It explored the extent to which the family led decision making process worked, and identified and explained factors that generated differing outcomes in certain kinds of contexts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

This evaluation placed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at its centre. It emphasised the importance of drawing on the knowledge, priorities and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when deciding what to evaluate and how to conduct the evaluation.

Evaluation features

It exhibited the following features of a robust evaluation:

- clear and measurable objectives
- mixed method design
- stakeholder involvement—including program or service users
- an independent evaluator.

Use of findings

We consulted with a representative of the commissioning agency, who advised that evaluation findings had influenced future legislative and practice changes that specifically affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. For example, legislative changes in 2018 specified the right of families to participate in decision making.

There were legislative changes that happened in 2018 that really embedded the right of families to participate in decision making and established an arrangement where there's independent people who are able to support families to participate in decision making. There's been a lot of induction of our Child Safety staff in the expectations around those provisions in the Act. There's a Child Safety practice manual that's been updated to make sure that that's reflected in practice on the ground.

This evaluation also influenced the development of the Family Participation Program. There are currently 16 Family Participation Programs operating across the state, with the most recently established in the Torres Strait. A key function of the program is to give authority to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, families and children to work together to solve problems and lead decision making in a culturally safe space.

The commissioning agency representative told us that family led decision making will be made available to families at every point in the Child Safety process when resources allow. To support rollout, concerted effort and resources have been put into training staff and organisations in the family led decision making process methodology. Over 2018–19, 104 training sessions were delivered, training 1,659 Child Safety staff members.

A future evaluation is planned when a budget is identified and COVID-19 restrictions ease.

Facilitators and barriers to using evaluation findings

The selection of the evaluators was critical to the outcome in that they really brought a very strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lens to the evaluation. The researchers that were used had a lot of experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and were able to bring that understanding to the evaluation. I think, as a result of that, they framed the evaluation quite differently from how other evaluators might have done it.

I think one learning is we need to have a stronger focus on implementation planning around that behaviour change and embedding it ... One of the things the evaluation highlighted is that implementing a program like this doesn't just rely on getting the funding to the community-controlled sector and getting services up and going. It's also about that change of practice in Child Safety Service Centres. So, it's required an awful lot of work with operations and with our practice areas around trying to make sure that our practice guidance includes involvement of the Family Participation Program and Aboriginal Family [led] Decision Making.

Case study 2

Evaluation of the Child Protection Joint Response Team trial

Evaluation conducted: January–June 2018 • Summary report published: February 2019

The overarching goal of this implementation evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the trial outcomes and the suitability of this model for state-wide implementation. Specifically, this evaluation aimed to identify strengths and challenges of the trial and gain insights into contextual variations across regions that may impact Child Protection Joint Response team processes.

This evaluation relied on successful collaboration between the Queensland Police Service and Child Safety. The evaluation framework was developed and endorsed by both agencies prior to the trial and evaluation.

Evaluation features

It exhibited the following features of a robust evaluation:

- ✓ clear and measurable objectives
- ✓ mixed method design
- ✓ stakeholder involvement—including program or service users
- ✓ an independent evaluator.

Use of findings

We consulted with stakeholders from both agencies who were directly involved in the Child Protection Joint Response Team trial. The evaluation recommended state-wide rollout of this program, as the genuine co-activity between agencies in this model was found to benefit children and young people subject to joint investigations. Implementation of this rollout was conducted in three stages, commencing in August 2019, with successful completion in February 2020. A critical aspect of the evaluation was that it provided the authority needed within their agency (the authorising environment) to support the future rollout of the program.

It gave us the authorising environment to take the project state-wide ... as we rolled it out on the three trial sites, [we] saw value in it straight away. But having the assurance of an external evaluator who recognised the value, then it was easier to get across the line as a state-wide initiative.

Stakeholders told us that collaborative practice is ongoing and will continue to be monitored.

I think though our ability to monitor how the relationships are going and how many of these things we're having is important, and that's probably where the value is.

Facilitators and barriers to using evaluation findings

Study participants highlighted the importance of the evaluation being conducted by an independent and external evaluator. External contractors are considered to have increased objectivity and are more likely to make progressive recommendations that can lead to program change.²⁸

One barrier to adopting evaluation recommendations was the constraints faced within the participating agency's existing policies and procedures.

We accepted six [evaluation recommendations] wholeheartedly, but two were in principle because they were ... a bit challenging for us. [One recommendation was] that [our department] should extend hours. It wasn't something that we have the ability to become a 24/7 workforce, and that's obviously a benefit that an independent external evaluation would identify for us ... [but it can be] really difficult for the government to quickly and simply answer what is actually quite a complex recommendation [given funding, industrial relations and other workforce considerations].

Further perceived barriers to the use of findings were the diversity of geographic locations and this model's reliance on relationships and local operational strategies. Participants felt some flexibility is needed to allow for these differences in local contexts when establishing the model in new locations.

Case study 3

Improving child protection matters in Queensland courts: A baseline evaluation

Evaluation conducted: 2015–2016 • Report published: February 2017

The aim of this baseline evaluation was to determine whether the court reforms were implemented as proposed. Specifically, this evaluation aimed to:

- identify implementation issues to inform ongoing delivery
- establish a comparison point against which to assess future effectiveness and emerging outcomes.

This evaluation used an expert panel to provide advice, and mixed methods to collect data from multiple stakeholder groups. Children and young people who had experiences with the court and tribunal process participated.

Evaluation features

The evaluation was conducted by the Department of Justice and Attorney-General, the lead agency for the court reforms. While the evaluation engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, it was criticised by the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service for its limited representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, including parents and kinship carers.

It exhibited the following features of a robust evaluation:

- clear and measurable objectives
- mixed method design
- stakeholder involvement—including program or service users
- an independent evaluator.

Use of findings

We consulted with stakeholders from two agencies involved with the evaluation of the Queensland court reforms.

One stakeholder advised that from their agency's perspective, the evaluation findings have been valuable and are often drawn upon to inform ongoing policy and practice, particularly in terms of domestic and family violence.

I think definitely it [the evaluation] has helped shape some of the measures that we are now collecting. Going forward I think it will continue to be something relevant to the policy work that we do.

I've certainly referred a lot of people to the baseline evaluation when they've asked me about different things and said 'well, this work's been done, have a look in that report.'

A stakeholder from a second agency advised that from their experience, the evaluation was one of a number of factors that had contributed to changes in their agency.

Perhaps if not directly, I think indirectly [the evaluation has had an impact]. I think that the evaluation ... and the heightened awareness of the issues in the jurisdiction has all come into play in terms of shaping our minds in terms of what we need to do better. So I think in the absence of that, maybe we wouldn't be at this point right now. Maybe it would have taken us a little longer to get there.

I think that certainly it has helped us to just guide us down this path and prompt us that we need to do this. [There has been] multiple sources [of influence] though ... There's been a lot of things swirling up in the air, and it's been too hard to ignore, really.

This evaluation recommended timely follow-up evaluations be conducted to assess whether the court reforms are achieving the intended outcomes. This includes the timeliness of outcomes for children in the Childrens Court.

A follow-up mid-term evaluation was planned for 2020, and a procurement process had started to engage an external evaluator, but this was put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have been advised that the mid-term evaluation will occur as soon as possible, and a final evaluation will occur once delivery of the package is complete.

Facilitators and barriers to using evaluation findings

Again, the challenge of operating within government constraints, such as limited available funding, was raised by one of the stakeholders as an implementation barrier.

There's always the overlay of the constraint with resources as well ... We've only been able to incrementally do what we can with the resources that we have available.

Case study 4

Next Steps After Care services evaluation

Evaluation conducted: February–October 2017 • Report published: October 2017

This evaluation explored the perspectives of key stakeholders and views of young people who had received services from Next Steps After Care. The evaluation considered implementation issues, the effectiveness of the program and measured outcomes for young people making the transition from care.

This evaluation also considered whether the services were culturally appropriate and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. It described activities undertaken, inputs (both funding and staffing), and the expected causal links from outputs to outcomes.

Evaluation features

It exhibited the following features of a robust evaluation:

- ✓ clear and measurable objectives
- ✓ mixed method design
- ✓ stakeholder involvement—including program or service users
- ✓ an independent evaluator.

Use of findings

The findings were used in a redesign process to ensure services are meeting the needs of young people, are accessible, and are assisting young people to improve their life outcomes through successful transition. This redesign process, undertaken by KPMG on behalf of Child Safety, included consultations with government stakeholders, key non-government stakeholders and providers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, and young people.

The redesigned program, under the new name Next Step Plus, began on 23 March 2020. It aims to build a young person's knowledge, skills and connections to enable them to live independently and participate actively in society through connection to community, social networks, education and employment.

Stakeholders told us that data will be collected from service providers on a quarterly basis. This will include a measure of outcomes through analysis of the number of service users with an improved quality of life. The evaluation recommended that a process evaluation of the redesigned program should occur 18 months after implementation, and an outcomes evaluation after three years.

The communication of the final report findings was limited to relevant external agencies, committees and organisations, including:

- Next Steps After Care Governance Committee
- Queensland Family and Child Commission
- CREATE Foundation
- Next Steps After Care providers.

The report was also distributed internally within Child Safety.

Facilitators and barriers to using evaluation findings

Stakeholders could not think of any barriers to using the evaluation findings.

They told us the inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement increased the credibility of its findings. It also increased the willingness of stakeholders to discuss the evaluation's findings and identified opportunities for improvement.

Extending the program for a 15-month period gave Child Safety time to give detailed consideration to the implications of the evaluation findings and recommendations, including extending support services to young people up to 25 years of age.

3.5 Future evaluation priorities

In May 2021, we emailed our Outcomes Evaluation Reference Group^e and asked each member to provide us with information about forthcoming evaluations relating to the child protection reforms planned by their agency. One agency reported that they had put two significant evaluations on hold indefinitely due to COVID-19. Education and Child Safety reported planned evaluations.

Table 3-2: Initiatives to be the focus of future evaluations

Department	Initiative subject to evaluation	Date commencing	Type of evaluation (implementation, outcomes or return on investment)
Queensland Family and Child Commission	Queensland Child Protection Reform Environment.	July 2019	Implementation and outcomes.
Education	Education Justice Initiative. This is an information, referral and advocacy service to help vulnerable young people involved with the criminal justice system to re-engage with education and training.	February 2020	Implementation and outcomes.
Child Safety	<i>Our Way</i> : A generational strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. ²⁹	March 2020	Implementation of the first phase of <i>Our Way</i> – the Changing Tracks action plans 2017–2022. Impact and outcomes (focus on system changes occurring since the introduction of <i>Our Way</i>).
Child Safety	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Wellbeing Services. These services provide culturally appropriate support to families experiencing vulnerability.	December 2020	Implementation, outcomes and return on investment.
Child Safety	Targeted assessment of reform programs including Family and Child Connect, Intensive Family Support service, Assessment and Service Connect, Family Wellbeing Services, transfer of responsibility for foster carers to the non-government sector, Next Step Plus, Framework for Practice, and Collaborative Family Decision Making.	Unknown	Return on investment.
Queensland Family and Child Commission	Queensland Child Protection Reform Environment.	July 2023	Implementation, outcomes and impact.

^e Our Outcomes Evaluation Reference Group includes representatives from nine government agencies involved with the child protection reforms.

The Department of the Premier and Cabinet reference group member confirmed that their agency had responsibility for the evaluation of the *Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Strategy 2016–2026*³⁰ but that they would not be evaluating any aspects of the child protection reform program.

The Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships representative advised that their agency is reporting annually on Queensland’s cross-government Closing the Gap outcomes at the state and national level. Their agency collates information from relevant agencies, and from the Queensland Government Statistician’s Office (as the data holder). The representative also advised that the agency is working in partnership with members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition of Peaks under the new Closing the Gap Agreement.³¹

It has been estimated that less than 10 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs have been evaluated.³² It is therefore encouraging that planning is underway for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led evaluations of programs and services that aim to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the Queensland child protection system.

Throughout our consultations, study participants identified additional programs, services and reform areas as evaluation priorities for the coming years, including:

- the intersection of the child protection and youth justice systems. This includes an emphasis on early intervention and preventative responses for children and young people at risk of offending, and best practice service responses for children and young people who are the subject of both youth justice and child protection orders (referred to as being ‘on dual orders’)
- ongoing evaluation of secondary services, including Family and Child Connect, to identify whether these services are achieving their intent of reducing demand on the statutory system and improving outcomes for vulnerable children and their families
- an evaluation of residential care services^f to explore whether these services are keeping children and young people safe, connected to friends, family and culture and supporting them to meet their future goals
- a process evaluation of the new Next Step Plus program (which is replacing the Next Steps After Care program) 18 months after its implementation, and an outcomes evaluation after three years. At this stage, neither of these evaluations have been scheduled.

“ [Evaluation] needs to go right down into the practice and understand what’s working and what’s not working on the ground really. ”

We suggest that programs providing services to children and young people in care and post-care should also be evaluation priorities, as should evaluating the effectiveness of reform initiatives that aim to improve care and long-term outcomes for children and young people.

In terms of how evaluations should be conducted, study participants told us there should be a focus on:

- the role of stakeholder relationships and collaboration. A recent report from the Queensland Audit Office³³ on the family and child protection system states that effective partnerships will continue to be particularly vital in the recovery phase of the COVID-19 pandemic due to the significant social and economic impacts expected
- the impact of place and context on findings—to determine differences between place-based findings
- the perspectives of service users. We found limited evidence that evaluations included children and young people or enabled the voices of children and young people to be heard. The participation of children and young people needs to be a much greater focus of future evaluations.

Overall, there is a need for more evaluations, in particular evaluations that focus specifically on outcomes for clients, which will enable us to monitor program and service effectiveness and identify opportunities for improvement.

“ [Evaluation is] very important, critically important, but what I think is, at the very core of evaluation, is understanding ... what actual genuine outcomes in improving ... outcomes for children and families have been realised. ”

^f Residential care services provide placements for children and young people subject to a child protection order in houses where care is delivered by a team of rostered employees. Children and young people are usually placed in residential care when foster care is not an appropriate option.

4

Conclusion

The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry found that the child protection sector did not sufficiently evaluate its programs and practices. The Inquiry made a number of recommendations to improve evaluation practice and highlight its importance in building a culture of learning and continuous improvement.

This study assessed whether evaluation is being used to achieve continuous improvement in the reform environment. The four evaluations we selected as case studies were some of the stronger evaluations of those provided (although there were other strong evaluations among those we reviewed). Each of the four selected evaluations exhibited several features of robust evaluations including clear and measurable objectives, the use of mixed methods designs, high levels of stakeholder involvement and (with one exception) the use of independent evaluators. There is clear evidence of high-quality evaluations of reform initiatives being conducted.

We found, however, that after an initial flurry of evaluation activity focusing on process and implementation issues, evaluation activity has slowed down significantly over the last few years. Relatively few evaluations have successfully considered outcomes, impact and return on investment, as they were conducted too early in the lifecycle of the program, or the required data was not available.

The child protection and family support system is not well set up to measure outcomes. Evaluations need to identify what is working, what can be improved, and what is not working. This will enable other, better options for achieving desired outcomes to be investigated, trialled and evaluated.

We also found that evaluation findings are not always shared well within commissioning agencies, let alone across the broader sector, which is a significant barrier to evaluations being used for system learning and continuous improvement. There would be value in developing an archive of evaluations conducted, ensuring that learnings from evaluations are shared across the child protection and family support sector.

Key insights from this study are:

- We need to know if the policies and programs that affect Queensland's children and families are having an impact.
- Evaluating significant programs or services that have an impact on outcomes for a wide range of children, young people and families in contact with the child protection system produces the most valuable information for government.
- Evaluations provide insight into whether a policy or program supporting our most vulnerable children and families is effective. They are an important source of evidence to inform tough budget decisions when significant financial constraints exist. This is an important issue for Queensland, as the economy is still recovering from the (continuing) impacts of COVID-19.

While we found evidence that evaluations are positively influencing policy and practice, there is room for improvement in the number, focus and usefulness of evaluations in terms of enhancing reform progress and system performance. This can be achieved through:

- having more evaluations that focus on outcomes and include the perspectives of clients
- prioritising evaluations of programs and services with significant financial investment and potential impact on children, young people and their families
- increased transparency—by publishing evaluation findings
- having a culture where evaluations are expected, not optional.

5

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Appendices

*Summaries of
case study evaluations*

Evaluation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Led Decision Making trials

Background

Child Safety, in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, trialled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family led decision making and a shared practice model in three Queensland regions between April 2016 and June 2017. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family led decision making was designed to empower families to make informed choices while Child Safety Services worked with them to ensure the safety of their children.

Purpose

The evaluation aimed to identify implementation challenges and strengths for each trial and location, assess how well each location had achieved the short-term objectives of each trial model, and collect cost information to evaluate the investment compared to the benefits, specifically:

- the cost of having a family in the trial versus the cost of a similar family not in the trial
- the differences in outcomes for the families and in costs and workload for the child protection system.

Approach

The evaluation aimed to demonstrate the extent to which the trials worked depending on the way they were implemented and administered in each site. Data was collected through interviews with families, convenors, community leaders, support service stakeholders and Child Safety staff in Ipswich (13 people), Mount Isa (22), Cairns (10) and the Torres Strait (19). The evaluators also analysed case files, administrative data, performance reports and program documentation.

Key limitations of the evaluation

- Findings reflect the unique contexts of each community in which the trials were delivered, so are not generalisable to other sites.
- Limited administrative data was recorded for the trials in terms of the time and resources taken to undertake the family led decision making process. There was also no data available to track cases.
- Only a small number of stakeholders and families were consulted in each site.
- This baseline evaluation was conducted during reform rollout, before the model had time to embed. Also, the trials did not occur over a long enough time period to allow all outcomes to emerge or be measured. It is anticipated that future evaluations will be able to collect and report more mature data and address these limitations.

Summary of key findings

- The evaluation demonstrated the value of family led decision making and shared practice models when they are implemented appropriately. When trials were successful and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples truly led the process, they were able to facilitate a culturally safe space for families. Positive outcomes were reported for families, family led decision making service providers and Child Safety. For example, families were motivated and committed to plans, and Child Safety staff developed an awareness of the value of cultural authority and knowledge and were able to engage with families who had previously not engaged.
- The stage of the child protection continuum at which the trial was applied was important. In the early intervention and secondary services stage, family led decision making service providers could work more independently with families and build trust through engagement. When applied at the tertiary stage, the service providers had to work more closely with Child Safety, which limited the trust of families. For the trial to work successfully at this later stage, service providers' capacity and knowledge about Child Safety processes must be built.

Reported strengths of the trials included:

- the commitment of family led decision making service providers and Child Safety to working collaboratively to resolve issues
- the use of an independent third-party implementation consultant to navigate tensions between service providers and Child Safety.

Reported challenges of the trials included:

- having adequate resourcing to ensure the family led decision making model was implemented as intended
- staff turnover and its impact on partnerships with clients and other organisations
- the need to change entrenched individual and organisational cultures in Child Safety to empower family led decision making service providers and families.

Each trial experienced challenges related to the diverse needs of the communities in which it was implemented. These challenges included accommodating the diversity of cultural needs within the community as well as capacity and resource constraints for family led decision making staff in travelling to clients.

Post-evaluation activities

- The Queensland Government continues to invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and has committed in its Changing Tracks action plan³⁴ to expand the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family led decision making approach state-wide. Implementation of this approach has been directly influenced by findings from the evaluation.
- Considerable effort has been put into training for staff involved in the family led decision making process. Training has been offered to workers in the child protection sector to:
 - develop an understanding of the principles underpinning family led decision making
 - develop skills in how to best facilitate family meetings
 - support the voice of children and families in case planning and decision making
 - meet identified needs and work collaboratively with partners involved in the family led decision making process.
- Extra funding has recently been delivered to develop online materials so that training can occur online (due to COVID-19).
- Findings specifically influenced legislative change in 2018 that embedded the right of families to participate in decision making. Family led decision making is enabled as part of the *Child Protection Reform Amendment Act 2017*, which commenced in October 2018.³⁵
- Findings directly influenced the implementation of the Family Participation Program. The Family Participation Program now operates across the state. There are 16 outlets, with the most recent starting in the Torres Strait.

If resourced appropriately, the family led decision making model could facilitate the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.^g

The aim is to build capacity of the Family Participation Program over time, so there is more ability to have family led decision making occur at each stage of the process. Family led decision making is currently conducted at three main priority decision making points:

- investigation and assessment
- permanency decisions
- case reviews.

Overall, findings very clearly show that this evaluation has directly influenced future changes and practice.

^g The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle is the cornerstone of Australian law and policy acknowledging the importance of family, cultural and community connections to the identity and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who come into contact with the statutory child protection system. The principle is based strongly on the presumptions that removal of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child from their family should be an intervention of last resort, and that reunification of a child that has been removed must be a high priority. The Principle has been enacted to varying extents within the legislation of every Australian state and territory. It has come to be understood as having three distinct, but interrelated elements:

1. Prioritising placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in order, with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family, community, or other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, where such placement is safe for the child.
2. Requiring consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and organisations about child protection intervention, and child placement and care.
3. Ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care are supported to maintain connection to their family, community and culture, especially children placed with non-Indigenous carers.

Evaluation of the Child Protection Joint Response Team trial

Background

Child Safety, in partnership with the Queensland Police Service, trialled the Child Protection Joint Response Team approach at three sites across Queensland between October 2017 and December 2018. The trial was designed to improve coordinated responses to matters in which action is required from both the Queensland Police Service and Child Safety, if both agencies consider that a joint response is necessary and appropriate. Specifically, this refers to matters in which a criminal offence may have occurred and a child may be in need of protection.

Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness and suitability of the Child Protection Joint Response Team model for state-wide implementation.

Approach

The evaluation used a variety of methods to gather data from several sources. Data was collected through:

- the Child Protection Joint Response Team pre-and-post trial online survey (administered to Child Safety and Queensland Police Service operational members)
- three focus groups conducted at each Child Protection Joint Response Team trial site for a total of nine focus groups
- analysis of documentation, including:
 - the Issues Log (developed to track all issues that arose throughout the trial and their resolution)
 - the Oversight Committee meeting minutes (three meetings occurred during the trial period)
 - joint investigation spreadsheets (which agencies were asked to use to record matters that required investigation by both the Queensland Police Service and Child Safety).

Key limitations of the evaluation

- Analysis of the survey data focused primarily on change over time through a comparison of pre- and post-trial responses. The small number of respondents reduced the statistical power of the analysis.
- Due to the very small number of respondents to the ‘during trial’ survey (16 Queensland Police Service and 7 Child Safety respondents), it could not be used for analysis. Additionally, due to sample size requirements, pre/post comparisons could only be conducted by combining the Queensland Police Service and Child Safety responses.
- The planned analysis of themes within the Oversight Committee minutes was not possible due to the limited number of meetings and the extent of the information available. Instead, noteworthy aspects of these minutes were referred to alongside other analyses, where appropriate.

Summary of key findings

The evaluation revealed that the trial had several successful and promising features:

- Adherence to the original Child Protection Joint Response Team Trial policy guidelines was evident across trial sites in the use of briefings between agencies as well as in joint planning and investigation.
- Changes to and flexibility regarding to processes for coordinating and initiating joint investigations were also viewed positively by respondents. Prior to the trial, less than half of respondents agreed that the process for initiating a joint investigation was clear. Following the trial, participants were significantly more likely to agree that this process was clear, with 78 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement.
- Some formal processes for information sharing, as well as informal information sharing, enhanced joint investigations.
- The greatest improvements to communication and collaboration between the Queensland Police Service and Child Safety appeared to come from informal information-sharing processes and improved relationships between staff. For example, there appears to have been an overall benefit from daily briefing processes and sharing of contact details of individual Child Protection Investigation Unit (Queensland Police Service) officers and child safety officers. These informal relationships had tangible benefits for planning and information sharing.

Appendix B: Evaluation of the Child Protection Joint Response Team trial

- Participants from both agencies also indicated that one of the main benefits of the trial was enhanced relationships between partner agencies. This allowed for flexibility and for Child Protection Joint Response Team processes to cater to the distinct needs of each region and account for different geographic and local contexts, including:
 - the physical size of the region
 - staff numbers at both agencies
 - physical proximity of the agencies to each other
 - pre-existing relationships between the agencies.
- The Child Protection Joint Response Team appears to have created a more consistent process for joint investigations. In most matters where a joint investigation was required, a joint investigation was conducted. Perceptions about the usefulness of policies and procedures also improved significantly over the course of the trial, and there were positive trends in relation to role clarity.
- The Child Protection Joint Response Team improved responsiveness, as evidence suggests that joint investigations commenced more quickly than other similarly prioritised investigations.
- The Child Protection Joint Response Team model can be effective in achieving better outcomes for children and families. For example, there were very low rates of repeated interviews of children across trial sites, reducing the potential for traumatising the child. Additional benefits for families were reported, including less anxiety and greater clarity around the respective roles of the partner agencies. By extension, staff of both the Queensland Police Service and Child Safety noted that the reduced number of interviews and better-informed families had subsequent positive outcomes for the agencies.
- Overall, the majority of Queensland Police Service and Child Safety respondents supported the Child Protection Joint Response Team and a state-wide rollout of the Child Protection Joint Response Team model, notwithstanding the identified need for flexibility and the impact of staff numbers and other contextual factors across regions. Staff did not identify any critical issues that made the trialled process unsuitable.

Reported challenges for joint investigations included the following:

- Some uncertainty remained around the boundaries of joint investigations. It was not always clear to staff when a joint investigation should be initiated, when a joint investigation had officially commenced, or when the joint investigation had officially concluded.
- Respondents at all focus groups noted some difficulties arising from variations in working hours and staff resources across agencies.

Post-evaluation activities

- Evaluation findings and recommendations directly informed the decision by Child Safety and the Queensland Police Service to implement Child Protection Joint Response Teams state-wide.
- Due to the success of the trial, on 2 April 2019, the Director-General of Child Safety approved the state-wide implementation of Child Protection Joint Response Teams.³⁶ State-wide implementation began in August 2019 and was successfully completed in February 2020.
- The Child Protection Joint Response Teams have created a more consistent process for joint investigations.

Improving child protection matters in Queensland courts: A baseline evaluation

Background

These reforms sought to achieve fair, timely and consistent outcomes in court processes by providing the Childrens Courts with tools and processes to actively manage child protection proceedings and ensure consistent outcomes.

The aims were to create greater accountability and oversight for applications, improve access to legal advice and support, and enable children and young people to participate in tribunal processes.

Purpose

This evaluation reports on data collected in 2015–16 regarding implementation and operation. The aims of this evaluation were to determine whether reforms were implemented as proposed, establish a comparison point to assess effectiveness in future, and identify emerging outcomes and implementation issues for future delivery.

Approach

A multi-method approach was used including:

- surveys of justice stakeholders (74 people)
- semi-structured interviews with children and young people (24) and magistrates, Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal members and legal professionals (15)
- focus groups with legal professionals, foster and kinship carers, parents and non-government organisations (86)
- a review of court files and appeals
- analysis of administrative data.

Key limitations of evaluation

The evaluation consulted a small number of parents and kinship carers. Participant recruitment was primarily managed by non-government organisations and peak bodies, so the evaluators had limited control over the sample size.

There was limited representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants (including parents and kinship carers).

The baseline evaluation was conducted during reform rollout, before many court reform initiatives had time to embed. It is anticipated that future evaluations will be able to collect and report more mature data and address these limitations.

Summary of key findings

The appointment of dedicated Childrens Court magistrates was viewed as a promising change to court processes, providing increased specialist knowledge of child protection proceedings, ensuring orders were minimally intrusive, and holding Child Safety accountable.

Stakeholders acknowledged the value of children's and young people's participation and were supportive of initiatives such as the introduction of Child Advocate Legal Officers. However, it was too early to tell whether the participation of children and young people in court processes had improved. Most stakeholders were largely supportive of the role of the Child Advocate Legal Officer and valued hearing the views and wishes of children and young people directly. This was reported as a previous gap in service delivery.

Reported challenges for the court reforms included the following:

- Barriers to children's and young people's participation included awareness of their right to participate and a lack of understanding of their options for involvement. Legal representation and advocacy were suggested as ways to facilitate their participation.
- Of the few parents who participated in this evaluation, most reported overwhelmingly negative experiences and perceptions of court processes, due to a lack of understanding of processes and decisions, and feelings of fear, intimidation and disempowerment. These issues were pronounced for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Legal representation and knowledge of processes may facilitate parents' participation.
- Stakeholders anticipated the efficiency of court matters would improve with the commencement of key reforms. However, the data does not yet show clear evidence of improved timeliness.
- There were mixed views about the cultural competency of courts and tribunals. A number of stakeholders were positive about changes to legislation (Section 113 of the *Child Protection Act 1999*) enabling a broader range of community members to become a party to proceedings, which may facilitate greater involvement from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and foster and kinship carers.
- Legal stakeholders, particularly magistrates, valued the cultural knowledge provided by Recognised Entities.^h However, Recognised Entities felt their legal standing (that is, the fact that they were not party to the proceedings) limited the extent to which they could engage in proceedings.

^h At the time of the court processes evaluation, Recognised Entities were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals or organisations funded by Child Safety to provide culturally appropriate advice about the care and protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Recognised Entities have since been replaced by the Independent Person role.

Post-evaluation activities

- As a result of the findings, from 1 July 2016, the Director of Child Protection Litigation is now the applicant in all pending child protection order applications before the Childrens Court of Queensland and is responsible for deciding whether an application for a child protection order should be made, the type of order to be applied for, and whether to litigate the application.³⁷
- The Office of the Director of Child Protection Litigation now employs specialised lawyers with expertise in child protection litigation prior to applications for child protection orders being filed. Under this new system, matters are now managed through collaboration and partnership between the Office of the Director of Child Protection Litigation and Child Safety. As a result, the Office of the Director of Child Protection Litigation now has greater oversight of child protection proceedings and can ensure applications are supported by relevant and supporting evidence and the state only takes action that is warranted in the circumstances.
- There is stakeholder consensus that findings from this baseline evaluation are valuable to other work that is occurring, and they are regularly drawn on.

Findings continue to directly influence policy work, particularly in child protection and domestic and family violence policy.

A mid-term evaluation was planned, and a procurement process commenced, but this has been put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The evaluation will occur when the Department of Justice and Attorney-General is in a position to recommence.

Evaluation of Next Steps After Care services

Background

The Next Steps After Care initiative aimed to support young people (aged 15–21) in making the transition to independence from out-of-home care. The initiative supported young people through two services:

1. the Connections program, providing support, information, referral and check-in services through online platforms and an all-hours phone number
2. tailored individual support, delivered by non-government agencies in 11 locations.

Purpose

The evaluation reports on data collected between March and September 2017. The research aimed to provide a detailed description and analysis of the implementation and efficacy of the initiative, and identify its impact in terms of improving outcomes for young people leaving care.

Approach

The evaluation adopted a mixed-methods design, using:

- literature and policy document reviews
- semi-structured interviews with staff from Child Safety (28 people) and non-government organisations providing Next Steps After Care (28)
- a survey of Next Steps After Care staff (22) and stakeholders who receive or make referrals to Next Steps After Care (71)
- site visits (9) to organisations providing Connections
- a review of administrative data.

Data collection for a client outcomes component was conducted between June and September 2017, using interviews (of 18 people) and a survey (of 17 young people) and a case file review (of 23 case files).

Key limitations of evaluation

- Interviews and surveys rely on self-reported data from young people who were currently engaged with Next Steps After Care services (as opposed to a sample of all young people transitioning from care). As such, there is likely to be bias towards positive responses.
- Consultation with young people engaged with Next Steps After Care was limited to a relatively small sample (18 for interviews and 17 for the online survey).
- This baseline evaluation was conducted during reform rollout, before the reform initiative had time to embed and outcomes for clients had time to emerge. It is anticipated that future evaluations will be able to collect and report more mature outcomes data.

Summary of key findings

- In general, young people, Next Steps After Care staff and other stakeholders in the sector viewed this initiative positively and considered it to be an important form of support for care leavers. The small number of young people consulted reported that the service had made noticeable improvements to their lives.
- While each provider was delivering Next Steps After Care in a manner that suited their own agency and local practices (due to a lack of collaboration between services), they were said to be working well together and facilitating transfer of cases between services.
- Young people who received Tailored Individual Support valued the relationship-driven practice, the trusting relationships they developed with workers, and the practical support offered.

Reported challenges for Next Steps After Care services included the following:

- Young people were only eligible for Next Steps After Care if they were the subject of a child protection order at age 15. Common practice within some Child Safety Service Centres is to allow child protection orders to lapse for young people approaching care-leaving age. This meant that these young people were ineligible for Next Steps After Care.
- Limited awareness of the services among child safety officers and young people themselves was also reported as impeding service access.
- The Connections component provides young people with 24/7 access to support. However, this component requires young people to be confident in using the phone or online platform and proactive in seeking support. Young people expressed a preference for contacting the Tailored Individual Support team if an issue arose.
- Improvements were required to ensure Next Steps After Care services were culturally appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Issues were identified with the low uptake of Connections among this group, given:
 - their preference for relationship-driven practice
 - limited phone and internet connection in rural or remote communities
 - lack of capacity for staff to raise cultural issues for clients, given the majority of Tailored Individual Support workers are non-Indigenous.

Due to the level of unmet needs for care leavers over 21 years of age, evaluation participants suggested that the service should be extended to support those aged up to 25 years.

Post-evaluation activities

- Findings from this evaluation, (as well as legislative changes in 2018 to the *Child Protection Act 1999* and stakeholder feedback) influenced Child Safety in redesigning the Next Steps After Care program.
- The Next Steps After Care program has now been redesigned, and eligibility for support has been extended to up to 25 years of age, in line with amendments to the *Child Protection Act 1999*. This initiative sits within the broader Queensland Child Protection Reform Program as a response to Recommendation 9.2 of the final report of Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry.
- The redesign, under the new name Next Step Plus, began in March 2020. The redesign has given particular attention to critical gaps identified through the evaluation so that young people who have been in care are able to achieve greater life outcomes.
- The Queensland Government approved increased funding of \$2.5 million over three years. It commenced in early 2020 to coincide with the rollout of the redesigned Next Step Plus program. This brought the total funding to approximately \$4.75 million per annum.
- The redesign and funding enhancement aim to ensure that help and guidance is available for young people who do not have strong adult support networks when they transition from care. This will include a focus on community-controlled services and the cultural capability of services delivered to young people transitioning from care.
- Greater emphasis has been placed on partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and mainstream services so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people have access to more culturally responsive services.
- Next Step Plus now features stronger partnerships with other government, community and corporate entities.
- It will complement improved pathway planning with the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy. This will ensure young people transitioning to adulthood can access safe and affordable housing so they can focus on their education and securing a job.³⁸

Next Step Plus currently has programs in 15 Queensland locations.

