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Service systems designed to prevent involvement in child protection and youth justice: Literature review

Contributing authors

Amy Graham, Research Specialist

Zvezdana Petrovic, Research Specialist

Elbina Avdagic, Research Specialist

Michelle Macvean, Senior Research Specialist

Acknowledgement of Country

The Parenting Research Centre acknowledges and respects the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country and the Elders of the past and present.

Contact

Melbourne office

Hub Southern Cross

Level 2, 696 Bourke Street

Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

Sydney office

Hub Hyde Park

Level 3, 223 Liverpool Street

Darlinghurst NSW 2010

P: +61 3 8660 3500

E: info@parentingrc.org.au

www.parentingrc.org.au

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Executive summary

Background

This report was prepared at the request of the Queensland Family and Child Commission. It includes a brief summary of programs designed to prevent involvement in statutory child protection and youth justice systems, a review of select systems reforms, and a summary of principles of successful service systems.

Considerable research has been conducted to test the effectiveness of programs and services¹ aimed at prevention of child abuse and neglect. While systematic review evidence suggests programs focused on supporting parenting and the home environment show promising outcomes, some uncertainty remains regarding the quality of the research and reliability of findings. The limited systematic review evidence available on youth justice prevention programs suggests this topic has received less research attention. As with child maltreatment programs research, some findings suggest value in parenting education and home visiting programs for prevention of youth justice involvement, while there is also emerging evidence for young person-oriented approaches such as skills development and mentoring. However, similarly there are limitations in the rigor of available evidence.

Acknowledging that children, young people, and families are part of broader, interconnected social systems, researchers point to a need to consider whole service systems in the prevention of statutory involvement. Intervening at the child- or family-level will be inadequate if the service systems they may come into contact with are not robust, connected and designed to cater for communities' needs. The purpose of this report is to review the evidence for systems reforms and identify what makes service systems effective.

Methods

We conducted a targeted, purposive search of published and unpublished literature to identify evidence. Systems reform details were primarily sourced through an internet search of unpublished literature available on websites. Principles of successful service systems were identified through unpublished and published literature.

Findings

Service systems reforms

Policy and service system reform regularly aim to address child protection and youth justice limitations, however, we found that much of the reform effort seems to focus on statutory systems change, rather than earlier intervention and prevention service systems. Further, given the complexity of systems change implementation and evaluation, there appears to be limited evidence indicating if and how systems reforms work. Where we did find information about systems reforms that aim to prevent statutory involvement, they were rarely evaluated at the whole reform level.

¹ In this report we use the term 'programs' to encompass all service-level approaches delivered to families, children and young people, as differentiated from service systems.

Principles of successful systems

There is little consensus on what systems change is, and there are a multitude of ways of approaching system reform. However, common features identified in the literature may be useful in guiding decisions about future service system reform (see Box 1).

Box 1. Key principles of successful service systems

- It takes supported families and communities to raise a child, and it takes good systems to enable families and communities to do so.
- Effective service systems and strategies are ones that have been developed in consultation with the end users, and with the agencies and stakeholders charged with implementation to ensure they are fit for purpose and appropriate to the context.
- Well-planned service systems are underpinned by an established theory of change, and clear plan for evaluating outcomes.
- Effective systems are intentional, have a broad scope but sufficient flexibility to adapt to local contexts and cohorts.
- Embedding the voices of children, families and communities at the centre of strategy and service design drives outcomes.
- Politics and policy must walk hand-in-hand to achieve system change.
- A reduction in fragmentation and silos, and efforts to better coordinate and integrate between agencies and departments leads to improved service systems and less duplication.
- Enduring strategies, with regular review and monitoring, that outlast political cycles are more likely to be successful than a short-term reform agenda.
- Effective service systems strike a delicate funding balance, which prioritises early and preventative strategies on equal footing as specialist and reactive services.
- Effective service systems require robust clinical, practice and cultural governance.
- Service systems need to include effective programs and services that are suited to the specific population.
- There has been an increasing emphasis on embedding relationship-based practice across service systems, working with clients in a positive, strengths-based, proactive, positive and empowering manner, rather than a focus on deficits or reactivity.
- Adequate resourcing for implementation is critical to success, including a well-trained and supported suitable workforce.
- Investment of time is required. Service reform does not happen overnight.

Conclusion

Systems change is complex and takes considerable time and funding to implement effectively and evaluate rigorously. We also note that population-level change, such as rates of involvement in child protection and youth justice, are hard outcomes to shift. The lack of robust evaluation data available for this report is an indication of how challenging systems-level evaluation is. We found that while systems strategies are often high-level, complex, cross-sectoral and long term, the data used for measurement and outcomes were sporadic and often lacked population-level data for accurate reporting.

Although this review of the literature did not involve a systematic search and selection process or comprehensive analysis of all relevant reforms, the findings suggest that clear evidence about what makes systems effective is not yet available. While learnings can be gained from past reforms and literature, further investment is needed to design, implement and robustly evaluate service systems reforms that aim to support children, young people and families earlier and prevent progression into statutory services.

Background

This report describes the findings of a brief, purposive literature review² conducted by the Parenting Research Centre at the request of the Queensland Family and Child Commission. Contents of this report will be used to inform a Discussion Paper regarding approaches to improve services for children, young people and families to prevent involvement in the statutory child protection and youth justice service systems.

In this report we provide a brief overview of systematic reviews on programs that aim to prevent the involvement of children and young people in child protection and youth justice, followed a review of systems reforms with a focus on pre-statutory service systems. We end this literature review with a summary of principles of successful service systems.

Prevention programs

Governments understand that good outcomes for children likely means a thriving society. Children and young people who have been involved in child protection and youth justice systems consistently experience worse psychological, educational and employment outcomes compared to the general population³. Recent inquiries into the child protection and youth justice systems across Australian jurisdictions have highlighted the need to place a greater emphasis on prevention and early intervention to divert children and young people from entering these statutory service systems.^{4,5} As prevention and early interventions focus on addressing underlying risk factors that lead to care entry,³ these approaches have the greatest potential to prevent and reduce the negative impact of child maltreatment and improve safety and wellbeing of children, young people and their families.⁶ Below, we summarise findings of systematic reviews and meta-analyses conducted as part of systematic reviews, on programs designed to prevent children and young people becoming involved in statutory child protection and youth justice systems.

Child protection

Research on programs to prevent child maltreatment, which may lead to involvement in statutory child protection, has found promising results but some methodological limitations prohibiting firm conclusions. Despite the breadth of studies available on prevention of maltreatment, a recent review of systematic reviews and meta-analyses⁷ noted that there is limited *rigorous* evidence in this area. These authors noted concerns about the measures used and poor study designs. They noted that while some interventions show effects in some settings, on the whole, the effects reported in studies included in their review were small or inconsistent.

Family home visits and parenting education are frequently used interventions aimed at preventing child maltreatment.⁸ Mikton and Butchart (2009)⁹ conducted a systematic review of reviews and

² A targeted search was conducted to suit the purpose of this literature review. Systematic search and selection processes were not used.

³ Brand, S., Morgan, F., Stabler, L., Weightman, A. L., Willis, S., Searchfield, L., ... & Evans, R. (2018). *Mapping the evidence about what works to safely reduce the number of children and young people in statutory care: A systematic scoping review*. What Works Centre For Children's Social Care.

⁴ Stevens, E., & Gahan, L. (2024). *Improving the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children. A consolidation of systemic recommendations and evidence*. Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Australian Human Rights Commission.

⁵ Wise, S. (2017). *Developments to strengthen systems for child protection across Australia*. Child Family Community Australia, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁶ Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) (2016). *The public health approach to preventing child maltreatment*. Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS).

⁷ Gautschi, J., & Lätsch, D. (2024). The effectiveness of interventions to prevent and reduce child maltreatment in high-income countries: an umbrella review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 153, 106845.

⁸ Malmberg-Heimonen, I., Finne, J., Tøge, A. G., Pontoppidan, M., Dion, J., Tømmerås, T., & Pedersen, E. (2024). Interventions to Reduce Child Maltreatment: A Systematic Review with a Narrative Synthesis. *International Journal on Child Maltreatment: Research, Policy and Practice*, 1-17.

⁹ Mikton, C., & Butchart, A. (2009). Child maltreatment prevention: a systematic review of reviews. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 87, 353-361.

found that home-visiting, parent education, abusive head trauma prevention and multi-component intervention demonstrated promising outcomes in preventing child maltreatment. However, the authors cautioned that methodological constraints limited the reliability of these findings.

A meta-analysis of early prevention programs¹⁰ found a significant reduction in abusive and neglectful caregiver behaviours, and improvement in risk factors, including parent-child interactions and child, parent and family functioning. In another systematic review, Gubbels et al. (2021)¹¹ found some support for the effectiveness of home visiting programs for preventing child maltreatment, particularly when they focused on improving parental expectations of the child, parental sensitivity to the child's needs, and when they incorporated video-feedback. In their systematic review, Holzer et al. (2006)¹² suggested that home visiting programs were more effective when they were delivered by trained staff, targeted specific client groups, and addressed both maternal and child wellbeing. Parenting education programs generally led to small positive family outcomes, including improved parenting competence and reducing risk factors for child maltreatment. However, the direct impact of parent education on reducing incidents of child maltreatment remained unclear, as many studies did not measure this outcome explicitly.¹² Other systematic review evidence has also suggested that parenting interventions demonstrated effectiveness in preventing and reducing child abuse and neglect.^{7,13} However, the systematic review by Chen and Chan (2015)¹³ also found evidence that parenting programs are less effective in improving some risk factors for child maltreatment, such as parental depression and stress.

In their review of various parenting programs aimed at prevention of maltreatment, the Department of Community Justice and the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (2020)¹⁴ found that most programs included in their systematic review had positive effects on preventing maltreatment and/or improving parenting skills. They also identified five core components of programs that aim to prevent child maltreatment: engagement; case management; coaching, education and modelling for parents; personal development and self-care for parents; and building social supports and supportive relationships. Van der Put (2017)¹⁵ identified specific components that contribute to the effectiveness of interventions to prevent or reduce child maltreatment, including cognitive-behavioural therapy, home visiting, parent training, family based/multisystemic, substance abuse and combined interventions. Similarly, a rapid evidence review¹⁶ suggested several components of effective interventions to reduce maltreatment, such as engagement, building supportive relationships, building parent capacity, and case management.

Although typically applicable to families already involved in statutory systems, intensive family supports have been widely adopted as a preventative measure for families at-risk of having a child placed in out-of-home care.¹⁷ Bezczky et al. (2020)¹⁸ conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis to investigate the effectiveness of intensive family preservation services in preventing child

¹⁰ Geeraert, L., Van den Noortgate, W., Grietens, H., & Onghena, P. (2004). The effects of early prevention programs for families with young children at risk for physical child abuse and neglect: A meta-analysis. *Child Maltreatment*, 9(3), 277-291.

¹¹ Gubbels, J., van der Put, C., Stams, G., Prinzie, P., & Assink, M. (2021). Components associated with the effect of home visiting programs on child maltreatment: A meta-analytic review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 114, 104981.

¹² Holzer, P. J., Higgins, J. R., Bromfield, L. M., & Higgins, D. J. (2006). *The effectiveness of parent education and home visiting child maltreatment prevention programs*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

¹³ Chen, M., & Chan, K. L. (2016). Effects of parenting programs on child maltreatment prevention: A meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 17(1), 88-104.

¹⁴ The Department of Communities and Justice & the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (2020). *Preventing child maltreatment: What works?* NSW Department of Communities and Justice.

¹⁵ Van der Put, C. E., Assink, M., Gubbels, J., & Boekhout van Solinge, N. F. (2018). Identifying effective components of child maltreatment interventions: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 21, 171-202.

¹⁶ Rotter, R., & Robertson, C. (2023). *Which programs reduce maltreatment and improve safety for vulnerable children?* Family and Community Services Insights analysis and Research (FACSIAR).

¹⁷ Al, C., Stams, G., Bek, M., Damen, E., Asscher, J., & Van der Laan, P. (2012). A meta-analysis of intensive family preservation programs: Placement prevention and improvement of family functioning. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(8), 1472-1479.

¹⁸ Bezczky, Z., El-Banna, A., Petrou, S., Kemp, A., Scourfield, J., Forrester, D., & Nurmatov, U. B. (2020). Intensive Family Preservation Services to prevent out-of-home placement of children: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 102, 104394.

placement in out-of-home care. The review found that intensive family preservation services were effective in preventing child placement up to 24 months after the intervention at the child level, though this effect was not observed at the family level. The findings highlighted that the implementation quality of intensive family preservation services was a critical factor in its success. Another meta-analysis¹⁷ revealed that intensive family preservation programs were effective in preventing out-of-home care placements for families facing multiple challenges. However, the effectiveness of these programs was limited when applied to families experiencing abuse and neglect. Cox et al. (2024)¹⁹ reviewed government-funded prevention programs in one Australian jurisdiction aimed at preventing child protection involvement and/or recurrence of abuse and renotifications. These authors found that while some programs showed benefits for lower-risk families, most lacked robust evidence, particularly for high-risk families.

Youth justice

There has been less research focusing on prevention of the involvement of children and young people in the statutory youth justice system. A review of international literature focusing on reducing juvenile offending indicated that developmental or early intervention programs are among the most promising but the more robust evidence was primarily from the USA with a clear gap in Australian studies.²⁰ Programs that had the greatest impact on preventing youth crime were skill-based and family focused, including home visiting, parent training and family therapy, while promising approaches included mentoring, community-based and hospital-based programs. However, the quality of research on mentoring and community-based programs was low.²¹

Diversion is the primary strategy used in Australia to prevent young people from becoming involved in the youth justice system, however, as noted above, most of the evidence for these approaches comes from the USA.²² Youth mentoring, a frequently used diversion program, has demonstrated positive outcomes in reducing aggression, drug use, and improving academic functioning among high-risk youth.²³ However, a review by Youth Justice NSW (2021)²² found mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of mentoring programs in reducing the risk of entry or re-entry, as opposed to prevention of initial entry, into the youth justice system. This review suggested that mentoring programs need to include the following core components to improve their effectiveness: mentor screening, mentor-mentee matching, supervision and training of mentors, engagement, skills development, and social networks and community engagement. However, the effectiveness of these components has not been investigated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.²²

Summary

Overall, research has suggested that prevention and early intervention programs show some promise for reducing risk factors for child maltreatment and preventing entry into child safety and youth justice systems, although there are some concerns about the methodological limitations of the body of evidence and the lack of Australian research. Research has also indicated low adherence to evidence-based interventions in child and youth service systems and a lack of evaluation of these interventions within a service system level.¹⁹ To effectively meet the needs and improve safety and wellbeing of families, children and young people, research suggests that the

¹⁹ Cox, S., Bromfield, L., Chong, A., & Arney, F. (2024). Opportunities to Strengthen Child Abuse Prevention Service Systems: A Jurisdictional Assessment of Child Welfare Interventions. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 15(1), 69-94.

²⁰ Allard, T., Ogilvie, J., & Stewart, A. (2007). *The efficacy of strategies to reduce juvenile offending*. Griffith University.

²¹ O'Connor, R. M., & Waddell, S. (2015). *What works to prevent gang involvement, youth violence and crime: A Rapid Review of Interventions Delivered in the UK and Abroad*. Early Intervention Foundation.

²² Youth Justice NSW (2021). *Youth mentoring: diverting young people from justice involvement*. <https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/dcj/evidence-portal/documents/youth-mentoring-diverting-young-people-from-justice-involvement.pdf>

²³ Tolan, P., Henry, D., Schoeny, M., Bass, A., Lovegrove, P., & Nichols, E. (2013). Mentoring interventions to affect juvenile delinquency and associated problems: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 9(1), 1-158.

focus should shift from individual interventions to changes in child protection and youth justice systems.^{4,6,19}

Aim

Noting previous researchers' call for systems reform as part of the effort to prevent involvement in statutory services, the purpose of the following literature review was to summarise the evidence for systems reforms and identify what makes service systems effective.

Methods

An initial database search for published studies on systems reform revealed little research into pre-statutory reforms and so the systems reform details reported below were sourced through an internet search of unpublished literature available on websites. Further guidance on principles of successful service systems was sourced through unpublished and published literature.

Findings

Below we describe findings from an internet search for systems reforms²⁴ in Australia and internationally. These reforms included a focus on pre-statutory services, and, at least in part, intended to prevent children and young people becoming involved in statutory child protection or youth justice. We aimed to identify reforms that reported evaluation outcomes, however, with the limited availability of evaluations, some of the reforms reported below include only monitoring and progress reporting. Reforms from Australia are described first, followed by reforms outside of Australia.

Australian service system reforms

Targeted Earlier Intervention Program – New South Wales (from 2020)

Targeted Earlier Intervention Program (TEI) is an initiative of the NSW Department of Communities and Justice that aims to strengthen communities and improve safety and wellbeing within families where there may be risks or identified vulnerabilities, with the intention of preventing involvement in child protection.²⁵ The reform commenced in 2020 and prioritises early intervention for four groups: Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities; young parents experiencing hardship; children up to the age of 5 years; and children and young people at risk of disengagement from school, community and family.

TEI was developed through an extensive community consultation process and is underpinned by the guiding principles of person-centredness, strength-based practice, evidence-informed practice, holistic and collaborative practice, capability building, trauma-informed practice, and flexibility and responsiveness. The program involves collaboration, codesign and coordination across various programs and services in the NSW community including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, child protection, education, recreation and social programs, mental health, and community organisations.

An evaluation of TEI is underway, with the final report due for release later in 2024. The interim report²⁵ addressed questions of program implementation and progress towards collecting outcomes data, and drew on findings from a document review, stakeholder interviews, a TEI provider survey,

²⁴ Reforms may also be referred using terms such as redesigns, transformations, or strategies.

²⁵ Taylor Fry, Social Ventures Australia & Gamarada Universal Indigenous Resources, 2024, *Interim Report (final)*. NSW Department of Communities and Justice Targeted Earlier Intervention Program Evaluation. NSW Department of Communities and Justice https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/service-providers/deliver-services-to-children-and-families/targeted-earlier-intervention-program/Interim_Report_HSDS_revisions_updated_with_GUIR_log_Sep_2024.pdf

and client outcomes datasets. The interim report indicated there has been some progress towards the intended implementation of TEI, however funding has not been fully reallocated to the new priority areas due to existing contracting arrangements. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis have reportedly created a challenging environment for change. While most TEI providers had positive feedback about the reform, they also indicated that data reporting requirements and funding amounts were barriers to implementation. The evaluators also noted that data quality was a challenge.

Interim findings suggest TEI is reaching a large number of clients and these clients are within the identified priority groups, however it was also noted that there are further priority clients with needs that are not being met. One of the objectives of TEI is to invest more in Aboriginal-led programs, which the interim report noted is not yet being achieved. Cultural safety within services was a gap observed by some evaluation participants.

Generational Change Reform Program – Northern Territory (from 2018)

The Generational Change Reform Program is a comprehensive reform approach designed to address critical areas impacting children and families in the Northern Territory. It combines three major inter-related reform programs: Safe, Thriving and Connected (2018-2023), Starting Early for a Better Future (2018-2028), and responses to the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017).

This Program is divided into six key portfolios: Putting Children and Families at the Centre, Improving Care and Protection, Improving Youth Justice, Strengthening Governance and Systems, Preventing Child Sexual Abuse and Supporting Survivors and Victims. Each portfolio includes several programs that focus on key areas of reform, with each program being made up of specific initiatives. For example, the portfolio Improving Youth includes three main programs: Police and Young People, Getting Kids Back on Track, and Youth Detention that Works. The Police and Young People program includes two initiatives: Custody Notification and the Police Youth Division. The Youth Detention that Works program includes three initiatives: Youth Detention Operations, Youth Detention Infrastructure, and Youth Detention Services and Programs²⁶.

Numerous initiatives have been embedded across the Northern Territory Government and within communities under each portfolio. As stated in the 2020 Generational Change Impact Report²⁶, this reform has involved strengthening partnerships between government agencies, stakeholders, and communities, improved service delivery, increased involvement from organisations, and greater family participation in programs aimed at building resilience.

The Generational Change Impact Report (2020)²⁶ asserted that in the two years since the reform commenced in 2018, an improvement in key outcomes for children and young people had been observed. They noted a decline in Productivity Commission-reported substantiations of abuse and neglect in the Northern Territory between 2016-17 and 2018-19, and a steady in the number of Northern Territory children in out-of-home care²⁷. The report also indicated there had been a decline in the rate of Aboriginal young people in detention. The authors concluded there had been significant progress in improving child protection and youth justice measures and services that are designed to help prevent families entering these systems.²⁶

Youth on Track - New South Wales (from 2013)

Youth on Track is an early intervention scheme aimed at supporting children aged 10-17 who are at risk of becoming involved in the youth justice system. Young people access Youth on Track via referrals made by NSW police and other eligible agencies (in the sectors of education, youth justice, justice health and forensic mental health, and mental health services). These referrals are

²⁶ Northern Territory Government, 2020, *Safe, thriving, and connected: Generational change for children and families: Generational change impact report*. https://rmo.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/980326/2020-Generational-Change-Impact-Report.pdf

²⁷ We note the more recent Productivity Commission Report on Government Services (2024), shows an *increase* in substantiations in the Northern Territory each year since 2019-20 and a downward trend in out-of-home care placements since a peak placements in 2017-18 (<https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2024/community-services/child-protection>).

for young people who have had at least one formal contact with police (such as a caution, Youth Justice Conference, or charge) and who show risk factors (such as skipping school, reports of being at risk, substance abuse, mental health issues, having friends involved with the police, family history of domestic violence, and lower than average learning or thinking abilities).²⁸ Starting in 2013, the scheme offers targeted support to young people and their families, interventions that address family dynamics and behaviour, and strategies to improve engagement with education. Key elements of Youth on Track that contribute to the continued achievement of positive outcomes for young people are:

- a focus on early intervention (usually before legal action or a formal charge has been made)
- a holistic and tailored approach (including working with families)
- highly trained professionals
- collaboration across service sectors.

A snapshot report by Youth Justice²⁹ looking at participants of Youth on Track states that in the 12 months following referral to Youth on Track, participants from 2017 to 2021 experienced a significant decrease in formal police contact compared to their rate at the time of referral.²⁹ Past evaluations of Youth on Track (reported in Trimboli, 2019)²⁸ found that participants were highly motivated to engage in the scheme and felt their case plans addressed all relevant issues. Most of the stakeholders interviewed viewed the scheme as beneficial and innovative, with a potential to improve the lives of young people and their families. Findings showed improvements over time, particularly in key areas such as leisure/recreation, education/employment, and peer relationships.²⁸ Youth on Track has been shown to promote positive attitudinal and behavioural changes in young people, helping them make lifestyle adjustments that reduce their risk of offending, such as enrolling in vocational training and building new friendships or community connections. Trimboli's 2019 study²⁸ reported that about one in five (20.8%) of the suggested improvements for Youth on Track focused on better communication, information sharing, and collaboration between staff and local agencies. Suggestions included keeping relevant stakeholders informed about the young person's progress, involving schools more in the program (possibly by contributing to planning), and offering programs in schools that address risk factors for offending behaviour.

Supporting Families Changing Futures - Queensland (from 2014)

In 2013, the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (QCPCOI) developed a roadmap after reviewing Queensland's child protection system. The 121 recommendations in the roadmap served as the foundation of the reform program, Supporting Families Changing Future. The recommendations were grouped under seven thematic domains which aim to work toward better outcomes for children and families. The primary outcome of the reforms was that 'Children and young people live in safe and supportive families and communities'. The four Supporting Outcomes were:

1. Children and families have timely access to high quality services.
2. Queensland's child and family support system is efficient, effective, client-centred and focussed on prevention.
3. The level of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system is significantly reduced.
4. Communities have confidence and trust in the Queensland child protection system.³⁰

According to the original QCPCOI report, the overarching foundational concepts that would need to be in place for the reform to be successful included: governance and shared responsibility,

²⁸ Trimboli, L. (2019). *Youth on Track randomised controlled trial: Process evaluation* (Bureau Brief No. 141). NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

²⁹ NSW Government, 2021, *Youth on Track Snapshot Report*, Communities and Justice. https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-07/Youth_on_Track_2021_Snapshot.pdf

³⁰ Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019, *Queensland Child Protection Reform Program (2014–24) Implementation Evaluation*. Queensland Government. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/Queensland%20Child%20Protection%20Reform%20Program%20%282014-24%29%20Implementation%20Evaluation%20Final%20Report%202019.PDF>

collaboration and information sharing, policy and legislative frameworks, sector capacity, and service system linkages.

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (2019)³⁰ reported on the progress of the reform in the first three years of the 10-year plan. This Implementation Evaluation gathered data by various evaluative methods including analysis of existing data and documents, stakeholder interviews, a workforce survey, community member survey, and place-based studies. The findings in the 2019 report include:

- The reform environment and system had evolved since implementation began.
- 57 of the 121 recommendations had been carried out at the three-year mark.
- Many elements of the reform, such as the phased approach and emphasis on partnerships, had been successfully implemented.
- Governance had adapted to changes in the child protection and family support landscape, as well as the broader human services reform context.
- While overall implementation had been to plan, reforms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities had been slower; stakeholders reported this may be due to the emphasis on thorough consultation during the design phase of initiatives.
- There had been improvements in access and service quality, though the timeliness of responses remained a debated issue.
- There was potential to further simplify how families navigate the system, ensuring they receive the right services at the right time.

The following were reported as areas of improvement:

- Greater awareness of policy and legislative changes were needed, especially within the non-government sector.
- Efforts should focus on ensuring that culture and practice align with policy and legislative updates.
- Training and resource distribution should be expanded across agencies and all system levels.
- More specialised training was necessary to address the complex needs of clients.
- Ongoing senior-level support and advocacy for the dual-pathway model were essential.
- Referral feedback mechanisms between service providers needed improvement.
- Better service coordination was necessary to reduce duplication and enhance stakeholders' understanding of available services.
- There were mixed opinions from both the community and reform stakeholders regarding confidence in the child protection and family support system.³⁰

The Measuring what Matters report presents further evaluation findings on the progress of Supporting Families Changing Futures.³¹ While most of the evaluation focuses on Queensland's child protection system, there are findings on family support services that are worth noting. It was reported that significant investment in Supporting Families Changing Futures was directed towards initiatives such as Intensive Family Support and Family Wellbeing Services to address the high number of reports to Child Safety. This issue was partly attributed to the lack of accessible family support services, which left vulnerable families without the necessary assistance to prevent them from entering the statutory system.³¹ Intensive Family Support services offer parenting support to help families develop the skills and capacity needed to safely care for their children. Families can either self-refer or consent to be referred by agencies like Family and Child Connect, Child Safety, police, and schools. Participation in these secondary services is voluntary, and families must provide consent to receive ongoing support. Similarly, Family Wellbeing Services, provided by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, focus on healing and culture, delivering support to enhance families' social, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing, and to build their capacity to safely care for and protect their children.³¹

³¹ Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021, *Measuring what matters: Evaluating outcomes achieved through the Queensland Child Protection Reform Environment* (2014–2020). Queensland Government. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/Measuring%20what%20matters%20report.pdf>

Keep them Safe - New South Wales (2009-2014)

Introduced in 2009, the Keep Them Safe (KTS) child protection initiative was the New South Wales government's investment into improving the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. The five-year initiative had four key objectives:

- intervening early (enhancing the universal service system and early intervention services)
- responding effectively (reducing the need for children to enter out-of-home-care and supporting those that are in out-of-home-care)
- supporting Aboriginal children and families (improving service delivery and Aboriginal participation)
- and changing practices and systems (improving interagency collaboration and information exchange across all services).³²

KTS involved several key service sectors including health, education, early childhood education and care (including family services and child protection), disability, housing, police, justice, and local government. From the total funding pool of \$750 million, more than \$156 million was invested into prevention and early intervention. The key programs funded by KTS included Brighter Futures, Sustaining NSW Families, Family Referral Services (FRS), Aboriginal Student Liaison Officer Positions, and Home School Liaison Officers (HSLO). As part of the KTS evaluation, Cassells et al. (2014)³² reported that Brighter Futures was the largest program within the child protection system aimed at addressing family vulnerability and after KTS boosted Brighter Futures funding, there was an increase in participation (from 3,502 children in 2008-09 to 7,050 in 2011-12). They also reported a noteworthy increase in participation among families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Cassells et al. concluded that early indicators suggest Brighter Futures may be effective in preventing children from entering the statutory child protection system and out-of-home care.³²

Furthermore, the multi-method evaluation of KTS (including secondary data analysis, stakeholder interviews and consultations, and a workforce survey of 7,056 staff) demonstrated success in changing the system across the four objectives. The evaluation found that the initiative has laid a strong foundation for future improvements in service provision, collaborative practices, early intervention strategies, engagement with Aboriginal communities, and the protection of children at risk of significant harm (ROSH). The cost-effectiveness analysis indicates that KTS funding, especially for prevention and early intervention, has notably reduced the rate of children reported at ROSH to the Child Protection Helpline.³² Continuing challenges were also noted in the report. For example, rather than being child-focused, the system continued to be more system-focused. There also remained considerable concern about whether children meet the ROSH threshold, which determines the responsible agency for providing services. Genuine interagency collaboration for families with children at ROSH was still noted to be uncommon. The overall goal of KTS was not just to enhance information exchange, it was to enable a multi-agency approach to addressing the needs of vulnerable children across all levels of risk.³²

Their Futures Matter – New South Wales (2016-2020)

The Their Futures Matter (TFM) initiative was built on the work of Keep Them Safe (above) and was developed to focus on improved outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and their families across NSW. TFM was introduced as a response to the 2015 Tune Review. The review highlighted that despite previous reforms, the out-of-home care system in NSW was ineffective and unsustainable. It emphasised that the system was not client-centred and failed to improve long-term outcomes for vulnerable children and families. The review also noted that most of the relevant expenditure was directed towards out-of-home care service delivery rather than investing in evidence-based early intervention strategies to address vulnerabilities when they first become apparent.

³² Cassells, R., Cortis, N., Duncan, A., Eastman, C., Gao, G., Giuntoli, G., Katz, I., Keegan, M., Macvean, M., Mavisakalyan, A., Shlonsky, A., Skattebol, J., Smyth, C., & Valentine, K. (2014). *Keep them safe outcomes evaluation final report*. NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet. <https://bcec.edu.au/projects/keep-them-safe-outcomes-evaluation/>

TFM was designed by the former Department of Family and Community Services (FACS). The Implementation Board included members from FACS, as well as the Departments of Premier and Cabinet, Education, Health, Justice, and NSW Treasury. The TFM reform was given \$190 million of funding across four years with the aim to put vulnerable children and families at the heart of services, and direct investment to where funding and programs deliver the greatest social and economic benefits. The TFM reform included the following five key outcomes which relied on appropriate governance, cross-agency collaboration, capacity to evaluate and prioritise initiatives in order to succeed:

- Every child gets the best start and families have access to information and opportunities for self service
- A whole-of-government investment approach is in place to ensure more effective and efficient allocation of resources
- Children, young people and families receive a streamlined, multi-disciplinary response appropriate to their needs
- More children and young people are safe at home, reducing entry into out-of-home care and preventing escalating risk
- Communities are equipped to support children, young people and families (Audit Office of New South Wales, 2020).³³

A performance audit in 2020 reported that the governance and cross-agency partnership arrangements used to implement the TFM reform were found to be ineffective.³³ The audit also found that the TFM evidence base was not sufficiently developed to identify which interventions offered the best long-term outcomes for vulnerable children and families, noting that such initiatives take time. Despite the establishment of important foundations and the trial of new programs during the reform's four-year period, the central goal of the reform (an evidence-based, whole-of-government early intervention approach for vulnerable children and families in NSW) was reportedly not achieved. The auditors concluded that the need and intent behind TFM continue to be relevant and urgent.³³

Strong Families Safe Kids – Tasmania (2016-2020)

Strong Families Safe Kids (SFSK) was an initiative aimed at reforming Tasmania's child protection system by adopting a collaborative, public health approach to child protection. SFSK originated as a response to a 2016 child protection review by Harries which concluded there was an urgent need for a contemporary child protection system. SFSK aimed to shift the focus from addressing child safety risks to promoting overall child wellbeing. It also aimed to change community perceptions of their role in supporting children's safety and wellbeing.³⁴ The implementation of SFSK outlined 30 actions across these five strategies:

- Placing the wellbeing of children at the centre of services
- Building a common, integrated risk assessment and planning system
- Creating a single front door
- Providing better support for children and their families
- Redesigning the Child Protection Service with additional support.

The implementation of the SFSK reforms included a cross-governance structure, involving representatives from the Departments of Communities Tasmania, Health, Justice, Education and the Department of Police, Emergency Management and Correction, as well as some non-government agencies. Four years into Tasmania's newly designed child safety system (previously known as child protection system), the SFSK evaluation³⁴ reported significant cultural shifts as the system worked to integrate a public health approach to child safety. The Advice and Referral Line

³³ Audit Office of New South Wales. (2020). *Their futures matter: New South Wales Auditor-General's report*. Sydney, NSW: Audit Office of New South Wales. <https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Their%20Futures%20Matter%20-%20PDF%20Report.pdf>

³⁴ Jose, K., Hyslop, S., Frey, R., & Le Roux, A. (2020). *Strong Families Safe Kids: Summary evaluation report*. University of Tasmania. https://www.utas.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1475576/Strong-Families-Safe-Kids-Summary-Evaluation-Report.pdf

(ARL) was a major change introduced by SFSK. The ARL was the first point of contact for anyone with concerns about child wellbeing and safety, focusing on early intervention and integrated support. The evaluation by Jose et al. (2020)³⁴ reviewed user experiences with the ARL, finding mixed feedback. While some users appreciated the ARL's combined advice and referral functions, others reported confusion and frustration due to unclear roles and responsibilities within the child safety system. Those who engaged regularly with the ARL reported improved collaboration and planning, however, clearer role definitions and responsibilities could enhance the ARL's effectiveness.³⁴ As part of SFSK, the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework was developed to address the need for a common language between services. The evaluation found that the Wellbeing Framework was reported to: help focus attention on wellbeing; enhance collaboration and information-sharing; support working with children, young people and families; provide a clearer decision-making process; assist with contract management; support the referrals process; assist in the evaluation of programs; and help guide case management discussions and aid planning and care team meetings.³⁴ Overall, these aforementioned initiatives contributed to improved collaboration across participating agencies and sectors in supporting families and children in Tasmania. While SFSK had made some progress with the initiated changes, further work remains to fully embed the new approach across the entire system and achieve the anticipated improvements in child wellbeing in Tasmania.³⁴

Closing the Gap – National (updated in 2020)

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap aims to address the deep-rooted inequality experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, ensuring their life outcomes are equal to those of all Australians. This includes addressing the disparities in the child protection and youth justice systems. Developed through collaboration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives and all Australian governments, the Agreement commits to genuine partnerships in creating policies to close the gap. The four Priority Reforms of the Closing the Gap agreement are:

- strengthening partnerships and shared decision-making
- building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector
- transforming the way that government services work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- and enhancing data access for informed decision making.³⁵

The reform aims to improve life outcomes measured against 17 socio-economic outcomes (SEOs) by strengthening the sectors of justice, social and emotional wellbeing, health, housing, early childhood care and development, disability and languages.³⁵ Progress will be reviewed every three years from when the agreement was signed in 2020 to identify where improvements may be needed.

The Productivity Commission's 2024 report³⁵ states that overall, governments are not adequately delivering on the commitment to address the inequality experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Progress in implementing the Priority Reforms has generally been weak, with actions largely resulting in minor adjustments to existing practices. These changes have not resulted in noticeable improvements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, raising concerns about whether governments fully understand the change needed to achieve the transformation they have committed to.

In the Productivity Commission's 2024 review, three SEOs were examined for alignment with the priority reforms: SEO 11 (Youth Justice) which focused on reforms to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility; SEO 12 (Child Protection) which focused on ensuring that decisions regarding the placement of children in out-of-home care are made with appropriate oversight and authority; and SEO 13 (family safety) which focused on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan (part of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children) which involves culturally appropriate strategies, community involvement, and targeted support to address and

³⁵ Productivity Commission. (2024). *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Study report, volume 1*, Australian Government Canberra.
<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/closing-the-gap-review/report/closing-the-gap-review-report.pdf>

reduce violence within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. While there has been some progress in partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and in recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Sovereignty as a guiding principle under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan, a strong message was conveyed during the review: progress on the Priority Reforms is hindered by the lack of power sharing needed for joint decision-making and the failure of governments to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know what is best for their communities. According to the Productivity Commission, a paradigm shift is needed to address this power imbalance and to meet the Priority Reform areas, with actions grounded in a clear rationale for how they will drive that transformation.³⁵

Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy – Western Australia (from 2016)

The Department of Communities' Building Safe and Strong Families: Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy (EIFS)³⁶ was introduced in 2016. It set out to offer targeted supports and services to children most at risk of entering the child protection system and families facing complex challenges, with an overall goal of system re-design to effectively deliver earlier intervention and family support services.

Under the EIFS Strategy, the Department of Communities, in partnership with the community services sector, delivers a continuum of support services for families facing complex challenges. Services range from earlier diversionary support, more intensive diversionary support, prevention supports, and active reunification supports to return children safely home as soon as possible. It has four focus areas:

- Delivering shared outcomes with collective effort
- A culturally competent service system
- Diverting families from the child protection system
- Preventing children entering out-of-home-care.

While the Strategy referenced the development of an evaluation framework to measure the impact and effectiveness of the Strategy, it was audited internally through the Office of the Auditor General.³⁷ Twenty-five actions were outlined under four key areas.

The audit included statistical data on the sorts of concerns experienced by families who engaged with the Department:

- family and domestic violence – 74%
- drug abuse – 48%
- mental health – 47%
- alcohol abuse – 24%
- homelessness – 16%
- a need for greater disability support – 12%.

Findings concluded that the Department has implemented 60% of the strategy's actions, but it was unable to show it is delivering the intended outcomes.

Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor – Victoria (2016-2023)

The Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (FVRIM) was established to oversee the implementation of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria. Annual reports were written to describe the Victorian Government's implementation of priority actions relating to family violence, across a range of agencies. It was intended as a whole-of-government reform program and the Monitor independently reviewed Government actions in relation to the Family Violence Reform to hold them to account. The function of the Family Violence

³⁶ Government of Western Australia. (2016). *Building Safe and Strong Families: Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy*. <https://www.wa.gov.au/media/44058/download?inline>

³⁷ Office of the Auditor General. (2024). *Implementation of the Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy*. <https://audit.wa.gov.au/reports-and-publications/reports/implementation-of-the-earlier-intervention-and-family-support-strategy/>

Reform Implementation Monitor was extended for a further 18 months after COVID thwarted the full implementation of some initiatives and work was concluded on 31 May 2023.

Findings summarised here come from the FVRIM final report³⁸ tabled in parliament. The report covers reform implementation for the period 1 November 2019 to 1 November 2020. As the final report under the current monitoring arrangements, the report also reflects on the nearly five years since the Royal Commission into Family Violence to highlight the major achievements in implementing the reform to date, as well as the areas that require more effort and should be the focus of future monitoring.

In taking a systemic view, the report considers the overall progress of implementation against the 11 'system limitations' described in the Royal Commission's report to assess the extent to which these constraints have been addressed nearly five years into the 10-year reform program.

With this broader focus, a different monitoring approach was adopted than in previous years. In addition to deep dives into specific topics, the Monitor called for submissions from the sector and other stakeholders on the questions of 'What has changed since the Royal Commission?' and 'What remains to be done?'. An implementation science model was also applied to three areas of the reform to assess the implementation approaches against the evidence base on effective implementation to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement.

While significant improvements were identified in the report, it was also acknowledged that the scale of the reforms set out by the Royal Commission requires sustained and long-term change.

Upon analysing the program against Royal Commission recommendations and system limitations, the Victorian Government recommended the following priorities within the reform program:

- Improved governance structures
- Improved data, evaluation, performance and outcomes
- Enhanced service integration
- Workforce Perpetrator accountability
- A focus on children and young people
- Addressing housing
- Prevention.

Stronger Families and Communities Strategy – National (2000-2004)

Stronger Families and Communities (SFCS) was a Commonwealth Government initiative aiming to give families, their children and communities opportunities for a better future. The Strategy focused on the Government's concerns about the health, wellbeing and capacity of many young Australians. It was a primary, pre-statutory intervention.

The below content is drawn from RMIT (2008)³⁹, 'Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004'.

The original priority areas for the Strategy were:

- Early childhood and the needs of families with young children
- Strengthening marriage and relationships
- Balancing work and family.

In October 2002, the priorities of the Strategy were revised to focus on:

- Early intervention and prevention – family relationships, early childhood and crime/violence
- Welfare reform – jobs, training, volunteering and social participation.

The Strategy was funded initially for \$240 million, later revised to \$225 million. The Strategy consisted of seven community-based linked initiatives that provided funding and support for projects in the community and six broader initiatives. While the projects funded under the Strategy were very diverse, they all aimed to contribute to stronger families and/or stronger communities.

³⁸ Victorian Government. (2020). *Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor*.

<https://www.fvrims.vic.gov.au/report-family-violence-reform-implementation-monitor-1-november-2020/print-all>

³⁹ RMIT University Circle. (2008). *Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000 – 2004*. <https://vgls.sdp.sirsidynix.net.au/client/search/asset/1292488>

The Strategy was not just about funding organisations, but about developing a ‘social coalition’ between government and community groups to work collaboratively to strengthen families and communities.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy was comprehensively evaluated by RMIT University and other consortium partners over three years, and reported learnings and achievements.

The evaluation was designed to investigate the overall achievements of the Strategy in strengthening families and communities (including any negative impacts and other costs incurred), the factors that contributed to these impacts, and the main learnings for future policy and practice. Evaluation questions were:

1. How is the Strategy contributing to family and community strength in the short-term, medium-term, and longer-term?
2. To what extent has the Strategy produced unintended outcomes (positive and negative)?
3. In broad qualitative terms, what were the costs and benefits of the Strategy relative to similar national and international interventions?
4. What were the particular features of the Strategy that made a difference?
5. What is helping or hindering the initiatives to achieve their objectives? What explains why some initiatives work? In particular, does the interaction between different initiatives contribute to achieving better outcomes?
6. How does the Strategy contribute to the achievement of outcomes in conjunction with other initiatives, programs or services in the area?
7. What else is helping or hindering the Strategy to achieve its objectives and outcomes? What works best for whom, why and when?
8. How can the Strategy achieve better outcomes?

Data collection methods relied on quantitative and qualitative evidence about the implementation and outcomes of projects and the overall Strategy, including reports, questionnaires, project documentation and case studies of some projects using field visits and interviews.

Three features of the Strategy made a difference to the success of projects: the targeting framework and support provided through the Strategy to develop proposals; Strategy support and flexibility during implementation of projects; and the explicit focus on the eight principles underpinning the Strategy.

Learnings include allowing sufficient time for planning, consultation and partnership development before starting projects, improving the timeliness and certainty of project selection processes, and improving opportunities for projects to contribute to the evidence base for policy and practice as well as drawing from it.

Benefits and costs were considered from the perspectives of a range of stakeholders: project participants; auspice agencies; other agencies; the broader society and economy; and governments. Twelve risks associated with identifying benefits and costs were identified and discussed. The achievements of the Strategy describe a range of benefits for families and communities who participated in Strategy projects. The increased capacity developed by individuals, families, communities and the agencies that work with them has the potential to achieve broad and far-reaching long-term benefits due to both positive outcomes achieved and negative outcomes avoided. On the other hand, some communities were disappointed when they were not approved for funding. The delay in approving funding and consequent reductions in the duration of many projects resulted in additional costs for the Department, the auspice agencies and communities.

The evaluation found that the overall model adopted for the Strategy can work. The model was associated with short-term to medium-term benefits in outcomes for individuals and families that participate in projects, provided the projects were able to effectively implement the principles of the strategy and were well supported. The Strategy was found to have the potential to contribute to wider and longer-term community impacts.

International service system reforms

Youth Justice Initiative – Canada (2015-2020)

The Youth Justice Initiative (YJI) was established to support the implementation of the Youth Criminal Justice Act through funding to maintain programs and services including diversionary programs, and respond to new and emerging youth justice issues. The ultimate objective of the YJI was to foster a fairer, more effective youth justice system, defined as:

- Increased use of extrajudicial measures (EJM)
- Appropriate use of courts by youth justice officials
- Appropriate use of custody by judges
- Responses by youth justice officials.

The YJI also provided the architecture for the three funding components that serve federal and provincial/territorial governments. Total budget for the YJI was approximately \$160 million annually for the five-year period from 2015-16 to 2019-20, with most funds allocated as grants and contributions funding through the three funding components of the Initiative.

One evaluation⁴⁰ of YJI focused on two of the funding programs (the third had been evaluated separately). Those two programs were the Youth Justice Services Funding Program (YJSFP) and the Intensive Rehabilitative Custody and Supervision (IRCS) Program. The evaluation scope included a review of available information, consultations with stakeholders and analysis of the previous 2010 and 2016 evaluations. The evaluation methodology involved literature and document analysis, file review, individual interviews and case studies of funded programs and services.

Service sectors involved included youth justice and police and this was a targeted reform.

The evaluation reported on findings under three criteria:

- **Relevance** — The evaluation found the YJI continued to have relevance and was flexible in its support to jurisdictions to address the changing youth justice landscape, and that trends included decreasing rates of crime and involvement in the youth justice system.
- **Effectiveness** — Findings on effectiveness were mixed. National data confirmed that fewer young people were being charged and, when charged, were less likely to receive a custodial sentence. Further, the evaluation found limited evidence of gaps or backlogs in priority programming and reported a positive impact on provincial/territorial capacity to implement programs and services. However, sustainability and reduction of funding was a concern, as well as achieving priorities in a timely way.
- **Efficiency** — The evaluation reported that the evaluated funding components were well-designed and implemented, with appropriate allocation of funding for important priorities, and had a high degree of satisfaction with regard to how the IRCS program was managed and delivered.

Child Welfare Redesign – Canada (from 2020)

According to the Government of Ontario, Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (2021),⁴¹ the Child Welfare Redesign has been built to transform child and family services to strengthen families and communities via prevention, early intervention and finding more permanent placements for children and young people in out-of-home care. It was developed with input from users and sector stakeholders, with more than 100 sessions held and 3,000 responses received to an online survey. Five pillars underpin the Redesign:

1. Child, youth, family and community wellbeing
2. Quality of care
3. Strengthening youth supports

⁴⁰ Department of Justice Canada. (2021). *Evaluation of the Youth Justice Initiative Final Report*. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cp-pm/eval/rep-rap/2021/youth-jeunes/docs/youth-justice-initiative-evaluation-report-eng.pdf>

⁴¹ Government of Ontario, Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (2021). *Child welfare redesign*. Ontario, Canada. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/child-welfare-redesign#section-1>

4. Improving stability and permanency
5. System accountability and sustainability.

The Redesign is in its infancy and the website indicates that broad engagement is currently taking place. This engagement is critical to ensure that policies and initiatives are responsive to the diverse needs of users of these services. Progress is reported on a timeline and the most recent announcement was government investment of \$68 million in a new program to connect young people involved in child welfare to additional services and supports when they prepare to leave out-of-home care and after exiting care. Another area of progress is extending the moratorium on young people leaving care.

There have been progress and annual reports published, but no formal evaluation as yet.

Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy – New Zealand (2020-2031)

The vision of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (the Strategy) is that New Zealand is the best place in the world for children and young people. While exploring broad domains of child and youth wellbeing, it has a specific focus on reducing poverty as it is well understood that poverty is a contributor to poor life outcomes and involvement in statutory systems.⁴²

The below content comes from New Zealand Government (2024),⁴³ 'Annual report on the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy and Child Poverty Related Indicators: July 2022 to June 2023'.

The Strategy was developed in consultation with 6,000 children and young people and is set out according to six outcomes that children and young people:

- Are loved, safe and nurtured
- Have what they need
- Are happy and healthy
- Are learning and developing
- Are accepted, respected and connected
- Are involved and empowered.

According to internal government documents, this Strategy was considered to be a world-leading approach in terms of its development. It is reported on annually against the outcomes, using a wide range of indicators (34) to measure progress on each outcome. Data sources vary from New Zealand surveys and government datasets, as well as international measures such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

The 2022-23 report⁴³ describes the change observed on outcomes since 2019-2020, the first year of reporting on the Strategy, to 2022-23. In previous annual reports the year-on-year change was reported. However, now that more time has passed since inception, more data is available, facilitating greater understanding of trends. The scale of change is measured as:

- Improving
- No change
- Worsening, or
- Change not known.

The rates of youth offending and child abuse allegations requiring follow up have decreased over time, so these outcomes were reported as 'improving'.

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) – Scotland (from 2006)

GIRFEC aims to provide Scotland with a consistent framework and shared language for promoting, supporting, and safeguarding the wellbeing of children and young people. It is locally embedded and reportedly positively embraced by organisations, services and practitioners across Children's

⁴² New Zealand Government. (2024). *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*.

<https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/child-youth-wellbeing/index.html>

⁴³ New Zealand Government.(2024). *Annual Report on the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy and Child Poverty Related Indicators*. <https://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/child-youth-wellbeing/reports/child-and-youth-wellbeing-strategy-cpri-annual-report-july-2022-to-june-2023.pdf>

Services Planning Partnerships, with a focus on changing culture, systems and practice for the benefit of babies, infants, children, young people and their families (Scottish Government).⁴⁴ GIFREC focuses on identifying, understanding, and responding to the needs and strengths of children, young people and families in a timely, preventative manner.

The core components of Getting it Right for Every Child are⁴⁵:

1. A focus on improving outcomes for children, young people and their families
2. A common approach to gaining consent and to sharing information where appropriate
3. An integral role for children, young people, and families in assessment, planning, and intervention
4. A unified approach to identifying concerns, needs, and agreeing on actions and outcomes
5. Streamlined planning, assessment, and decision-making processes
6. Consistent high standards of cooperation, joint working, and communication where more than one agency needs to be involved, locally and across Scotland
7. A Named Person for every child and young person and a Lead Professional (where necessary) to coordinate and monitor multiagency activity
8. Maximising the skilled workforce within universal services to address needs and risks as early as possible
9. A confident and competent workforce across all services
10. The capacity to share demographic, assessment, and planning information electronically within and across agency boundaries

Coles et al. (2016)⁴⁵ undertook a critical analysis of the Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) policy framework during its implementation. Its intent is to improve children's wellbeing in Scotland, United Kingdom, and it represents a distinct way of thinking, an agenda for change, and the future direction of child welfare policy via universal public services. It aspires to reduce inequalities and improve life outcomes for Scottish children and young people. The authors reported tensions around intrusion, data gathering, professional roles and balancing wellbeing against child protection that could threaten the effectiveness of the policy if not resolved.

Scotland's 32 local authority administrations are charged with implementation, and as such, there is some inconsistency in children's services across different areas. Acknowledging the diversity in different parts of the country, the GIRFEC framework does allow some local flexibility.⁴⁵

Considerable grey and some published literature exists on this Framework, which is implemented across Scotland. However, evaluations are often place-based rather than for the whole system (e.g., East Ayrshire evaluation of Team Around the Child),⁴⁶ or they relate to a broader Scottish policy context rather than GIRFEC (e.g., Stephen et al, 2015).⁴⁷

Children and Young People's Plan – Wales (2019-2022)

The Our Plan for all Children and Young People (2019-22) was published in 2019⁴⁸, outlining the universal priorities and aspirations the Children's Commissioner for Wales had to deliver better life outcomes for every child and young person. This Plan was developed after consultation (via survey, workshops and meetings) with children and adults and a broader evidence review. This engagement was identified as an important stage in shaping a purposeful and relevant Strategy.

⁴⁴ Scottish Government. *Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)*. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/>

⁴⁵ Coles, E., Cheyne, H., Rankin, J., & Daniel, B. (2016). Getting It Right for Every Child: A National Policy Framework to Promote Children's Wellbeing in Scotland, United Kingdom. *The Milbank Quarterly*, 94(2), 334-365.

⁴⁶ East Ayrshire Council website: <http://www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk/>

⁴⁷ Stephen, J., Lerpiniere, J., Young, E., and Welch, V. (2015) *Integrating Health and Social Care in Scotland : Potential Impact on Children's Services - Report Two: Study Findings*. CELCIS, Glasgow. <http://www.celcis.org/knowledge-bank/search-bank/i...>

⁴⁸ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Three-Year-Plan-19-22.pdf>

As detailed in an evaluation report by the Children’s Commissioner of Wales (April, 2022),⁴⁹ this Plan has an intentionally broad remit, covering all the service systems a child or young person might engage with including child protection and youth justice. The internal evaluation reflected on how progress was achieved across the ambitions and tracked the government and Commissioner’s actions and accountability. One notable achievement was banning physical punishment of children, while another is health and social services working together to support children and families. The evaluation was done through talking and listening to children and young people and responding to feedback directly received, rather than an independent evaluation. The Commissioner spoke to 20,000 children and young people and 51,000 survey responses.

Future actions were shaped from the Plan, including:

- A single system of early childhood education and care (ECEC).
- Funded care for children
- Encouraging speaking the Welsh language with children
- Assisting low-income families to buy school supplies
- Better support for unemployed people with complex needs
- Lowering the voting age.

Discussion

This report has summarised high-level evidence for prevention programs and described a sample of systems reforms from Australia and overseas. In this section we provide a summary of findings regarding these systems reforms and present additional suggestions regarding what may contribute to the success of service systems.

Summary of findings

While there is agreement that earlier intervention and prevention is needed, systems reforms with a lens to addressing statutory involvement appear to focus on the later end of the service system continuum.

Overall, system strategies are intentionally broad and opaque. They may be accompanied by action plans and operationalisation of the priorities but these often come about some time later and similarly lack clarity. The strategies themselves often lack detail on how the focus areas can be actioned and operationalised and don’t lay out clear criteria for measurement of outcomes.

Some of the available literature pertains to Commissioners’ plans and reforms. While statutory bodies, they are not critiqued in the same way as Government strategies and the plans are often intentionally broad and ambitious. They usually share similar pillars for children’s outcomes, though limited participation in decisions and planning that affect children, young people and their families’ lives was seen across all the strategies analysed. Usually statutory bodies like Children’s Commissioners need to provide at least annual reporting on the progress and implementation of their strategies to the Parliament. In this sense, while they may be considered ‘evaluated’ they are in fact simply monitored; that is, reported on in parliamentary papers against specific actions.

In general, there appears to be limited publicly available evaluation. In some cases, what is available tends toward individual components of the reform, such as evaluations at the program-level rather than at the whole reform or systems-level (e.g., South Australian Government *Child and Family Service System* reform⁵⁰). There are also various reforms in Australia that are early in establishment and/or have yet to report an evaluation (e.g., Queensland Government *Putting*

⁴⁹ Children’s Commission for Wales (April, 2022). *Our plan for all children and young people 2019-22: Evaluation*. https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/CCFW-Three-Year-plan_Evaluation_E-2.pdf

⁵⁰ Government of South Australia. (2023). *Child and Family Support System (CFSS)*. <https://dhs.sa.gov.au/how-we-help/child-and-family-support-system-cfss/about-cfss>

Queensland Kids First,⁵¹ Australian Government *Early Years Strategy*,⁵² Tasmanian Government *It Takes a Village*,⁵³ and Victorian Government *Strong Families, Safe Children*⁵⁴).

Given the time needed to implement systems change, there is also likely considerable lag time between reform commencement and potential public availability of evaluation findings. While we were able to find some detailed evaluations, such as the evaluation of KTS, and some evaluations of systems reforms show promising results, overall we note a lack of robust evaluation, inconsistent reporting of outcomes, appropriateness of the data chosen to measure outcomes and effectiveness of the strategy, a lack of clarity on how the strategy is operationalised into actions, and overall, the pace of change is slow.

Differences in data collection methods and measurement protocols make cross-jurisdiction comparisons challenging. There have been several efforts to compare statistics across jurisdictions including the rates of reports to the child protection system, rates of children entering and in out-of-home care and rates of re-reports and re-entries into care. However, this remains a challenge as definitions and data collection processes differ between jurisdictions.⁵⁵

Principles of a successful service system

An emerging body of evidence finds that an interconnected, flexible and collaborative service system is the most effective way to assist families and children living in disadvantage.⁵⁶ It takes supported families and communities to raise a child, and it takes good systems to enable families and communities to do so.⁵⁷ While many systems have engaged in significant reforms in recent years, there is little available information, from the above examples of systems reform, about what makes a system effective. Overall, there is also little consensus about what systems change is, and there are a multitude of ways of approaching it. It is grounded in both theory and practice. At the heart of it, systems change is about maximising social impact with available resources, and thinking strategically about complex problems and innovative solutions without being bound by personal and institutional interests.⁵⁸

Well-planned service systems are underpinned by an established theory of change, and clear plan for evaluating outcomes.⁵⁹ Effective systems have broad scope and are visionary, but with clear outcomes and measurement strategies spelt out to a fine-grained level of specificity. Improving service system design also requires having clear service models, tailoring programs to specific groups, cultural and language needs, determining appropriate program intensity, maintaining strong clinical and cultural governance, ensuring a well-trained workforce, and conducting regular evaluation to assess effectiveness and drive improvements.¹⁹

Effective service responses are ones that have been developed in consultation with the end users, as well as the agencies and stakeholders charged with implementation to ensure they are fit for

⁵¹ Queensland Government. *Putting Queensland Kids First*. <https://www.qld.gov.au/about/putting-qld-kids-first>

⁵² Australian Government. (2024). *Early Years Strategy*. <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services/early-years-strategy>

⁵³ Tasmanian Government. (2024). *It takes a Tasmanian village: Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*. <https://wellbeing.tas.gov.au>

⁵⁴ Victorian Government. *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children*. <https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/roadmap-reform-strong-families-safe-children>

⁵⁵ Katz, I., Cortis, N., Shlonsky, A., & Mildon, R. (2016, May). *Modernising child protection in New Zealand: Learning from system reforms in other jurisdictions*. Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit. <https://thehub.sia.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Modernising-Child-Protection-report.pdf>

⁵⁶ Stuart, J., Krahe, M. A., Branch, S., & Gibson, M. (2023). Mapping the service system that supports children and families in the context of place-based disadvantage: Potential leverage points for discussion. *Wellbeing, Space and Society*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2023.100165>

⁵⁷ Hogan, M., Hatfield Dodds, L., Barnes, L., & Struthers, K. (2021, February). *Systems leadership for child wellbeing project: Stage 1 synthesis report*. ANZSOG. <https://www.aracy.org.au/documents/item/832>

⁵⁸ Abercrombie, R., Harries, E., & Wharton, R. (2015, June). *Systems change: A guide to what it is and how to do it*. Lankelly Chase. <https://www.aracy.org.au/documents/item/755>

⁵⁹ McTier, A., Mackinnon, K., & Ottaway, H. (2023, June). *Case studies of transformational reform*. Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection. https://www.celcis.org/application/files/8216/9346/8290/CSRR_Case_Studies_of_Transformational_Reform_Programmes_-_CEL CIS_-_June_2023.pdf

purpose and appropriate. While the strategy needs to be sufficiently broad to achieve systems change, it cannot be applied as a one-size-fits-all and must allow for operational discretion. Implementation needs to be place-based and using a local lens, with flexibility and contextualisation for different cohorts and communities to realise its full strategic intent. They should also be written as succinctly as possible using plain language and limited jargon, so the strategies can be understood by a broad audience.

Patience in system reform is critical. While some aspects of reform can happen quickly, like the appointment of staff and establishment of new structures, more transformational changes of culture and strategy are often more complex to shift and implementation takes much longer to achieve.⁵⁹ Furthermore, statutory systems face a complex range of workforce issues, including training, coaching and supervision, worker satisfaction, churn and administrative burden. These are both resource and quality issues and a high turnover of staff creates significant problems.⁵⁵

In the context of statutory systems, the complexity of change is even more profound. Thus, preventing involvement in these systems is not an easy task. It is essential that a whole-of-government approach is taken, by breaking down silos and avoiding single responsibility by any one agency or department.⁵⁵ Strategies and initiatives must account for the broad range of factors that contribute to involvement with statutory systems and system-wide alignment is required to create the conditions where children and families benefit. Agencies and departments, from housing to education to justice to health to human and community services, must work cohesively and in a connected way to drive change forward. The benefits of early intervention are distributed not just within portfolios but across departments. This means the most effective funding model for early intervention impact should be grounded in the system rather than department silos. Another way of saying this is that priority-setting and budgeting for early intervention funding should be based on people rather than services.⁶⁰

The need for absolute clarity and understanding of relative roles, responsibilities and accountability cannot be overstated.⁵⁹ According to Katz et al. (2016)⁵⁵, systems are attempting to refocus on prevention and early intervention, including by additional resources focused on early intervention and providing a differential response to reduce numbers of children in the child protection system and in out-of-home care.

Enduring strategies, with regular review and monitoring, that outlast political cycles are more likely to be successful than a short-term reform agenda. This can be challenging with service systems often having a high turnover of staff, making it difficult to have continuity and consistently follow a strategy through as it was intended. Adequate resourcing for implementation is critical to success, including additional staff, training and supports as well as a climate of encouragement among staff.⁵⁹

Service systems are traditionally weighted heavily toward 'treatment' and acute services, leaving systems lagging when it comes to effectively intervening early, and ideally at a person's first presentation to a service.⁶⁰ Effective service systems strike a delicate funding balance, which prioritises early and preventative strategies on equal footing as specialist and reactive services. There has been an increasing emphasis on embedding relationship-based practice across service systems, working with clients in a positive, strengths-based, and empowering manner.⁵⁹ It has also been suggested that system reform should re-examine budgeting, co-investment and commissioning for outcomes, ensuring there is funding for more upstream developmental, preventive and reward integrated efforts.

According to Rose and others (2022),⁶⁰ a successful early intervention system fundamentally offers the right services (i.e., evidence informed, and effective services to address need) at the right time (i.e., in response to a problem as it first emerges) to the right people (i.e., those in the most need who can benefit most) in the right way (i.e., tailored to people's needs, preferences and values). The preconditions for a successful early intervention system are an adequately resourced and

⁶⁰ Rose, V., Mildon, R. & Hateley-Browne, J. (2022). *What early intervention looks like across the service system*. Paper 1 prepared for the Victorian Department of Treasury & Finance. Centre for Evidence and Implementation. <https://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/What%20successful%20early%20intervention%20looks%20like%20across%20the%20service%20system%20-%20CEI.pdf>

integrated system invested in person-centred care, evidence-informed practice, outcome measurement and continuous quality improvement.

Systems comprise of a dynamic interaction of many interacting actors, including politicians, policymakers, service providers and clients, each with their own role to play and their own objectives and motivations. To this end, achieving system change requires the contribution of all stakeholders in each of the nested systems to improve the outcomes for children and families. Transformational reform requires political will at every level, including states and territories, and strong stewardship, collaboration and coordination at the national level.⁶¹ Harmonious relationships between government and public servants are critical; that is, politics and policy must walk hand-in-hand to achieve system change. Embedding the voices and rights of children, families and communities at the centre of strategy and service design drives outcomes.^{59,61}

Successful system change/transformation is not easy, with 80 per cent of government efforts to public sector reform failing to meet their objectives.⁶² Using a Participatory Systems Mapping approach, Stuart and others (2023)⁵⁶ have explored the most prominent levers for positive outcomes at the level of the community, family and individual child. The paper demonstrated that the service system supporting children, young people and their families in a region experiencing disadvantage is a complex and densely connected network.

However, the McKinsey Centre for Government⁶² suggests there are common elements and principles of effective systems that can be applied, including:

- Having a clear purpose and clearly articulated priorities and targets that are embedded throughout the organisation
- Passionate and committed leadership
- Bi-directional communication to and with stakeholders.

According to Reforming Health Care: The Single System Solution,⁶³ other principles include:

- Consistency, rather than fragmentation, across parts of the system
- Universal coverage
- Measuring what matters and consumer-focused service delivery
- Equitable access across the system
- Comprehensive information on performance
- Incentivised payments and informed consumer choice, where possible.

Milner and colleagues (2022)⁶⁴ state that successfully applied systems thinking interventions have the following common elements:

- Purpose: clearly defined and shared goals and aims for multiple stakeholder groups.
- Context: a deep understanding of local context.
- Process: codesign and implementation that incorporates both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' elements and a strong focus on stakeholder engagement, especially at the community level.
- Continual learning: using data and indicators for monitoring, adaptation and feedback as well as mixed methods approaches for monitoring and evaluation.
- Collaboration and networking: A key to intervention design and implementation.

⁶¹ Australian Human Rights Commission (2024). 'Help way earlier!': How Australia can transform child justice to improve safety and wellbeing. Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission.

https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/1807_help_way_earlier_-_accessible_0.pdf

⁶² Allas, T., Checinski, M., Dillon, R., and Dobbs, R. 2018. *Elements of a successful government transformation*. McKinsey & Company <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/elements-of-a-successful-government-transformation>

⁶³ Elliot, S. and Fisher, M. 2020. Reforming Health Care: The Single System Solution. *NEJM Catalyst Innovations in Care Delivery* 2020;1(5) <https://catalyst.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/CAT.20.0456>

⁶⁴ Milner, K. M., Zonji, S., Yousafzai, A. K., Lule, E., Joseph, C., Lipson, J., Ong, R., Anwar, N., & Goldfeld S. (2022, February). Mixed-method evidence review of the potential role of systems thinking in accelerating and scaling promotion of early child development. Melbourne, Australia: Murdoch Children's Research Institute. <https://www.aracy.org.au/documents/item/751>

Conclusion and limitations

The wellbeing of children and young people is dependent on the complex interconnected family, social, community and environmental systems in which they live and grow. Any service or intervention they receive is part of this system and therefore both strengths and inadequacies in this system will impact programs for children, young people or families and subsequently their outcomes. An important feature of the reforms described here is that they, almost universally, publicly consulted with users in the development stage to ensure utility and appropriateness for children and families.

Systems change is complex and takes considerable time and funding to implement effectively and evaluate rigorously; often extending beyond the political term in which it was conceived. The lack of robust evaluation data available here is an indication of how challenging systems-level evaluation is. One of the notable barriers to systems reform is that population-level statistics – such as child protection and youth justice statistics - are hard to shift the dial on; it takes a long time and progress on many indicators. We found that while systems strategies are often high-level, complex, cross-sectoral and long term, the measurement of these 'outcomes' are often based on qualitative reports from individual children, and summaries of discussions where no nuance on the demographics and characteristics of groups is applied. The data used for measurement and outcomes were sporadic and often lacked population-level data for accurate reporting.

Although this review of the literature did not involve a systematic search and selection process or comprehensive analysis of all relevant reforms, the findings suggest that clear evidence about what makes systems effective is not yet available. While learnings can be gained from past reforms and literature, further investment is needed to design, implement and robustly evaluate service systems reforms that aim to support children, young people and families earlier and prevent progression into statutory services.

