

Approach to family support services

Planning

The focus on family support services has sharpened in recent years, with most jurisdictions reviewing programs and, in some cases, substantially increasing funding available for services which support and strengthen families.

A number of key issues are apparent in the approach of family support services in most, if not all, jurisdictions. Many family initiatives—the Commonwealth's 'Stronger Families and Communities Strategy', New South Wales' "Families First Strategy", the Australian Capital Territory's 'Family Support Plan', Victoria's 'Strengthening Families', South Australia's 'Together with Families for Children', the Northern Territory's 'Action Plan for Families and Children', Queensland's 'Putting Families First', Western Australia's Outcome Based Management strategy, and Tasmania's reform process—all include the same basic approaches as outlined below.

The main issues identified in the approach to the provision and funding of family support services across jurisdictions are:

- Family support services are becoming more publicly visible and politically (and financially) recognised. Concentration on child protection, family violence or other 'hard core problems' of family life is changing. These issues are still extremely important, and receive considerable funding by government, but are now increasingly complemented by services which build on the strengths which exist in families, rather than focussing on the dysfunctional aspects of family life.
- Building and strengthening the capacity of families and communities to manage their own needs is critical in developing strong, responsible families and communities. Sometimes referred to as developing 'social capital', this focus is about equipping families and communities with the information, skills and resources to meet their current and emerging needs.
- Local perspectives are becoming more important, with generic, whole of jurisdiction service delivery models being complemented by innovative, locally designed and delivered services to meet the needs of the families and communities for whom the services are provided.
- Integration or 'seamlessness' of service delivery is a key aim, with jurisdictions actively involved in fostering partnerships between the varied departments, local government and non-government agencies and in assisting with coordination of services and sharing of resources.
- Professionalism in providing family support services is increasing, with resourcing, training and support for both professional staff and volunteers receiving greater attention and funding.
- Clients are seen in the context of their family, and the family in the context of their community. Strengthening families and communities, rather than a sole focus on the

needs of an individual, is a prime driver for many of the services, even if these services only directly engage with an individual client.

- Early childhood services are crucial—support for families with children in the youngest age groups is essential if stronger, self-reliant families and communities are to thrive. Early support and intervention are clearly seen as highly effective in preventing or reducing the level of more intrusive interventions at later stages.
- Services are designed to meet the specific needs of the people they are seeking to assist whether these are recent migrants, families with young children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, or isolated families. Services are respectful of clients, and seek to involve people in the decisions about their own lives. Building on strengths, rather than focusing on weaknesses, is the direction for most services.
- Understanding and measuring outcomes are essential factors in delivering effective services, with a sustained move towards identifying outcomes for individuals, families and communities. Knowing and understanding ‘what works’ is a major issue for all jurisdictions.
- Clearer objectives in funding services in the local government and non-government sector are evident, with historical, recurrent submission-based funding giving way to open tendering for services. Funding arrangements may include formal Service Agreements or contracts, which specify the outcome and performance measures expected. Services are funded to meet key program outcomes or goals.
- Commitment to good, consistent information about services being delivered is evident, with enhancements to existing data collections or plans for new data collections on the agenda for many jurisdictions. Using the information gained from data collections contributes to a knowledge base for service providers to tap into for planning, developing, implementing and evaluating services and for providing accountability to government and the Australian community.

The main divergence from this approach occurs in the Northern Territory, where the focus is strongly on the child, with other benefits obtained by other family members seen as a bonus, rather than a particular outcome of the service.

Funding

As noted above, funding of services now reflects a purchaser/provider model, or is moving towards that model. Historical, submission-based funding is being phased out, with reviews of traditional funding programs and models having been completed or under way in community services departments.

Most departments are now identifying a small number of key outcome or output areas, into which both departmental and funded service provision are grouped. Funded agencies are encouraged to position their services within these outcome or output groups, and to ensure that services are working towards the achievement of the goals specified. Performance measures, output targets and other measures of accountability are becoming routine within service agreements or contracts. Funding is increasingly on a triennial basis, providing security of funding to agencies. Work or service plans are often used to assist agencies and departments to set expectations for service delivery, and to measure workloads, outputs and outcomes.

New monies are generally subject to tender, with coordination, co-location or networking with existing services being an important determinant of allocations. Capacity building in communities which have few services is also important in ensuring that funds are directed to the communities which most need them. Accountability and transparency in funding decisions are a fundamental part of funding programs for all departments.