

Children, Young People and Families

Introduction

All children deserve the best start in life, however too many of our children and young people are growing up in poverty. We know that children who experience poverty and disadvantage are more likely to have health and behavioural problems, experience housing and food insecurity and not achieve their full potential at school. Long term this experience shapes their employment prospects, health outcomes and sense of wellbeing.

Across the state, communities told us that whole-of-family, whole-of-community approaches, that provide targeted support for vulnerable children and families early on, are the most effective and efficient approach to delivering best outcomes.

What can you do?

Across NSW we heard about the types of things that would make a difference in our communities. If you have any other ideas or want to get involved in our work in the below areas, please contact Elyse Cain (Policy Lead for Health, Mental Health, Children and Families) on 02 8960 7912 or elyse@ncoss.org.au

Health | Pre-and-Post Natal Care

What we heard

The period leading up to and immediately following pregnancy is when targeted support that can have lasting impacts is needed for vulnerable families. However, it is often the least accessible.

Barriers such as limited service provision, previous negative experiences with the service system, affordability, and logistical barriers (such as access to transport) means too many families are falling through the cracks. For example, in regions such as Orange, we heard the hospital is out of town and it is hard for many families to access via public transport.

It is important that vulnerable families are assisted and linked into the service system early on in life, to ensure seamless support throughout a child's life.

What our members told us would make a difference

Across the state, we heard of the need for soft-entry points for vulnerable children and families. Our members told us that:

- Nurse-led home visiting programs can improve a child's health and developmental outcomes and help cultivate a safe and nurturing home environment. In NSW, the Ministry of Health funds the nurse-led home visiting program, Sustaining NSW Families, in eight sites across the state. While nurse-led home visiting programs are currently available in some areas of disadvantage in NSW, many areas are missing out.
- Greater support for Aboriginal Families is needed. Programs such as the [Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Strategy](#) is a great initiative that should be enhance, expanded and supported.
- [Playgroups](#) are a great first soft entry point for families. Across the state, we heard that secured funding is needed to facilitate supported playgroups; and provide culturally appropriate playgroups that include grandparents and community elders.

Regional spotlight: [The Nepean Cranbrook Neighbourhood Centre](#)

The Nepean Cranbrook Neighbourhood Centre acts as a hub for the community and provides much needed wrap around services for vulnerable children, and their families.

Onsite they offer a range of programs, such as supported playgroups that are culturally appropriate, parenting programs, a speech pathologist, breakfast programs and furthermore facilitate access for vulnerable families by organising a bus that picks up children from their homes.

Next steps

For the past three years NCOSS has been advocating for the investment of an additional \$25 million per year in the state-wide roll out of nurse-led home visiting programs for vulnerable families.

In the 2017/2018 Budget we were encouraged to see the NSW Government recognise the value of these programs as part of the Future Directions Strategy for social housing. This saw \$1.5 million in 2017-18 committed to expanding the Sustaining NSW Families Program, with an additional site in Wollongong and enhancement to the sites in the Fairfield, Rockdale and Wyong Local Government Areas. Despite this, with only nine sites across the state, many vulnerable families will continue to lack access to this vital service.

We will continue to advocate for a state-wide roll out. In the short to medium term, NCOSS will be providing a submission to the NSW Parliament [inquiry into support for new parents and babies in NSW](#). To provide input into the submission and to be involved in the development process, please contact Caroline Dimond (Policy Officer for Children, Young People and Families) on 8960 7922 or caroline@ncoss.org.au.

Health | Childhood Obesity

What we heard

We know that children from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds are at greater risk of being overweight or obese. This has a significant impact on their wellbeing – both short and long-term. But our members told us that there are key barriers to low-income families trying to lead healthier lifestyles. These include poor urban design and lack of green spaces in local communities, the cost of sports memberships, lack and cost of healthy food options and low nutrition awareness.

Across the state we heard many of these barriers look similar across communities. But we also heard that different communities have unique needs, and they require solutions that are specific to those needs and incorporate the resources of those communities.

What our members told us would make a difference

Across the state, we heard communities are working hard to develop their own initiatives that support at risk children and families to lead healthy lives. They told us more support is needed for:

- Better collaboration and partnership of services and community groups.
- Affordable and accessible sports clubs and activities, which not only encourage physical activity but help children socialise and feel part of the community.
- Initiatives that give children access to healthy food and teach them how to grow and prepare healthy food, such as breakfast clubs and school kitchen gardens. We heard that these initiatives should also engage the whole family.
- Better urban design, with local councils playing a larger role in making neighbourhoods more conducive to outdoor physical activity.

Regional spotlight: [Let's Play Let's Eat](#)

Family Services Illawarra started “Let’s Play Let’s Eat”. Together a group of Illawarra families participate in an 8 week program focused on interacting and playing with their children and healthy living through nutrition and cooking.

The program is hosted at the UOW’s Early Start facility where “Let’s Play” happens in the Discovery Space and “Let’s Cook” happens in the Early Start industrial kitchen. The program has been a great way for families to live well, connect and build community.

Next steps

NCOSS takes active part in the NSW Obesity Expert Advisory Panel convened by the Ministry of Health. NCOSS

is also a member of the NSW Healthy Planning Expert Working Group, which looks at opportunities to develop healthy built environments.

Our [Pre-Budget Submission 2018/19](#) is also calling for the NSW Government to further invest in childhood obesity prevention with a focus on equitable access and opportunities in regional and remote NSW. This includes:

- Exploring whole-of-community approaches that support collaboration and partnership within communities to use existing resources and develop new initiatives that address their unique needs. NCOSS has also started conversations with the Western Sydney Diabetes Prevention Alliance and South Western Sydney Local Health District to explore how whole-of-community approaches in these areas can boost prevention of childhood obesity.
- Enabling vulnerable families on low incomes to access higher rebates for kids' sport and fitness activities,
- Ensuring regional communities have equal access to fresh public drinking water.

We need to mobilise our communities for this change to happen. NCOSS will be lobbying the NSW Government to adopt these recommendations and has also prepared an [advocacy kit](#) for members to use to lobby their local MP. We are also interested to hear about other initiatives going on in our communities that are helping kids lead healthy, active lives.

Education | Early Childhood Education and Care

What we heard

We know that high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is vital to breaking the cycle of poverty and enhancing a child's developmental outcomes. Yet NSW continues to spend less on ECEC services than most other states and territories. This means less access, higher fees, and less opportunity for vulnerable children. In regional and remote areas, and for Aboriginal communities, this problem is even worse.

Across the state we heard concerns around:

- The need for increased training, support supervision and access to mentoring and development opportunities and pathways for the ECEC workforce.
- Transport and access to transport in regional and remote communities.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and representation in providing culturally appropriate ECEC provision.

What our members told us would make a difference

Our members told us that more government support and funding is needed to support vulnerable families' access to benefits of ECEC. This funding should work to:

- Develop cross-sectoral partnerships – between early childhood services, children and family services, Aboriginal services, employment services, educational institutions, housing providers, government, the private sector and employees.
- Ensure early childhood services are equipped to support children who experience domestic violence.
- Ensure children in vulnerable families successfully transition to preschool and that their enrolment begins at birth.
- Support strategies to improve Aboriginal access to early education, including growing the number of Aboriginal community-controlled services, resourcing an Aboriginal representative body, and developing a systematic and sustained approach to improving the cultural accessibility of mainstream services.

Next steps

Our [Pre-Budget Submission](#) is calling on the NSW Government to invest in a \$250 million early childhood and education fund to complement existing funding measures and ensure vulnerable children can access the full benefits of quality early education.

We need to mobilise our communities for this change to happen. NCOSS will be lobbying the NSW Government to adopt this recommendation and has also prepared an [advocacy toolkit](#) for members to use to lobby their local MP.

As part of our work in this space, NSW also convenes the NSW Children Services Forum (the Forum). The Forum works towards improving the quality, range and provision of children's services in NSW through coordinated advocacy. Membership is made up of state-wide, not-for-profit children's service organisations and their representatives, and the Forum has a particular interest in ensuring that children from low income, and vulnerable families have access to quality early education.

Housing | Youth Homelessness

What we heard

Children and young people need stable and secure homes to thrive. However, across the state we heard concern about the increased number of young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Homelessness greatly affects health and education outcomes, with children and young people who experience homelessness more likely to find themselves homeless as adults. Young people who encounter the child protection or criminal justice system face additional barriers to finding stable and affordable accommodation, and are often the least supported.

What our members told us would make a difference

- Increased targeted housing options for young people that link accommodation to training, employment and other support services. Services such as the [Foyer Model](#), and [Lighthouse](#) (a Melbourne based model) were identified as possible models to be rolled out in NSW.
- Need for better and earlier exit planning for children and young people in the OOHC system to transition into safe and secure housing.
- Developing innovative tenancy and housing models that are suitable for children and young people, with a focus on reconnecting with family where the family environment is safe and constructive.

Next steps

This year, NCOSS is calling for the NSW Government to invest \$45 million over four years towards developing at least five foyer models across NSW. Foyer models have been shown to help at risk young people successfully transition to independence, and will play a particularly important role in supporting young people leaving out of home care.

As part of our work in this space, NCOSS further convenes the NSW Children, Young People and Families Alliance, a network of service providers, representative and peak organisations advocating for the well-being of children, young people and families. Youth Homelessness is a key advocacy agenda for this group.

Regional spotlight: Youth Foyers

“Youth foyers” give young people access to affordable accommodation linking to training, employment and other support services. Work is underway to develop youth foyers in a number of regions including [Western Sydney](#), the [Hunter](#) and [Wagga Wagga](#).

The Government has also recently announced the development of [Foyer51](#), focusing on young people in the first 18 months of leaving out-of-home care.

NCOSS is also working with the COSS network to champion the National 1 in 7 Campaign, where housing and homelessness will be a key priority area. Watch this space!

Connection to Community | Child Protection System

What we heard

All children and young people should feel safe and connected to their families, communities and country. Across the state we heard of the steady increase in both the numbers, and rate of children entering out of home care, and how children are not getting the support they need when they need it, before a crisis occurs. We know that this picture is worse for Aboriginal families and communities.

Work is currently underway to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and flexibility of existing services through the NSW Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) Reform and Out of Home Care Reform Process.

Our members continue to be concerned that there has been no new or increased funding as part of this process. The under-resourcing of programs focused on families and communities is increasing pressure on more intensive and costly interventions and undermining the child protection system. Moreover, the funding that is provided is increasingly at the pointy end, and there is not enough directed towards TEI services.

We further heard how children transitioning from the OOHC system into independent adulthood (15-18 year age group) are a particularly vulnerable cohort at risk of homelessness and significant harm, and are essential to responding to the intergenerational cycle of children entering care.

What our members told us would make a difference

Our members told us that more funding is needed for early intervention services across the state. We also heard that more support is needed to ensure:

- Aboriginal community controlled organisations can meet the needs of Aboriginal children and young people in their communities.
- Better urban design and the successful co-location of services to ensure ease of access for vulnerable families, and better collaboration and partnership of services and community groups.
- Young voices are embedded in service design.
- Kinship programs are acknowledged as a viable option of care.
- Initiatives to address child removal (particularly in Aboriginal families) adopt a co-design, community led approach.

Next steps

NCOSS is working collaboratively with FAMS, and the other peaks to ensure that the TEI and OOHC Reform processes lead to best outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

As part of our work in this space NCOSS convenes the Children, Young People and Families Alliance, with the reforms being a key interest and advocacy agenda for this group.

Regional spotlight: [Aboriginal Family Planning Circle \(AFPC\)](#)

AFPC is a community-based program that has been running in Blacktown LGA since 2006.

The program works with Aboriginal women and their families who are at risk of having their children assumed into out-of-home care.

AFPC is a program grounded in community, working with families, service providers (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, government and not for profit) and community elders to provide holistic support to address clients' complex needs, and improve the circumstances into which children are born.

NCOSS is also signatory and strong supporter of the [Family Matters Campaign](#) and a member of the NSW Family Matters Group. The campaign aims to eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 2040.

Cost of Living

What we heard

Across the state, our members told us that lack of adequate and affordable transport, increasing cost of household bills, and the rising cost of recreational activities for children is an increasing concern and barrier in providing children with the best start in life. For children and families that face complex needs and geographical isolation, this experience is compounded.

Moreover, limited availability and access to education and employment opportunities in regional and remote communities compounds this issue, and often results in many young people being forced to look for education and employment opportunities further afield. This results in far reaching impacts and many children and young people feeling disconnected from their communities, families and country.

What our members told us would make a difference

- Integrated service delivery and design, where services work together to coordinate and provide accessible service provision, such as bus sharing.
- Incentives for community transport operators to provide universally accessible point to point services in rural and regional NSW.
- Affordable and accessible sports clubs and activities.
- Better urban design and support for youth friendly public spaces such as playgrounds and youth hubs.
- Initiatives in communities and schools that empower youth through arts and creativity.

Regional spotlight: [OneVision](#)

OneVision is a not-for-profit organisation introducing arts based multiliteracy programs to isolated and marginalised communities.

Working with community groups, schools and youth agencies OneVision runs workshops that combine hip hop and film production to help young people learn new skills, enhance self-expression and confidence.

Next steps

As part of our work in this space, NSW convenes the NSW Children, Young People and Families Alliance. Cost of Living is a key advocacy agenda for this group.

As part of the National 1 in 7 Campaign NCOSS is launching, we are committed to carrying out a Cost of Living report for Children and Families in 2018. Watch this space!

Safety | Children as Victims of Domestic Violence

What we heard

All children should be safe and empowered. Yet too often children are the unseen or unheard victims of domestic and family violence (DFV), and this experience can impact on their health, wellbeing, education, relationships and housing outcomes both now and later in life. Moreover, these children are more likely to enter the out-of-home care system; and come into contact with the juvenile justice system.

Children and young people have distinct experiences of DFV. However, in NSW there has been no coherent public policy approach to children affected by DFV, which has resulted in uncoordinated and poorly directed responses to children. Our communities have highlighted the lack of service provision that is child-centred and

trauma informed, where most programs and services for children are not distinct from programs and services for women.

What our members told us would make a difference

We heard that we need responses that support all children, everywhere. This requires a multi-pronged approach that:

- Raises awareness of the impact on children and young people, making it easier for children to disclose instances of domestic violence.
- Ensures children and young people, including diverse groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, and children and young people with disability are involved in the design and delivery of services that affect them.
- Funds child-centred, specialist services that support children and young people who are or have experienced domestic and family violence.
- Develops and tests perpetrator programs that focus on children and fathers.
- Ensures services and programs are age specific, so no children fall through the gap.

Regional spotlight: [Kids Can Women Can](#)

Kids Can is an eight-week group work program for children aged 8-12 years who have experienced domestic and family violence.

Children engage in a range of therapeutic activities, which address the impacts of violence and build children's self-esteem confidence and resilience.

The course also educates children on appropriate protective behaviours and safety strategies. Mothers are also encouraged to attend the *Women Can* support group. The program has been positively evaluated.

Next steps

This year, NCOSS is calling on the NSW Government to invest in the delivery of child-centred, trauma informed services targeting children and young people, and commit to the delivery of, at a minimum, a service in metropolitan Sydney, one in regional NSW, and an Aboriginal community-controlled service. This investment will enhance the evidence base of models of service delivery that are child-centred and trauma informed.

NCOSS is a proud supporter of the Advocate for Children and Young People and their campaign 'End Violence against Children'.

NCOSS is also working with the COSS network to champion the National 1 in 7 Campaign, where children as victims of domestic violence will be a key priority area. Watch this space!