

# Support for new parents and babies in NSW:

NCOSS submission to the Legislative  
Assembly Committee on Community  
Services Inquiry

November 2017

## About NCOSS

The NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) works with and for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage to see positive change in our communities.

When rates of poverty and inequality are low, everyone in NSW benefits. With 80 years of knowledge and experience informing our vision, NCOSS is uniquely placed to bring together civil society to work with government and business to ensure communities in NSW are strong for everyone.

As the peak body for health and community services in NSW we support the sector to deliver innovative services that grow and develop as needs and circumstances evolve.

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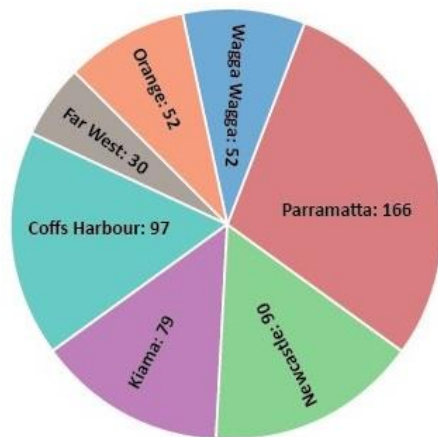
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## 1. Introduction

NCOSS is grateful for the opportunity to provide input into the *Inquiry into Support for New Parents and Babies in New South Wales*. In preparing this submission, NCOSS has chosen to focus on the Inquiry's Terms of References 1, 2 and 3 to discuss where there are current gaps in services and support, particularly around early intervention, early childhood education and care, and housing. This submission further focuses on those parents and families experiencing particular disadvantage in these areas and makes a number of recommendations to boost support for these groups.

To this end, NCOSS also supports the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) submission and recommendations to this inquiry. We echo that achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families can only be achieved through an approach that recognises the importance of self-determination, and holistic and community-controlled service provision. In this context, NCOSS emphasises that the recommendations in this submission should at all times be considered and adopted with a view to ensuring any measures and approaches are flexible and culturally appropriate for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

The recommendations in this submission are actions that the NSW Government could take to make a very real difference to the life opportunities of new parents and babies, and families experiencing poverty and disadvantage. They have been informed by the expertise of our members and incorporates their feedback. They have also built on what we heard in consultations held in July and August this year, comprising six regional conferences, 38 workshops and 570 people across the state.



This submission was also informed by discussions and participation with our organisational members and the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) as part of the Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) and out-of-home-care (OOHC) reform process.

The particular focus on healthcare, education and housing supports what we know are top priorities for people experiencing poverty, as indicated by our 2017 Cost of Living survey of 440 households living below the poverty line in NSW.

Overall, NCOSS believes that the service system should take a holistic and culturally appropriate approach. It should be built around the safety, health and wellbeing of children, young people and families, with a key focus on prevention and early intervention. This is crucial to better support new parents and babies and help lift families out of the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.

## 2. Summary of recommendations

1. Provide the Targeted Early Intervention sector with support and training on effective approaches in engaging in and working with young parents as part of the reforms to the Targeted Early Intervention system.
2. Increase investment in prevention and early intervention as part of the reforms to the Targeted Early Intervention system, with a commitment to better assisting and supporting target groups without reducing funding in other areas. This should include increased investment in specific regions of identified need, such as Far West and Western NSW.
3. Roll out a state-wide sustained nurse-led home visiting program for expectant parents and vulnerable families with children aged 0-2 years. In addition, investigate the potential to incorporate childhood obesity prevention into this program.
4. Establish a \$250 million Early Childhood Education Investment Fund to ensure vulnerable children access the full benefits of quality early education.
5. Explore the need for expanding specialist homelessness services, workers and training across NSW that specifically target vulnerable young parents.
6. Develop Housing First responses that provide immediate access to long-term, sustainable accommodation and support services.

## 3. Context

All children deserve the best start in life, however too many of our children and young people are growing up in poverty.

In New South Wales, almost 1 in 7 children are living in households below the poverty line. In regional areas such as such Brewarrina, Kyogle and Tenterfield and metropolitan suburbs like Auburn and Canterbury the child poverty rates far exceed the state-wide average.<sup>1</sup> We know this picture is even worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are not only over-represented amongst children experiencing poverty, but are particularly disadvantaged across a range of health and education indicators.

We know that children who grow up in poverty and experience disadvantage are more likely to have health and behavioural problems, experience housing and food insecurity and not achieve their full potential at school. Over their life cycle, this experience shapes their employment prospects, financial situation, health outcomes and sense of wellbeing. We also know that poverty is a key driver of child abuse and neglect, and one of the key reasons why so many children in NSW are living in OOHC.

In NSW we are not doing enough to stop the cycle of disadvantage and support new parents and babies when they need it most. We have seen a steady increase in the both the number and rates of children entering OOHC, and we now have

<sup>1</sup> B Phillips et al (2013) *Poverty, Social Exclusion and Disadvantage in Australia*, NATEM, Report prepared by Uniting Care, Children Young People and Families.

the second highest rates of OOHC of all states and territories.<sup>2</sup> Of particular concern is the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the OOHC system, with Aboriginal children in NSW more than 10 times more likely than their non-Aboriginal peers to be in OOHC.<sup>3</sup>

We welcome the opportunity to examine how to better support new parents and babies. We also note that there have been numerous state, territory and federal inquiries into child protection, OOHC and TEI in recent years, and these have driven substantial changes in NSW. It is important to have a holistic view of the service system and for this inquiry to take into consideration findings and outcomes from others. Significant pieces of work to be cognisant of are:

- Bringing them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (1997)
- Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW (Wood Inquiry) (2007/08).
- Keep Them Safe: A shared approach to child wellbeing (2008)
- Ombudsman's Review: Keep Them Safe? (2011)
- Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs Inquiry into Out of Home Care (2014/15)
- Auditor-General's Report: Transferring out-of-home care to non-government organisations (2015)
- NSW Government-commissioned independent review of the out of home care system in New South Wales (Tune Review) (November 2015)
- Family is Culture Independent review of Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care (2016)

Collectively, these processes represent the investment of considerable resources, and extensive community and stakeholder consultation. We therefore recommend that the Committee builds on, rather than replicates, this previous work and consolidate previous and current recommendations.

## 4. Improving child protection and health outcomes through early intervention

It is widely accepted that a system focusing on effective prevention and early intervention, rather than crisis response, delivers better outcomes for children and can prevent children, young people and families from coming in to contact with the child protection system. Early intervention services deliver a range of benefits – greater stability in the home environment, reduced risk of harm to children and young people and improved outcomes across a range of areas, such as education and employment.<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, a lack of intervention has significant consequences, with research showing it can further entrench disadvantage and reduce a community's quality of life, cohesion and economic opportunities.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the business case for early intervention is also well supported, with government investment in early intervention delivering societal

<sup>2</sup> The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2017) 'Child protection Australia 2014-15', *Child Welfare Series* no.66

<sup>3</sup> Productivity Commission (2016) *Report on Government Services*, Child Protection Services

<sup>4</sup> Fox, S., Southwell, A., Stafford, N., Goodhue, R., Jackson, D. and Smith, C. 2015, *Better Systems, Better Chances: A review of research and practice for prevention and early intervention*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), Canberra

<sup>5</sup> FACS 2015, *TEI Consultation Paper*, accessed 15 November 2017,

<[http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/335165/CS\\_TIER\\_consultation\\_paper.pdf](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/335165/CS_TIER_consultation_paper.pdf)>

cost savings by reducing the need for long term intensive service responses at the risk of significant harm (ROSH) and statutory OOHC end of the continuum.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, while the value of early intervention is acknowledged there are a range of challenges associated with the delivery of effective early intervention and prevention services in NSW. These include:

*"If more preventative support can be offered to families, [there would be] less need for targeted intervention later on."*  
– Regional conference, Western Sydney

- An overwhelmed system that is fragmented, operates predominantly in crisis mode, is not well aligned to the evidence and does not effectively target vulnerable clients.
- Families struggling to access the support they need, with a significant gap in support for families at the pre-crisis stage.
- Current services lacking capacity, flexibility and access that would provide adequate responses to vulnerable young people. Our members tell us that when families do reach out, they are often finding that they a) are not eligible for existing programs; b) must wait too long before help becomes available; c) are being referred to services on the basis on what is available rather than what is appropriate to their needs.
- Some families in need may not be receiving as much support because those with perceived higher needs are given priority access. Some services also do not feel resourced to support families with higher needs and are worried about risking poor outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

Recognising that improvements are needed to the early intervention and prevention framework, FACS commenced its TEI Reform Program in 2015.<sup>8</sup> NCOSS and the sector have been actively engaged in the reform process, and are committed to work to best outcomes, and redesigning the system so that it is more flexible, locally responsive, evidence-based, adaptive and client-centred.

It is also worth noting that the TEI reforms are focusing on children aged 0-3 years, young parents and Aboriginal children and families as target groups. In this context, NCOSS believes there needs to be greater consideration of what works in early intervention for these target groups, with more effort to build the evidence base of early intervention programs and services. This evidence base should be built with a view to FACS providing the sector with support to develop the expertise and facilitate specialty training around the complex needs of target groups, including young parents.

***Recommendation 1: Provide the Targeted Early Intervention sector with evidence-based support and training on effective approaches in engaging in and working with young parents as part of the reforms to the Targeted Early Intervention system.***

<sup>6</sup> Department of Social Services 2014, *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020*

<sup>7</sup> General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 (2017) Child protection, available <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/DBAssets/InquiryReport/ReportAcrobat/6106/Final%20report%20-%20Child%20protection.pdf> (at 15 November, 2017)

<sup>8</sup> FACS (2015), TEI Consultation Paper, available [http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/335165/CS\\_TIER\\_consultation\\_paper.pdf](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/335165/CS_TIER_consultation_paper.pdf) (at 15 November, 2017)

## Funding and resource constraints affecting access to early intervention services for vulnerable groups

We remain concerned that levels of funding for the early intervention sector are not adequate to meet the level of need. Vulnerable families are not being identified and referred to services early enough to prevent the breakdown of relationships and other serious harm or child protection concerns. As a result, services are increasingly seeing higher-need clients who present with issues that take more time and resources to resolve.

In NSW there has been considerable effort directed towards reforming the OOHC sector and improving outcomes for children and young people who come into contact with the child protection system, with the 2016-17 Budget included a significant injection of funding into these systems.

However, while this investment is welcome, funding for prevention and early intervention has eroded over time.<sup>9</sup> For example, Brighter Futures – once the flagship early intervention program in NSW – now works with clients on the cusp of entering the child protection systems and there has been no replacement funding allocated to fill this gap in the early intervention services.

In addition, while we have seen a massive expansion in the state OOHC budget, there has been no matching growth in funding to support young people once they have left formal care. Young adults and new parents who have previously been in contact with the OOHC sector are a particularly vulnerable group that needs further support. Many are at risk of or experience homelessness as they exit OOHC without adequate transitional arrangements or a support network. In addition, young women who have been in care are at greater risk of becoming pregnant at an earlier age, with nearly a third of young women falling pregnant or having a child within 12 months of leaving care.<sup>10</sup>

Holistic support programs must be developed and funded to support the complex needs of young parents to prevent the intergenerational cycle of children coming into care. These young parents need assistance with emotional and practical issues including financial help with the expenses of caring for a new baby, help with parenting skills, stable housing, and social support.

The effectiveness of the current TEI reforms will likely be undermined, and universal supports eroded, if the system as a whole is not adequately resourced. We are particularly concerned regarding the low level of funding allocated for the Far West and Western NSW. While these areas have a much higher proportion of children at risk of significant harm, these districts have historically received comparatively low levels of funding.<sup>11</sup>

We have also heard this from our membership who have concerns that in rural and regional areas there are too few services for new parents. Moreover, the greater distance from support services and inadequate public transport increases the vulnerability of families and compounds the factors that make it difficult for families in these areas to access services.

*“Accessing maternity services around Albury is done through Victorian Health Services. The biggest challenge for parents accessing these services is transport...if a baby is in ICU, the mum needs to travel to feed the bub.”*

*– Regional conference, Wagga Wagga*

<sup>9</sup> Productivity Commission (2016) Report on Government Services, Child Protection Services.

<sup>10</sup> Cashmore, J. and Paxton, M., 2007, Longitudinal Study of Wards Leaving Care: four to five years on, Report of research commissioned by the NSW Department of Community Services

<sup>11</sup> Department of Family and Community Services (2017) *FACS Districts*, accessed 23 November 2017 <<https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/facs-statistics/facs-districts/far-west>>

We therefore recommend that additional funding be injected into early intervention as part of the TEI reform process. As discussed above, efforts to build an evidence base on what is working and where the gaps are should also inform the allocation of resources, and help to 'lead and drive' decisions on resourcing programs that work. We emphasise that the system needs to be resourced as a whole; any funding needs identified for target groups such as young parents or target areas such as regional NSW, should facilitate increased investment rather than diverting funding from other areas of the system.

Resourcing the system as whole would also align with the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's children 2009-2020*. The framework sets out a long term approach that aspires to a model of services emphasising universal and secondary interventions (prevention and early intervention), with tertiary interventions (such as crisis responses) as a last resort. This has been supported by the 2007 Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW (Wood Inquiry) observing that: "The child protection system should comprise (of) integrated universal, secondary and tertiary services, with universal services comprising the greater proportion."<sup>12</sup>

***Recommendation 2: Increase investment in prevention and early intervention as part of the reforms to the Targeted Early Intervention system, with a commitment to better assisting and supporting target groups without reducing funding in other areas. This should include increased investment in specific regions of identified need, such as Far West and Western NSW.***

## Support for new parents in the first 1000 days

The period leading up to and immediately following pregnancy (in the first 1000 days) is when targeted support, that can have a lasting impact, is needed for vulnerable families. Strong evidence highlights the strong correlation between poverty in the first 1000 days and adverse health and wellbeing outcomes in later life.<sup>13</sup> However, issues such as previous negative experiences with the service system, affordability and logistical barriers – such as access to transport and service provision – means too many families are falling through the crack.

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. A nurse-led evidence-based sustained health home visiting program that commences in pregnancy and continues until the child's second birthday is key to making this happen.

A 2015 FACS-commissioned review of prevention and early intervention research identified nurse-led home visiting programs as one of the most promising strategies for improving child development outcomes, with multiple studies demonstrating a return on investment of between 1.26 and 5.7.<sup>14</sup>

*"We need to target new mothers early on so they know where to get support from the very start. Furthermore, we need to have good pathways for ongoing support. This is just as important for affluent families as it is for vulnerable families to ensure new parents get the support they need."*  
– Regional conference, Western Sydney

<sup>12</sup> Wood (2008) Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW (Wood Inquiry), page v

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccchdev/CCCH-The-First-Thousand-Days-An-Evidence-Paper-September-2017.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Fox, S., Southwell, A., Stafford, N., Goodhue, R., Jackson, D. and Smith, C. 2015, *Better Systems, Better Chances: A Review of Research and Practice for Prevention and Early Intervention*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), Canberra



The largest nurse-led home visiting program in NSW, *Sustaining NSW Families*, currently operates in nine sites across the state. But many locations – including those experiencing significant levels of disadvantage – are missing out.

KPMG's 2015 evaluation of *Sustaining NSW Families* found a strong case for state-wide rollout given the positive outcomes being achieved for children and parents, and an estimated \$9,769 net benefit per child completing at least one year of the program.<sup>15</sup> Investing in the state-wide rollout of *Sustaining NSW Families* would also be in line with the Third Action Plan under the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*, which includes a focus on 'Early intervention with a focus on the early years, particularly the first 1000 days for a child.'

A state-wide rollout of this type of program should also include the capacity for the program to be tailored appropriately to local communities. In particular, it would need to be able to address the needs of especially vulnerable groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and those from CALD backgrounds.

*"We need additional funding to make [nurse-led home visiting programs] available in Western NSW."*  
– Regional conference, Western NSW

Nurse-led home visiting programs have been used effectively overseas in countries like the United States and the Netherlands, and there is a strong evidence base for the substantial benefits to vulnerable children and their families.<sup>16,17,18</sup> These programs can lead to better pregnancy outcomes and improve women's experience of motherhood. They can also support mothers to breastfeed for longer, which has been shown to be an important protector against obesity across a child's life cycle.<sup>19</sup> With 1 in 5 NSW children overweight or obese,<sup>20</sup> this is an important factor to consider.

In the context of early intervention measures to prevent childhood obesity, we know that targeted, home-based programs for the 0-2 age group have been shown to be particularly effective.<sup>21</sup> Programs such as *Healthy Beginnings*, which focused on infant and mother nutrition, physical activity and social support, can reduce family and behavioural risk factors for childhood obesity.<sup>22</sup> NCOSS believes there is strong potential to embed these programs into the nurse home visiting model and maximise the opportunities to improve health outcomes early on in life.

Ultimately, nurse home visits can help cultivate a safe and nurturing home environment and improve a child's health and developmental outcomes across their life cycle.

***Recommendation 3: Roll out a state-wide sustained nurse-led home visiting program for expectant parents and vulnerable families with children aged 0-2 years. In addition, investigate the potential to incorporate childhood obesity prevention into this program.***

<sup>15</sup> KPMG 2015, *Evaluation of the Sustaining NSW Families Program: Final Report*, accessed 13 November 2017, <<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/MCFhealth/Documents/sustaining-nsw-families-kpmg.pdf>>

<sup>16</sup> Chamberlin, R. et al 1986, 'Preventing child abuse and neglect: a randomized trial of nurse home visitation', *Pediatrics*, vol.78, pp.65–78

<sup>17</sup> Kitzman, H. et al 1997, 'Effect of prenatal and infancy home visitation by nurses on pregnancy outcomes, childhood injuries, and repeated childbearing. A randomized controlled trial', *JAMA*, vol.278, pp.644–52

<sup>18</sup> Mejdoubi, J. et al 2014, 'Effects of nurse home visitation on cigarette smoking, pregnancy outcomes and breastfeeding: a randomized controlled trial', *Midwifery*, vol.30, pp.688–95

<sup>19</sup> Owen, CG et al 2005, 'Effect on infant feeding on the risk of obesity across the life course: a quantitative review of published evidence', *Pediatrics*, issue 115, pp.1367-1377

<sup>20</sup> Hardy LL, Mihrshahi S, Drayton BA, Bauman, A. 2016, *NSW Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (SPANS) 2015: Full Report*, NSW Department of Health, Sydney.

<sup>21</sup> Laws, R. et al 2014, 'The impact of interventions to prevent obesity or improve obesity related behaviours in children (0–5 years) from socioeconomically disadvantaged and/or indigenous families: a systematic review', *BMC Public Health*, vol.14

<sup>22</sup> NSW Government, *Healthy Beginnings*, Sydney Local Health District, accessed 23 November 2017, <<http://www.healthybeginnings.net.au/results/>>

## 5. Connectedness and support through early childhood education and care

High quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is vital in giving children the best start in life, enhancing a child's developmental outcomes and breaking the cycle of poverty in vulnerable families. ECEC also has a critical role to play in the early intervention system.

In many cases ECEC services act as key hubs and 'soft entry points' that engage families that would otherwise be missed in the system, and link them to a variety of early childhood support, community and health services. They are often the first and sometimes only connection vulnerable families have with service networks. Referrals between early education and other services are therefore crucial.

The provision of holistic and integrated service delivery is critical to increasing vulnerable families' access to and engagement with early childhood services, particularly in regional and remote NSW. Enhancing this integration and collaboration involves offering and engaging with a comprehensive range of services that cater for children's learning and development needs, while also actively involving and supporting families and communities.

We believe ECEC is a critical enabler of a successful early intervention system and there is considerable opportunity for early intervention services in NSW to work more closely with ECEC services towards the goal of universal access. Further, there is scope to build on the potential for ECEC services to provide pathways through which developmental and other issues can be identified early and ensure families are connected into a more targeted service system.

To enable this, as part of our 2018/19 Pre-Budget Submission NCOSS has been advocating for the establishment of \$250 million Early Childhood Education Investment Fund (the Fund), to complement existing funding measures and ensure vulnerable children are able to access the full benefits of quality early education. The Fund is envisaged to be a flexible and complementary mechanism that would resource and support ECEC services to act as key hubs and provide vulnerable families with those pathways to other services. It would also support services that currently use these holistic, whole-of-community approaches effectively, to scale up their work.

A key outcome of the Fund would be to incubate cross-sectoral partnerships – such as between early childhood services, children and family services, Aboriginal services, employment services, educational institutions, housing providers, government, the private sector and employees – that will encourage collaboration to deliver new services and build on innovative approaches to service delivery. The establishment of such a fund would be particularly impactful for vulnerable families in regional and remote communities. The Fund should also be complemented by work to recognise and ensure that children in vulnerable families successfully transition to preschool and that their enrolment in ECEC services begins at birth.

Over 26% of people living below the poverty line told us that 'a quality education system' should be a top priority for the NSW Government, with a further 14% nominating 'giving children the best start in life' as a top priority.  
– *NCOSS Cost of Living Survey, April 2017*

*"Holistic and integrated service delivery is critical to increasing families' access to and engagement with ECEC services."*  
– *Regional conference, Western NSW*

In NSW, we spend less per child than most other jurisdictions in Australia when it comes to ECEC investment. Greater investment through the Fund to support cross-sector collaboration, along with better data collection, mapping of existing services and gaps in delivery, would be the first steps in ensuring vulnerable families are connected early on in life.

**Recommendation 4: Establish a \$250 million Early Childhood Education Investment Fund to ensure vulnerable children access the full benefits of quality early education.**

## 6. Providing a safe and nurturing environment through housing

A safe, secure home provides a stable base for people to flourish and work towards a better life for themselves and their families. The need for a stable environment is particularly crucial for young parents at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Over 1 in 6 young people aged 15-24 years presenting alone to specialist homelessness services are single parents,<sup>23</sup> and children aged under 10 years now make up one-sixth of all clients accessing specialist homelessness services in Australia.<sup>24</sup>

In NSW, we have reached a crisis point with housing accessibility and affordability where waiting lists for social housing are longer than ever,<sup>25</sup> and demand for homelessness services is at a record high.<sup>26</sup> In recent consultations across the state, communities told NCOSS about the particularly significant impact of the housing crisis on young people with little or no financial support, and the increase in youth homelessness.

Research has shown that homelessness has a detrimental impact on young families and particularly on children's health, wellbeing, and development, emotional and behavioural patterns, ability to access education, social connectedness and family relationships. Infants born into homelessness are often delivered prematurely and underweight, and the absence of a secure physical environment and well-supported caregiver significantly affects the infant's development and contributes to high rates of emotional, cognitive and physical health problems.<sup>27</sup>

There are a number of specialist youth homelessness services in NSW providing support that ranges from early intervention and crisis support, to longer term support involving access to education and training for employment. However, very few are resourced to specifically address the more complex needs of young parents experiencing or at risk of homelessness.<sup>28</sup>

This is a significant service gap that means young parents experiencing homelessness will often rely on more generalist youth or family homelessness services. While many youth homelessness services are able to assist young parents, some service providers struggle to engage this group in their services. Family support services do not always understand youth

<sup>23</sup> AIHW 2016, *Specialist homelessness services 2015-16*, accessed 15 November 2017, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services/contents/client-groups-of-interest/young-people-presenting-alone>>

<sup>24</sup> AIHW 2016, *Specialist homelessness services 2015-16*, accessed 13 November 2017, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services/contents/clients-services-and-outcomes>>

<sup>25</sup> <<http://www.housingpathways.nsw.gov.au/how-to-apply/expected-waiting-times>>

<sup>26</sup> AIHW 2016, *Specialist homelessness services 2015-16*, accessed 13 November 2017, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services/contents/clients-services-and-outcomes>>

<sup>27</sup> David, D. et al 2012, 'Implications of homelessness for parenting young children: a preliminary review from a developmental attachment perspective', *Infant Mental Health Journal*, vol. 33(1), pp. 1-9

<sup>28</sup> Kuskoff, E. & Mallett, S. 2016, 'Young, Homeless, and Raising a Child: A Review of Existing Approaches to Addressing the Needs of Young Australian Parents Experiencing Homelessness', *Life Course Centre Working Paper Series*, July, No. 2016-13

specific needs, while youth services often do not recognise the issues and needs associated with parenting. Compounding this issue is the fact that demand for homelessness support is outstripping availability of services, so a significant portion of young parents trying to access accommodation get turned away.

We need responses to these issues that address the complex needs of young parents at risk of or experiencing homelessness, particularly those from Aboriginal and CALD communities, and provide immediate access to stable housing to help break the cycle of homelessness and disadvantage in young families.

## Specialist housing support for young parents

We need to fill the services gap by developing and funding small, targeted, youth-orientated accommodation models and approaches that specifically cater for the needs of young pregnant and parenting women and families. We know that some youth homelessness services do work with young parents frequently and well, and we can learn from these in setting up young parent-specific services.

We also need further research on the intersectionality of vulnerable young parents and youth homelessness, and evaluation of the effectiveness of services currently available to this cohort. This would help assess the type and level of need for specialist support for this cohort across the state. For example, increasing the number of specialist homelessness services specifically for this cohort may be appropriate in metropolitan areas where the concentration of need is high, while generalist homelessness services in more remote areas may benefit from specialist workers trained in this area of need.

We also know that the few homelessness services available to address the needs of young parents often find it difficult to engage this vulnerable group in their services. Many young parents find it difficult to trust staff and engage in a structured, rules-based environment where there is a perception of a loss of control over their parenting decisions.<sup>29</sup> Therefore there is also a clear need to support the sector to further develop expertise and facilitate specialist training around the very specific and complex needs of young parents.

***Recommendation 5: Explore the need for expanding specialist homelessness services, workers and training across NSW that specifically target vulnerable young parents.***

## Addressing immediate housing needs

The Housing First approach to homelessness has gained recognition in recent years and is based on the idea that adequate housing is an immediate need, basic human right and foundation for people to flourish in other areas. Once stable housing has been gained, intersecting needs around education, employment, mental health and other areas can be addressed more effectively. As such, this type of response focuses on providing safe and affordable housing to vulnerable individuals and families, along with support staff to help provide clients with safety, flexibility, permanence, access to support services and, above all, independence.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Barker, J., et al 2012, *Effective interventions for working with young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness*, Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Dickson

As part of our 2018/19 Pre-Budget Submission, NCOSS recommended that the NSW Government invest in Housing First responses to address chronic homelessness. However, NCOSS also believes there is a place for Housing First principles in supporting young parents and families experiencing homelessness. Denmark and Canada are leading the way in using this approach effectively for homeless youth.<sup>31,32</sup> More locally, Micah Projects in Brisbane has been able to permanently house 66 young families experiencing homelessness over 2014-17 using a Housing First approach.<sup>33</sup>

41% of people living below the poverty line rated having a 'safe and secure place to live' as the second most important measure that would make an immediate difference to their lives.  
– NCOSS Cost of Living Survey, April 2017

Providing young parents immediate access to long-term housing, and the independence that comes along with it, can help create the stability and secure environment that is crucial to improving outcomes in young families. As per the recommendation above, NCOSS believes this approach must be supported by further research, understanding and training on the specific needs of this particular cohort.

***Recommendation 6: Develop Housing First responses that provide immediate access to long-term, sustainable accommodation and support services.***

## 7. Conclusion

The intersections between the key services and systems discussed above is a crucial factor to consider in the context of support for new parents and babies. A lack of housing and fixed address can pose a major barrier to the effective delivery of other support services to young families. In turn, early intervention services can play an important role in supporting them to access stable housing, while early childhood education and care services provide crucial touchpoints for young families through which they can connect with the different types of support they need.

This is why the NSW Government needs to invest in and commit to measures that will improve prevention and early intervention, provide connectedness and support through early childhood education and care services, and increase housing stability for vulnerable families.

We also know that the experience of poverty and disadvantage in NSW can be significantly complex for young families, so these measures need to be supported and informed by further research and sector development on the specific needs of young families and the level of need in Far West and Western NSW. Additional funding must be invested to match this need and provide flexible mechanisms to resource local, place-based solutions appropriate to regional communities.

Above all, any support for new parents and babies must be approached and provided in a holistic, flexible and culturally appropriate manner to ensure that people from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and CALD backgrounds are empowered to care for their families in the way they want to.

<sup>31</sup> Martinsen, B. 2017, 'How Denmark has helped its homeless young people', *The Guardian*, 10 July, accessed 16 November 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2017/jul/10/housing-first-young-people-homelessness-denmark>>

<sup>32</sup> Gaetz, S. 2014, *A Safe and Decent Place to Live: Towards a Housing First Framework for Youth*, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Toronto

<sup>33</sup> Micah Projects 2017, 500 Lives 500 Homes: Campaign Outcomes 2014-2017, accessed 16 November 2017, <<http://micahprojects.org.au/assets/docs/Factsheets/2017-500-Lives-Young-Families.pdf>>