



Aboriginal In-Home Support Service Evaluation Report – Summary

Background

The Aboriginal In-Home Support Service (AISS) is a key initiative delivered under the Department of Communities (Communities) Building Safe and Strong Families: Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy (EIFS Strategy).

AISS operates in Hubs across the Perth metropolitan area, including Peel, and provides intensive in-home support for families at risk of child protection intervention to keep children safely at home or reunify children safely home to their family.

Communities delivers AISS in partnership with Wungening Moort (Healing Families) a Consortium of four local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs):

- Wungening Aboriginal Corporation (lead agency)
- Coolabaroo Community Services
- Ebenezer Aboriginal Corporation
- Moorditj Koort Aboriginal Corporation

AISS aims to provide a culturally safe, trauma-informed service, and works with families to build on their strengths, supporting them to address issues impacting on parenting and the safety of their children.

Evaluation of the Aboriginal In-Home Support Service

In 2021 Social Ventures Australia (SVA) completed an impact evaluation of the AISS program. In January 2023, Communities engaged Keogh Bay People (Keogh Bay) to undertake further evaluation of AISS, and the Final Evaluation Report (Final Report) was completed on the 24 August 2023.

The aim of the evaluation is to build upon the first evaluation and assess:

- **Appropriateness** – The extent to which the AISS design is responsive to, and addresses, community need and demand, and aligns with government policy objectives.
- **Effectiveness** – The extent to which AISS is achieving outcomes for Aboriginal families and the family support service system.
- **Efficiency** – The extent to which AISS demonstrates government value for money in terms of the cost of services delivery (productive efficiency) for the outcomes achieved (cost-benefit).

The Keogh Bay evaluation also includes in its scope:

- The implementation actions of the previous evaluation recommendations

- Impacts of the service variations initiated in mid-2021.
- Expansion of Wungening Moort to the Peel District in the Bindjareb region.
- Effectiveness of partnerships and collaborations in the program.
- How new key learnings can inform future service design and contracts.

Keogh Bay utilised both a Process and Outcomes evaluation approach to measure whether AISS is being implemented as intended and to identify the short, medium and long-term outcomes families are achieving. A value for money analysis was also undertaken to determine if AISS as an intervention service was achieving savings for the State Government.

The evaluation consulted with 86 stakeholders, including 10 families/clients, with 47 per cent of stakeholders identifying as Aboriginal. The families interviewed included those referred to the keeping children safely at home and the reunification services.

The stakeholder consultations also included, the AISS staff, Consortium partners, Communities Head office and District staff, Aboriginal Practice Leaders, Education Officers, and Senior Practice Development Officers.

Summary of key findings

The Final Report contains a number of key findings, including:

- Overall, AISS is regarded as an essential service which has made the child protection system more culturally responsive and trauma-informed and aligns to the current Government strategic environment.
- AISS is empowering families to better understand and navigate the child protection system, with some evidence indicating that the service is preventing Aboriginal children from entering, or staying in, out-of-home care.
- Overall, AISS contributes to strengthening outcomes for Aboriginal families who are experiencing a range of complex, intergenerational, and systemic issues, but there are issues that impact some families being able to achieve outcomes, including:
 - AISS works with many families who are in a crisis situation, and family goals are often focused on stabilising families by implementing practical supports, which detracts from the capacity of the service to implement interventions targeting complex trauma and longer-term behaviour change.
- Between 2019 and 2022, AISS recorded referrals for 675 families and 1,732 children. Most referrals were for families who were at risk of child protection involvement (71 per cent), with the remaining being reunification families (29 per cent).
- The needs of families engaging with AISS included support for:
 - Advocating with Communities (Child Protection) – 87 per cent.
 - Family Violence Support - 57 per cent.
 - Drug and Alcohol Services - 52 per cent
 - Mental Health Services - 41 per cent.
 - Family Led Family Safety Planning - 40 per cent.
- The intensive, in-home and culturally safe delivery of holistic supports to families were commonly described by stakeholders as the most valuable features of AISS and there



was strong support for the cultural security and trauma-informed approach of the program.

- The value for money analysis demonstrated that financial investment in AISS creates significant cost savings for Government overall¹. Between the period 2019 – 2020, for every \$1 invested, Communities potentially avoided costs of \$11.76.

Opportunities for improvement

The Final Report contains 12 ‘opportunities for improvement’ to further strengthen the current AISS service. These are provided below, along with additional information from the report to assist with providing context.

Opportunity 1: Review the current process for capturing and managing AISS demand i.e., referrals that are not able to be made to AISS, due to service capacity. This process will need to consider:

- A process that does not disadvantage families.
- The best way for AISS and Communities to communicate in a timely and clear way updates on service capacity.
- A way for capturing demand information to inform service planning and funding.

Report Context: Although data appears to indicate that referrals are processed quickly, and that families are not having to wait for access, Communities’ Districts consistently report concerns with long waitlists for the service, most commonly of up to several weeks to three months, with some reporting they had been unable to refer to AISS for approximately 18 months. Stakeholders indicated that AISS informs Child Protection Districts when they are at capacity and Districts then cease sending referrals (i.e., they are not waitlisted).

Further, there may be a delay in service initiation following the allocation of a referral to a Hub, as families then need an AISS worker assigned to them (defined as ‘admission’). The number of referrals not sent to Hubs due to lack of capacity is not reported to Communities, neither is the length of ‘admission’ times.

Opportunity 2: Develop more flexible AISS Brokerage Guidelines

Report Context: AISS Brokerage Guidelines are considered to be too restrictive and hinder AISS’ ability to provide tailored, flexible, and culturally responsive supports. Currently brokerage is capped at \$500 per family, and the AISS Consortium would like to purchase goods commonly needed by families in bulk to maximise brokerage available to families. In addition, they would like to have more flexibility with what they spend brokerage funds on, for example, paying a client fine is prohibited but paying the fine may enable the client to have a valid license reissued so that they can take their child to

¹ The value for money analysis estimates the potential savings to Government that are likely to be generated as a result of a reduction in child protection activity and out-of-home care placements.

important health appointments. This can support families to overcome significant hurdles to achieving stability in other domains of their life and to improving their parenting capacity.

Opportunity 3: Communities and the AISS Consortium to review their current governance arrangements with consideration for strengthening the central oversight and coordination of the strategic and operational matters impacting AISS. This review should:

- Include consideration by the AISS Consortium to reinstate the Aboriginal Advisory Group and the Practice and Service Delivery Advisory Group or something self-determined by the Consortium as more appropriate.
- Implementing a trial AISS Operational Group with representatives from AISS and Child Protection Districts to strengthen the governance over frontline operations.

Report Context: When AISS was first implemented it's Consortium Governance Structure included the overarching Governance Committee Group (Consortium Chief Executive Officers [CEOs]) and two additional specialised subgroups: the Aboriginal Advisory Group and the Practice and Service Delivery Advisory Group. These specialist subgroups have since ceased and been replaced with internal AISS meeting groups, such as Portfolio Leadership Group meetings, Coordinator meetings and Staff meetings.

Opportunity 4: The Consortium and Communities co-develop an AISS Partnership Model to include clearer governance arrangements which uphold the principles of Aboriginal “self-determination” and “community participation” enshrined in the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*.

The AISS Partnership Model should be developed using a process respectful of Aboriginal self-determination. This could include consideration of the use of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care's *Genuine Partnerships Audit Tool* (or similar) to first review current partnership arrangements and inform the development of new ones, and/or using an independent Aboriginal third party to facilitate or guide the process.

As a starting point, the new AISS Partnership Framework should consider the following elements, listed under the four key domains in SNAICC's *Partnership Framework* (capacity building; process, governance and accountability; cultural competence; and relationships):

1. Capacity Building

- Communities' commitment to building the child protection capacity of the ACCO sector in preparation for the planned transfer of delegated authority to ACCOs under *Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021 – 2031*.
- Seek assistance from Communities' Aboriginal Outcomes division to identify ways for the AISS model to have 'successful partnerships' as outlined in Communities' ACCO

Strategy: respect, shared responsibility, shared decision making, transparency, commitment, and integrity.

- Deliver formal, informal, and joint training to AISS and Child Protection Districts about the updated Partnership Model.

2. Process, governance and accountability

- Recognition of the unique and specific role of the ACCO sector in accordance with the strategic and legislated requirements for Aboriginal self-determination and empowerment.
- Guidelines to clarify roles and responsibilities of AISS and Communities, including AISS' involvement in Child Protection cases (IFS, Child Safety and Reunification) by specifying AISS' participation and shared authority in key meetings and decision-making processes.
- Clarification about the scope and definition of "advocacy" (for inclusion in the AISS Service Agreement and practice guidance for both AISS and Child Protection).
- Guidance for where the operational balance lies between advocacy work and other types of family support/interventions in the context of prioritising child safety.
- Establishment of structured, regular, and consistent communication and information sharing requirements between AISS Hubs and Child Protection Districts across each service corridor.
- Identifying and using existing internal accountability, monitoring, and auditing processes to review the consistency of services and information sharing between both organisations.
- Providing, as a last resort, an external and independent mediation pathway for AISS and Child Protection Districts to resolve issues.

3. Cultural Competence

- Consider the role of Communities' Aboriginal Outcomes division in driving system-level change (e.g., training in Child Protection Districts) to further develop the cultural competency of Child Protection staff, challenge current worldviews and practices and to build awareness of the unique purpose and models of working of ACCOs.

4. Relationships

- Appointing new AISS roles and/or existing roles (Communities SPDOs, APLs, Senior Aboriginal IFS Workers, and AISS Coordinators) to actively support communication, collaborative practices, and relationships.
- Consider opportunities for further developing and strengthening relationships across AISS and Child Protection Districts. For example, by having informal events (i.e. BBQs, morning teas, NAIDOC events) to create opportunities for new interactions and building trust.

Report Context: The relationship between the AISS Consortium and Communities at the senior leadership level was uniformly reported to be strong and constructive, with many



examples provided of good communication and shared work. Communities' leadership valued AISS' responsiveness, and willingness to discuss and proactively address issues. However, overall, the evaluation found that the foundations of the relationship are not as strong at the service delivery level and there is significant work that needs to be undertaken for AISS and Communities Child Protection teams to work in partnership for the benefit of children and families. Current confusion about roles and responsibilities between AISS and Communities in frontline undermine the capacity of the service to fully realise some key strategic intentions, particularly regarding shared decision-making and authority. The reasons for this are complex, partly historical, and need specific focus for the model to successfully move forward.

Opportunity 5: Provide AISS staff with additional training and supervision to strengthen the supports available to them for managing their personal and vicarious trauma, with consideration for supporting staff:

- To navigate the challenges of balancing cultural and community obligations with Child Protection practice.
- To have difficult conversations with families to set boundaries and expectations.
- To avoid burnout and re-traumatisation with self-regulation tools and access to cultural healing.

Report Context: It was suggested that Wungening provide Aboriginal staff with extra training and support to address the unique challenges of managing blurred personal and professional boundaries in the context of experiences of racism, and intergenerational and vicarious trauma. A key lesson from AISS, as Communities progresses building of the ACCO sector in WA, is Aboriginal staff need consideration and support for navigating vastly different cultural and professional worldviews often while themselves experiencing personal and vicarious traumas

Opportunity 6: AISS Consortium to review and consider potential opportunities for further building the organisational capacity of each Consortium partner and the ACCO sector.

Report Context: From its inception, AISS was envisioned by Communities as building relationships and service capacity across small and medium-sized ACCOs. This has been achieved to some extent. As the Lead Agency, Wungening reportedly provides informal support to the smaller-sized Consortium partners in terms of human resources matters and developing policies and procedures, assisting with developing their organisational capacity. One of the Consortium members reported that joining the arrangement raised their profile and credibility in the community and within the government sector, resulting in organisational growth.

Opportunity 7: Consider AISS staff training to increase their 'toolbox' of skills (whether traditional or western) to be used when responding to families who need a deeper journey of healing and therapeutic responses.



Report Context: Evaluation findings further evidence the need for Wungening to consider providing AISS staff with training or access to specialist resources regarding culturally secure parenting approaches. The AISS Consortium has identified that there is no available training regarding parenting skills which combines both Western and Aboriginal modes of parenting and child rearing.

Opportunity 8: Develop specialist resources, referral pathways or roles to strengthen AISS parenting skills development i.e., establish an Aboriginal Parenting Program delivered by an ACCO or dedicated Parenting Support role which is attached to AISS to strengthen AISS' effectiveness in improving parental skills and capacity.

Report Context: AISS Progress Reports indicate that staff predominantly use 'positive role modelling' when interacting with families to help them improve their parenting. AISS staff noted that its "tricky" talking to families about parenting, which is a sensitive topic to raise with clients. There are no formal Parenting Guidelines staff can refer to and there is no specific parenting training delivered to staff, which means they predominantly draw on their personal experiences and knowledge of parenting when conducting AISS casework. AISS could benefit from Wungening developing or providing more specialised and culturally-informed parenting knowledge and skills, such as an Aboriginal Parenting Program.

Opportunity 9: Review the contracted requirement AISS could benefit from providing more specialised and culturally-informed parenting knowledge and skills (i.e. Aboriginal Parenting Program) for AISS to work with Diversionary cases to determine if additional resourcing is required to service these cases or if a separate contracting arrangement is needed. The diversionary capacity of AISS (or the wider suite of EIFS services) would need to be increased so that current family support service responses are less crisis driven and the child protection system can better divert families.

Report Context: AISS has limited capacity to accept Diversionary cases. Stakeholders within the AISS Consortium report that they would like to do more in this space, but within the current contract feel it is not possible and suggest there should be a separate service for that cohort – diversion cases/closed cases. A finding from the evaluation is that AISS could be more strongly aligned to the strategic priority of earlier intervention and prevention if it had additional funding to increasing its capacity for accepting diversionary cases.

Opportunity 10: Further develop the cultural components of AISS with ongoing input from Aboriginal leaders and external Aboriginal services to provide families consistent access across AISS Hubs to activities designed to strengthen cultural connections.

Report Context: Stakeholders also reported that AISS is helping families to deepen their cultural connections in different ways. For example, the AISS Mirrabooka Hub has begun delivering a Healing Group which involves a weekly discussion topic delivered via yarning and food and where staff are able to observe family functioning and supervised

contact between parents and children in a more natural and culturally safe setting. AISS Progress Reports showed that other Hubs, like Rockingham, had implemented Back to Country Day trips involving a smoking ceremony, tool making, storytelling, bush tucker and cave exploration. While AISS reports that the Healing Days will be rolled out across all Hubs, there could be further clarity and consistency about the sorts of activities constituting cultural activities and connections.

Opportunity 11: Future evaluation should include methods to draw out data that analyses contributions of AISS to children remaining at home, or returning home, separately to the work of Communities to best understand the work's effectiveness. As this analysis is complex, future evaluation projects will need to allow sufficient time to do this.

Report Context: Overall, the evaluation indicated that AISS strongly achieved highest outcomes relating to trusting relationships with families, families starting to address issues that impact negatively on children, partnerships with families, families beginning to develop an understanding of Child Protection and various elements relating to culture. Further work maybe required in future evaluations, however, to draw out AISS' contribution to children staying at home or returning home above and beyond the work of Communities given the data is currently intertwined. However, data available currently does indicate that AISS does improve outcomes relating to this important area.

Opportunity 12: Consider validating the AISS Model and *Moorditj Djerripin Koorlungas (Strong, Happy Children) Assessment Framework* to further develop the evidence base for the model and use the findings of the validation study to update the model (if needed) and inform policy, other service models and decision-making about culturally safe ways of working with Aboriginal families.

Report Context: Wungening's MDK Assessment Framework, which now forms the foundation for AISS' ongoing assessment and planning activities, further strengthened the cultural basis of the Model. The MDK was developed by Wungening in recognition that traditional Western theories and methods of assessment and child development do not accurately assess or measure strength for Aboriginal children. It was designed by Aboriginal staff and is grounded in Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. It assesses and informs case planning through a holistic assessment framework of all aspects or 'domains' of a child's wellbeing.

Next steps

Communities will consider the Final Evaluation Report findings and 'opportunities for improvement' in partnership with Wungening, with a view to developing an implementation plan. The implementation plan will drive the progression of viable actions and activities to ensure AISS, as a key community service, is realised to its full potential.

Key activities and outcomes to further strengthen AISS will be published on Communities websites.

