ReachOut Australia

Supporting Improvements to the Families and Children Activity

Consultation Online Questionnaire

Recent and emerging impacts on service delivery

Question 1

How have you adapted service delivery in response to the bushfires, floods and Coronavirus pandemic? When has it worked and when hasn't it worked? How will this affect how you deliver services in the future? Have your service adaptations included better integration with other initiatives?

ReachOut has a data and research-driven service delivery model that combines analytics from our digital products with contextual quantitative and qualitative research to enable us to accurately and responsively deliver a service that meets our users' needs in the context of current events and issues. This model was used to respond to stress and distress as a result of bushfires, floods and the Coronavirus pandemic.

ReachOut's rapid and ongoing response to the Coronavirus pandemic focused on the widespread economic and social disruption impacting the lives of young people and their parents, including lockdowns, job losses, rapid and constant change, working and schooling from home, disruption to connections with family and friends, and uncertainty about the future.

ReachOut experienced an initial 48% spike in service demand for its youth, parents and schools services from mid-March 2020, and a sustained, ongoing increase in service demand of 35%. There were 456,285 additional visitors to ReachOut with 202,783 users accessed Coronavirus specific content (16 March to 30 September 2020).

An onsite intercept survey asked parents about the usefulness of resources, with 80% responding it made them feel better. Parents commented that the resources validated how they felt and the challenges they were experiencing, helping them to feel less alone. It also affirmed the steps they were already taking to support their teens through the pandemic, and provided them with new ideas about how to manage.

The ReachOut Parents coaching service saw a significant increase in demand, and ReachOut had to introduce a waiting list.

As part of its digital transformation agenda, ReachOut has actively pursued integration approaches with other services, see response to Question 9.

There were a number of lessons learned that will inform ReachOut's ongoing service response:

- the majority of young people will turn to parents and carers, friends and online for support for their psychological wellbeing, underlining the important role of services like ReachOut that support young people, parents and schools
- parents and carers are time-poor, seeking flexible and responsive support, including brief tips and video content, accessible in spaces where they are online, e.g. Facebook and Instagram
- short bursts of parenting coaching may be beneficial to help parents become 'unstuck' during difficult times
- parents and carers found it really helpful to hear from other parents and carers to validate their experiences and parenting approach.

ReachOut reprioritised funding, staffing and resources to support its Coronavirus response. The response was funded by existing Department of Health and Department of Social Services grants, as well as new funding from the Department of Health and other funders. The reprioritisation has caused constraints in other parts of the service and delays to activity plans, specifically for service delivery, research and evaluation, and digital transformation.

Additional details about ReachOut's Coronavirus response are available in the case study 'ReachOut's Response to COVID-19 in Australia', see attachment.

Question 2

Are the proposed key outcomes for the families and children programs the right ones? Are there any major outcomes missing? How can we include strengths-based outcomes that focus on family or child safety?

The ReachOut Parents service is underpinned by a strengths-based approach to delivering outcomes. The Families and Children's Programs aims and outcomes proposed as part of this consultation are well aligned to the ReachOut Parents outcomes framework, specifically the focus on family relationships, children and young people and empowered individuals.

The key family-level program outcomes for ReachOut Parents are decreased psychological distress in 12-18 year olds/improved wellbeing of children, and increased family resilience. The parent-level outcomes differ between different parts of the program: digital information and resources, and online peer support; and 1:1 parent coaching support.

The Family and Children's Programs outcomes that are specifically relevant to the ReachOut Parents theories of change and outcomes are:

- Family and Relationships Flourish: positive parenting practices, positive caregiver/child relationship, good communications skills.
- Children and Young People Thrive: optimal mental and emotional wellbeing, feel safe and supported at home
- Empowered Individuals: increased parenting knowledge, sense of self-efficacy and confidence.

A key outcome that may present challenges is 'linked to appropriate services' (Children and Young People Thrive/ Empowered Individuals). Evidence shows there are a number of attitudinal and contextual barriers that prevent parents and young people from engaging with services, even if they are aware of them. As the Department of Social Services has identified in its Discussion Paper this underscores the importance of mental health literacy (to reduce stigma), the availability of culturally appropriate services, and stronger referral pathways between services to address these barriers.

Outcomes and Evidence

Question 3

What tools or training would support you to effectively measure and report outcomes through the Data Exchange Partnership Approach?

The current ReachOut Parents contract has funding allocated for user research, and routine evaluation and monitoring. The anonymity of key components of the ReachOut Parents service (digital information and resources, and online peer support) makes it difficult to build outcomes data into routine evaluation activity or data analytics.

ReachOut's 1:1 parent coaching service reports client data and sessions as part of the Data Exchange. This component of the service could potentially meet additional Data Exchange requirements. This would require staff and resourcing to support data collection and reporting, as well as additional training in the Data Exchange. In determining the level of reporting required for the Data Exchange, the Department of Social Services should consider global trends around data and privacy, for example, could the user identification number (UID) be sufficient and remove the requirement to report first and last names.

ReachOut agrees that data and evaluation must underpin Family and Children's Program activities, and that measuring outcomes is vital to service evaluation and improvement. At the same time, it is important that flexibility in the approach to measuring outcomes is retained. This recognises that different service models may draw on different forms of evidence to measure outcomes. For example, services where anonymity is important for engaging users may find it difficult to meet specific data collection requirements. In this case, demonstrating outcomes could involve measuring the impact of the service through cohort studies, including what the users themselves value.

A final consideration is to avoid directive data collection that redirects limited organisational evaluation capacity away from what is meaningful for a service. Regular opportunities to revisit and if necessary, refine evaluation activities and targets within service agreements are essential to circumvent this, and to ensure they drive continuous service improvement, and meet the changing needs of users.

Question 4

Do you already have a program logic or theory of change outlined for your program? Did you find the process useful? If you do not have one, what has stopped you from developing one? What capacity building support would assist service providers to develop program logics and theories of change?

ReachOut Parents is underpinned by an overarching outcomes hierarchy and three product-level models relevant to different aspects of the service offering: digital information and resources; online peer support; and 1:1 parent coaching support. The ReachOut service (young people, parents and schools) is supported by an organisational theory of change.

Understanding impact is a priority for ReachOut, to have confidence the service is supporting parents to recognise when their teenager needs help. The ReachOut Parents theories of change guide the design of a program of research which measures outcomes that matter to young people and parents, as well as to funders and policy makers.

Some lessons ReachOut has learned as part of this process are:

- it is important for theories of change to align with other documentation, such as activity work plans and performance reports, for consistency in reporting outputs and evaluating outcomes
- for digital services, investment in data collection and warehousing is important to enable real-time tracking of user journeys relative to theories of change and for this data to drive service improvement and optimise user pathways through the service to ensure the best impact
- it is important to incorporate multiple sources of evidence into theories of change, including impacts that are valued by users
- theories of change not static theories, and data collection and evaluation activities should test and evolve these theories
- funding is essential to support cross-sectional and longitudinal studies to evaluate outcomes.

Certainty and accountability

Question 5

If longer-term agreements are implemented, how can the department work with you to develop criteria to measure and demonstrate performance? How can the Data Exchange better support this?

Longer-term funding agreements would provide certainty of funding, and enable more effective and efficient planning and investment decisions. As the Department of Social Services has identified it will be important to have designated review points to ensure performance standards are met, and if necessary, refine evaluation criteria, to ensure that these are most useful in demonstrating performance, driving continuous service improvement, and meeting changing user needs.

As previously indicated, understanding impact is a priority for ReachOut, to have confidence the service is supporting parents to recognise when their teenager needs help. The ReachOut Parents theories of change guide the design of a program of research to measure identified priority outcomes.

It is important that a service's theories of change align with Department activity work plans and performance reports for consistency in reporting outputs and evaluating outcomes.

Insufficient funding for evaluation in service agreements with governments and donors has been a significant challenge, and ReachOut has self-funded impact studies and the external evaluation of peer support forums. Funding to better support evaluation and investment to improve the use and understanding of data, would likely be beneficial to service providers and the Department to support outcomes measurement and the Data Exchange.

Again, it is important to note that data reporting requirements need to be flexible and appropriate for the mode of service delivery, rather than a one-size-fit-all approach that only some services will be able to meet. For instance, for digital services where anonymity is an important feature, or that are short in duration, full client level data reporting is not feasible and would create a barrier to entry, preventing parents from accessing the support they need. For these services outcomes would be best demonstrated by cohort level data.

Question 6

What does success look like for your service, and how do you assess the overall success of your service?

The underpinning principle and success metric of the ReachOut Parents service is that when a parent recognises a teenager needs help, they're more likely to get it. From the theories of change, the parent-level outcomes for digital information and resources, and online peer support are:

- decreased sense of isolation
- increased mental health literacy
- increased confidence of parents to facilitate early intervention for emerging issues
- improved connection between the parent and their child.

In 2015-16, to inform the content and design of the service, ReachOut carried out a suite of research activities, including a literature review, focus groups and co-design workshops, and an online survey involving a diverse group of parents. The ReachOut Parents Research Summary is available at: https://issuu.com/reachoutaustralia/docs/reachout-parents_research-summary

The service includes easy-to-read information on a range of mental health and wellbeing issues, including fact sheets, stories, practical tips and tools; provides access to an online community forum so that parents can connect with each other to share experiences in an anonymous, supportive space; and free, professional phone-based coaching with a parenting expert.

The success and continuous service improvement for the ReachOut Parents service is measured through a number of routine evaluation activities:

- data analytics
- onsite user intercept surveys
- online surveys with diverse groups of parents
- pre-and post- outcome assessments for the 1:1 parent coaching service

Special evaluation projects are also conducted periodically as needed.

ReachOut Parents has won a number of awards, including the National Play Your Part Award from the National Association to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect (2018) for its 1:1 parent coaching service; and the Mental Health Promotion and Mental Illness Prevention Award at the 2018 Mental Health Service Awards, Australia and New Zealand.

The service was accessed by more than 363,000 parents in 2019–20, with 72.5% of parents rating the service as good or very good with 80.1% saying they were likely or very likely to return in the future (ReachOut User Profiling Survey, 2020). In 2019–20, 21,093 parents and carers accessed peer support.

The ReachOut Parents phone-based supported 736 parents with 1,782 sessions in 2019-2020. 83% of parents that have accessed the coaching program have rated the program as good or very good.

Targeting and accessibility

Question 7
Do you currently service cohorts experiencing vulnerability, including those at risk of engaging with the child protection system? If not, how does service delivery need to adapt to provide support to these cohorts?

ReachOut helps hard-to-reach and vulnerable young people by supporting the people they turn to for support: parents and carers, schools and friends. ReachOut takes the safety and wellbeing of young people seriously. ReachOut is a Mandatory Reporter and its Duty of Care Framework requires

that for any young person under the age of 18 at risk of harm to follow the relevant NSW Child Protection guidelines. If a report is made, ReachOut offers support to both parents and young people to help understand the process and explore support networks.

Social, economic and cultural factors influence the access particular parents have to appropriate services and the issues they viewed their teenagers as having to deal with. Formative research conducted when developing the ReachOut Parents service found parents' common barriers to seeking help for their teenagers were:

- a lack of resources, including finance, transport and internet access
- not knowing where to get help
- stigma
- changing world, that the world had changed significantly and they were ill-equipped to deal with it
- past experiences with services
- racism and discrimination
- young people not wanting to be helped, or believing their parents were able to help them.

Parents wanted a service that was friendly, inclusive, relatable, evidence-based, practical, non-judgemental, uses humour, is easy to navigate and understand, and that respects their privacy and anonymity.

Parents from hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups are a priority for the ReachOut Parents service, specifically: single parents, parents located in rural and regional Australia, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents. ReachOut recruits parents from hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups for research and to ensure their needs and experiences are reflected in the service as it continues to evolve. As part of routine evaluation, ReachOut tracks the proportion of users who identify as being from these groups, and their satisfaction with the service.

Online services like ReachOut Parents, that provide a mix of self help, peer support and 1:1 coaching, and in different combinations, have particular potential to provide more responsive and culturally safe services for hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups, who have lower rates of help-seeking and face more barriers to accessing support. Importantly, the focus should be on what service-mix and formats work well for different cohorts and how best to engage them and deliver outcomes.

ReachOut would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department of Social Services to better target and improve service delivery for vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups. Technology provides the opportunity to deliver a personalised experience for different cohorts, and use data, research insights and co-design to deliver an online experience that better reflects the background and identity of the user engaging with the service.

Collaboration and coordination

Question 8

If you are a Children and Parenting Support or Budget Based Funded service provider, do you currently link with a Communities for Children Facilitating Partner or other regional planning mechanism to understand what other services are provided in the community and what the community identifies as their needs? How does this work in practice? Would you value the increased support of being attached to a local Facilitating Partner?

ReachOut Parents is a national, online service and has not been identified as a service that could be merged into the Communities for Children Facilitating Partner Program.

Question 9

For all providers, are there other ways to improve collaboration and coordination across services and systems?

There is a significant opportunity to improve service and system collaboration and coordination between programs and services. Where possible, the system should work behind the scenes to seamlessly connect users to the program(s) and service(s), that best meet their needs and service preferences.

ReachOut is self-funding a range of pilot programs with partner organisations that are proving to be a valuable learning opportunity:

- ReachOut is working with Lifeline and Beyond Blue to test and trial new digital referral pathways to connect services, reduce duplication and ensure that users get access to the services that best meet their needs at a particular point in time. For example, ReachOut is using data capability to be able to identify when someone engaging with self-help might benefit from peer support, or even crisis support – and making these transitions seamless. In the case of crisis support, this referral is made online and links directly into Lifeline's digital crisis text product – ensuring the young person doesn't have to stop their journey with ReachOut and begin again with Lifeline.
- ReachOut is working with the Raising Children Network to provide parents with access to ReachOut Parents peer support forums via the Raising Children Network site. The partnership means that any parent searching for teen parenting information via raisingchildren.net.au is also shown relevant discussions from the ReachOut Parent peer support forum, and can seamlessly click through to read the discussion and/or sign up to contribute to the conversation.

The test, trial and learn approach ReachOut has taken to these projects has enabled the service to be improved and optimised as the value and opportunities are better understood from the project data, and respond to user preferences and how the connections work in practice.

The Department of Social Services could foster similar collaboration and coordination across programs and activities by providing funding for pilot programs for services that are willing to collaborate, test and learn. This pilot approach allows services to start small, try different ways of connecting and referring, and test and validate assumptions before scaling.

As an addition to this approach, funding to support not just the delivery of service, but the underlying technology and capabilities required to deliver and progressively evolve them may also be beneficial, for example, to harness data, connect and optimise referral pathways, and support the evaluation required to assess their outcomes and effectiveness.

Capability and innovation

Question 10

The capability building support offered under Families and Children Activity programs has gone through several iterations. What works well? What do you think should change?

With the reform focus on improving and measuring outcomes for Australian families, and the use of outcomes-focused assessment models, it is a priority that services are appropriately funded to conduct rigorous evaluations of their programs. ReachOut currently funds most evaluation from

limited fundraised resources, rather than as a component of program funding, and this is unsustainable ongoing.

As previously raised, insufficient funding for evaluation in service agreements can result in services redirecting project funding away from service delivery where permitted, or absorbing evaluation costs in other areas. In some instances, directive data collection may redirect limited evaluation capacity away from what is meaningful, in order to meet funding requirements.

Regular opportunities to revisit and if necessary refine evaluation activities and targets would be valued and essential, to ensure that these activities can be most useful in driving continuous service improvement, in line with changing user needs.

As part of capacity building support, the quality of a service's digital and data literacy should also be considered. To be done well, evidence, outcomes measurement, reporting, evaluation and encouraging innovation, require parties to be technology literate and to have contemporary platforms. Keeping pace with technology can be a difficult funding and resourcing issue for services, which results in lagging services, poor data collection and evaluation, and limited ways of creating meaningful connections and referrals between services. With the focus of planned reforms, it is important to recognise that for them to be successful and have enduring value, the base cost of maintaining and upgrading the technology underpinning each service must also be funded, as well as investments in digital infrastructure and capabilities (eg. software, systems, data analysts etc).

Lastly, implementing the recommended outcomes for the Family and Children Activity reform process may also present a broader challenge for some services. For ReachOut, as a small organisation, the capacity to work across a large number of workstreams may be limited. Resource constraints, both financial and in terms of staff workload capacity, may limit our ability to respond to or implement multiple changes simultaneously. ReachOut is also concerned that any reforms do not create a significant reporting burden and take the focus away from core service delivery functions.

Question 11

Aside from additional funding, how can the department best work with you to support innovation in your services while maintaining a commitment to existing service delivery?

If we imagine a future post-reform state of longer-term funding contracts with designated review points; as well as funding to support outcomes measurement and evaluation, technology improvements and pilot project funding to encourage innovation and stronger referral pathways, then an important way to support innovation and service delivery is by providing flexibility.

A greater focus on program outcomes does not have to be inconsistent with the provision of flexible services, innovation and responding to the changing needs of users. This flexibility would allow for:
- refinement of evaluation criteria to ensure that these are most useful in demonstrating performance
- recognise that different service models will deliver different outcomes and draw on different forms of evidence, and that may involve demonstrating the impact of the service through cohort studies, or by measuring what consumers themselves value
- allow changes to programs and services with a focus on driving continuous service improvement and meeting changing user needs.

For example, the ReachOut Parents 1:1 coaching program was launched in 2016 and has become increasingly popular. Through operating this service and evaluation activities to better understand

the needs of parents and carers, ReachOut has valuable information that could improve the service, specifically:

- a large number of parents are in high distress when registering
- Coronavirus has made it difficult for parents to find a private space for sessions and many are using their time in transit (and are not able to fully participate in online elements of the coaching program)
- not all parents require the full program (4 sessions) to receive the benefits they are looking for (from January to June 2020, there was an average of 1.9 sessions per client).

Flexibility within service agreements would ensure ReachOut could use these learnings to adapt the coaching model, and continuously improve it to better meet the needs of users.

Question 12

Is there anything else you would like to say?

In 2020, Australia and the world radically changed, there was uncertainty, disruption, change, and transformation. For many organisations there was a significant reprioritisation of effort to meet these new challenges, in order to deliver valuable services for Australian families. Disasters and emergencies will continue to occur, and in this context it is a priority to innovate to meet changing user needs.

Digital is evolving from being an advantage for some services, to a basic expectation for service users. Services will need to design and deliver digital services to meet changing user needs and expectations, and that truly improve the lives of Australian families. With this ambition, ReachOut has worked to develop a digital transformation strategy that will:

- create a world-class connected digital ecosystem across ReachOut, third party and social channels
- deliver a tailored user experience (personalisation)
- connect people to each other's stories, through expanding peer support
- create pathways to other services
- partner with adjacent service providers to deliver a seamless end-to-end user journey ensuring our service users receive the support they need.

A significant part of ReachOut's digital transformation strategy is to provide a tailored user experience or 'personalisation'. ReachOut's guiding principles for personalisation:

- the right support at the right time
- a user-centric approach that recognises that the user is the expert in their mental health journey, provides personalised recommendations and options, and empowers them to make their own decisions
- transparency, that users are aware of the data ReachOut collects, how it is used and privacy policies to protect their data.

Personalisation will enable ReachOut to deliver a more relevant and impactful service to each user and, importantly, will drive better outcomes.

ReachOut is committed to delivering this future state and has developed a roadmap of key deliverables to achieve this, with an initial focus on its youth service. Securing ongoing funding to deliver this strategy is a priority, and will impact the pace of delivery and rollout across other parts of the service, eg. parents and schools.

Co-design with lived experience perspectives is fundamental to the service design process. For ReachOut, the ongoing involvement of parents (and young people and teachers), is essential to ensuring our service resonates with the intended audience and best meets their needs.

Ongoing research will continue throughout the life of ReachOut's strategy and services will iterate and evolve based on their changing lives and needs, and their input, feedback and evaluation.

As part of capacity building, the Department of Social Services could explore how to support services to effectively integrate lived experience perspectives into the design and delivery processes of services.

It is also vital that lived experience perspectives are embedded into the evaluation process from the outset and that lived experience informs the analysis and assessment of outcomes. ReachOut's mixed methods participatory research approach achieves this by using a range of different methods, including data analytics, brief on-site surveys, qualitative research, cross-sectional surveys and longitudinal studies.