

Early Intervention Services for Vulnerable Children and Families

Tabled 27 May 2015

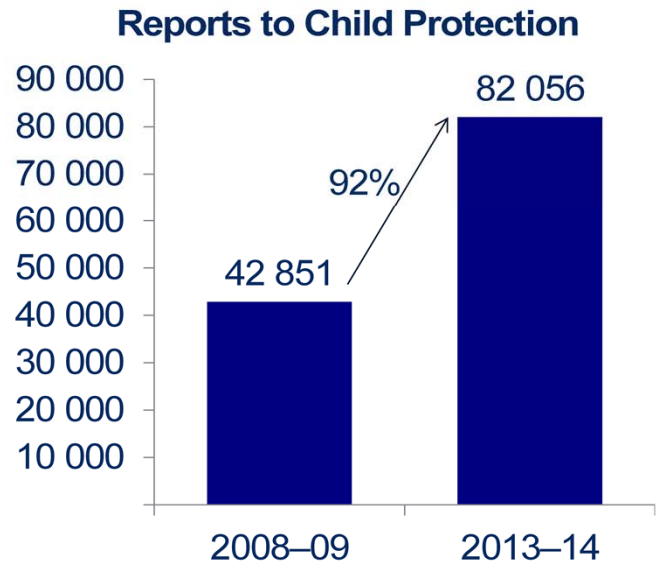
The Auditor-General provides assurance to Parliament on the accountability and performance of the Victorian Public Sector. The Auditor-General conducts financial audits and performance audits, and reports on the results of these audits to Parliament.

On 27 May 2015, the Auditor-General tabled his performance audit report, *Early Intervention Services for Vulnerable Children and Families*.

This is the second of three audits looking at vulnerable children. The first was *Residential Care Services for Children* in 2014. The third will be *Diverting Young People from the Criminal Justice System*.

Some facts

- In 2013–14, one in 37 Australian children in child protection services.
- Of these, 73% were repeat clients.
- In 2013–14, over 82 000 reports to the Victorian Child Protection Service (Child Protection) in Victoria.
- This represents a 92% increase since 2008–09.



Here are some contextual facts for our audit:

- In 2013–14, one in 37 Australian children received child protection services.
- Of these, 73 per cent were repeat clients.
- In 2013–14, in Victoria, over 82 000 reports were made to the Victorian Child Protection Service (or Child Protection).
- This represents a 92 per cent increase since 2008–09.

Overview

- Child and Family Information, Referral and Support Teams (Child FIRST) and Integrated Family Services (IFS) are important early intervention services.
- The audit found:
 - inadequate services to families needing early intervention
 - no assurance on effectiveness.
- Department of Health & Human Services (the department) needs to comprehensively review its approach to early intervention.

Early intervention services are critical. Without these, vulnerable children may end up on a trajectory through child protection, youth justice and the criminal justice system.

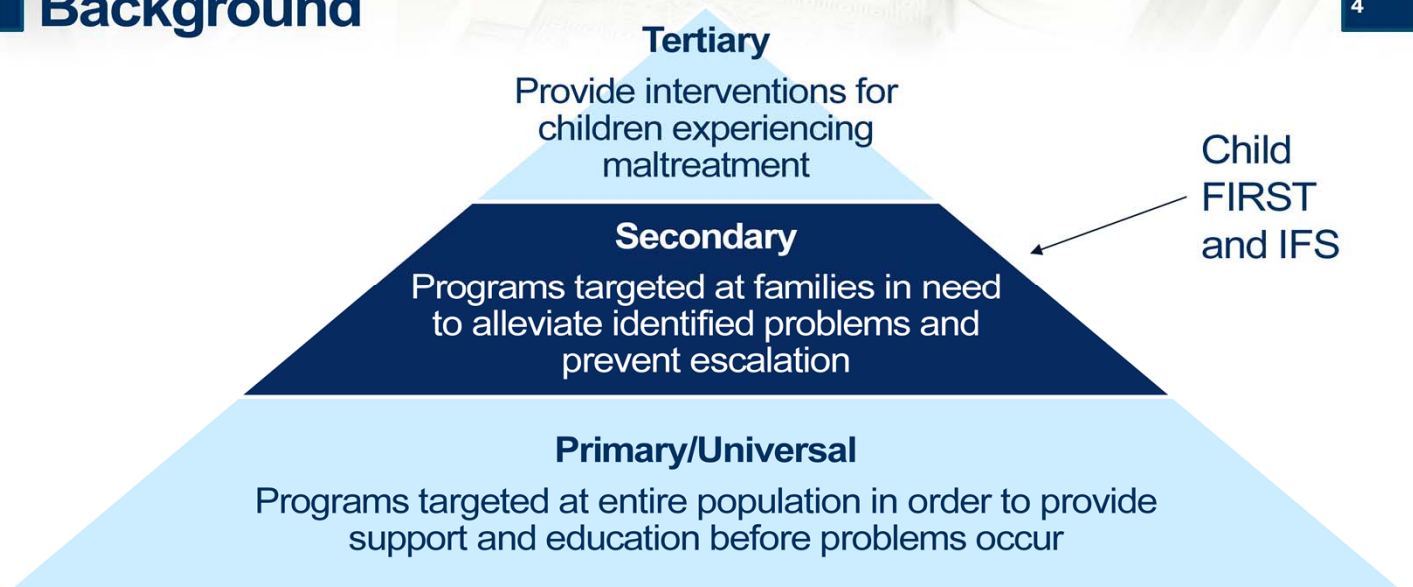
The audit examined Child and Family Information, Referral and Support Teams—or Child FIRST—and Integrated Family Services—or IFS.

We looked at whether vulnerable families can access Child FIRST and IFS and whether outcomes for families are improving.

We found that:

- Low- to moderate-risk families are missing out on these services.
- The Department of Health & Human Services—or the department—does not measure outcomes for families.
- The department needs to comprehensively review its approach to early intervention.

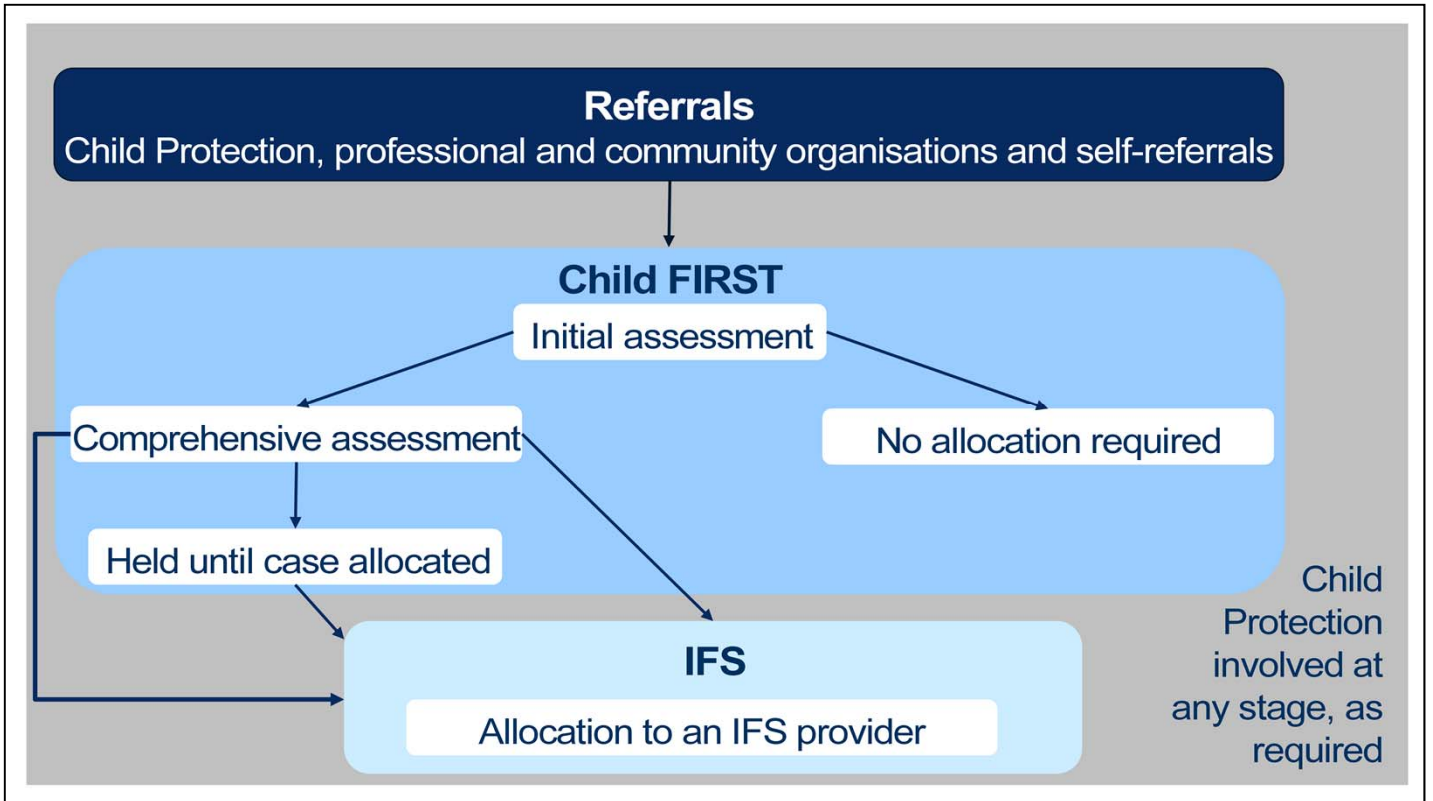
Background



Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies (2009) adapted from Bromfield & Holzer model (2008).

There are escalating interventions, as shown in this diagram:

- Primary interventions are available to any family.
- Secondary interventions focus on children and families where vulnerability has been identified.
- And, Tertiary interventions target children and families with significant vulnerability. Often the children are already in child protection.
- Child FIRST and IFS represent a secondary intervention.



In this diagram we show that Child FIRST acts as a referral gateway.

Referrals come from a range of different sources. Families may be given advice and information during an initial screening assessment or referred for more comprehensive assessment and support from IFS.

Focus of this audit

Key areas examined

- Accessibility to Child FIRST and IFS.
- Effectiveness of these services in improving outcomes.

Audit scope

- The Department of Health & Human Services.
- Service providers in six alliances consulted but no 'follow-the-dollar' powers to audit them.

The audit assessed whether:

- vulnerable children and families can access these services as needed, and
- services are improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

It focused on the department's oversight and leadership role.

We also consulted with a selection of service providers.

Without 'follow-the-dollar' powers we couldn't look at how providers are using their funding.

Inadequate and reactive strategic planning

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- Inadequate demand forecasting.
- Slow response to emerging issues—family violence.
- Effectiveness of local demand management strategies not evaluated.
- Families with lower levels of risk are missing out.
- Providers delivered above the funded level—\$5.3 million in 2013–14.

The department needs to better plan for demand, review whole-of-system funding for early intervention, and act more promptly on issues that affect service delivery.

We found strategic planning for Child FIRST and IFS to be reactive and rudimentary.

- The department hasn't forecast overall demand or responded promptly to emerging demand drivers.
- It requires service providers to manage demand but hasn't analysed the impact of these strategies when demand is high.
- Increased demand means families with high needs are prioritised. Families with low or moderate needs are missing out, yet could benefit most from early intervention to divert from child protection.
- Most service providers are not-for-profit organisations. In 2013–14, they delivered more services—the equivalent of \$5.3 million—than funded for. The department doesn't know if this is because of goodwill, inefficiency or mis-reporting.

The department needs to better plan for demand and act promptly on issues affecting service delivery.

Inadequate partnerships and governance

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27–35

- Weak partnerships in some alliances.
- Governance problematic at different levels.
- Inadequate engagement with the service sector over time.

The department needs to strengthen partnerships and governance, and better communicate operational and strategic issues to the sector.

Child FIRST and IFS rely on multiple providers to deliver services. Training and resources are needed to create strong collaborative partnerships.

Currently there is great variability across alliance partnerships.

- Weak partnerships and inadequate governance arrangements have impeded integrated and coordinated service delivery.
- Over time engagement between the department and the service sector has weakened.

To improve access and outcomes, the department needs to better support the development of partnerships and governance, and communicate better across different departmental levels and with the sector on operational and strategic issues.

Limited performance and outcomes monitoring

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- Department does not monitor outcomes for families.
- Monitors contractual outputs but not critical aspects such as timeliness or engagement.
- Service data limited and unreliable.
- Little analysis of system performance.

The department needs to do more to monitor program risks, address and identify key performance issues and measure outcomes.

The department focuses on outputs such as number of cases and service hours. It doesn't monitor outcomes for vulnerable families.

Its Integrated Reports and Information System—called IRIS—collects service data from Child FIRST and IFS but has significant limitations.

The department does little system level analysis of how services perform, which seriously affects its strategic planning.

The department needs to do more to monitor program risks, address and identify key performance issues, and measure outcomes.

Recommendations

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	Accept
That the Department of Health & Human Services urgently and comprehensively reviews its approach to early intervention to:	✓
1. improves planning by better demand forecasting	✓
2. promptly identifies risks to services and engages with the sector to design appropriate solutions to address these	✓
3. provides targeted training to service providers in catchment planning and data analysis	✓
4. reviews the whole-of-system funding to early intervention, to better reflect the demand impact on Child FIRST and IFS	✓
5. provides targeted support for under-developed partnerships to achieve better collaboration.	✓

Our overarching recommendation is that the Department of Health and Human Services conducts a thorough review of its approach to early intervention.

This is supported by 9 specific recommendations:

- Recommendations 1 and 4 focus on improving demand forecasting and reviewing funding.
- Recommendations 2, 6, and 7 focus on better engagement with the service sector to respond effectively to emerging issues.
- Recommendations 3 and 5 are about strengthening partnerships. And
- Recommendations 8 and 9 are about using analytical tools and sharing good practice.

Recommendations – continued

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		Accept
That the Department of Health & Human Services:		
6.	improves the effectiveness of its communications about operational and strategic issues	✓
7.	requires its staff to monitor operational risks, emerging issues and the quality of alliance partnerships	✓
8.	develops standard analytical data sets for alliances to use to monitor and report on timeliness and effectiveness of their engagement with clients at the program level	✓
9.	undertakes statewide performance analysis using catchment data to drive local improvement.	✓

The department accepted all recommendations and has included a comprehensive action plan in Appendix B of the report.

The Auditor-General will monitor this progress over time.

Key messages

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Families with low to moderate needs—who would benefit from early intervention—are missing out.

The department needs to improve planning, quality of alliance partnerships, governance arrangements, communication and sector engagement.

The department needs to better monitor program risks through routine data analysis, identify and address key performance issues, and measure outcomes.

In summary, increased demand means Child FIRST and IFS must focus on families with high needs. Families at low or moderate risk miss out.

The department needs to improve its planning, partnerships, governance arrangements, communication, and sector engagement.

It needs to do systematic data analysis, address key performance issues, and measure outcomes.

Overall message

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The department needs to make sure that vulnerable children and families receive intervention early enough to divert from child protection.

Our overall message is that the department needs to make sure children and families receive intervention early enough to divert from child protection.

Relevant audits

Previous audit

- *Residential Care Services for Children (2014)*

Proposed audit

- *Diverting Young People from the Criminal Justice System (2015–16)*

Relevant audits are listed on this slide.

Contact details

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For further information on this presentation please contact:

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