

Early Learning Strategies: Final Report

Author/Contributor:

Warrilow, Prue; Fisher, Karen; valentine, kylie

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW SOUTH WALES



**Families
AT WORK**

Work & Personal Life Specialists

EARLY LEARNING STRATEGIES

FINAL REPORT

FOR FAMILIES FIRST CUMBERLAND PROSPECT

SPRC Report 6/04

University of New South Wales Research Consortium
Social Policy Research Centre
Families At Work

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Publications, SPRC, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, 2052, Australia.
Telephone: +61 (2) 9385 7800 Fax: +61 (2) 9385 7838 Email: sprc@unsw.edu.au

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UNSW Consortium

Social Policy Research Centre

Karen Fisher, kylie valentine, Sonia Hoffmann, Kyungja Jung, Nicole Aggett and Katherine Cummings

Families At Work

Prue Warrilow and Fay Bennett

Authors

Prue Warrilow, Karen Fisher and kylie valentine

Contacts

Karen Fisher ph 9385 7813, fax 9385 7838, email karen.fisher@unsw.edu.au

Prue Warrilow ph 9261 1855, fax 9261 1864, email p.warrilow@familiesatwork.com

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Abbreviations

ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
DADHC	NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care
DIMIA	Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs
DoCS	NSW Department of Community Services
ECICP	Early Childhood Intervention Co-ordination Program
FFIG	Families First Implementation Group
HIPPY	Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters
LGA	Local government area
MOTT	Mobile Outreach Therapy Team, Western Sydney Area Health Service
NESB	Non-English speaking background
NESC	Non-English speaking country
SCAN	Supporting Children with Additional Needs
SNSS	Special Needs Subsidy Scheme
SUPS	Supplementary Services Program

Executive Summary

Background

The objective of the Early Learning Project was to increase formal early learning opportunities for children 0-5 years in the Families First Cumberland Prospect Area (Auburn, Baulkham Hills, Blacktown, Holroyd and Parramatta Local Government Areas (LGAs)).

Formal early learning opportunities in this context mean structured early learning activities, for children in formal services, informal settings or at home. They might include pre-school, long day care, child care, supported playgroups and other structured child and relationship-centred activities, as well as in-home early learning ideas for families who are house-bound.

The project involved:

- documenting issues about groups who did not access formal early learning opportunities in the Cumberland Prospect Families First Area;
- identifying early learning models and strategies that would increase early learning opportunities for children 0-5 years from the identified groups; and
- developing a plan outlining priority strategies to increase early learning opportunities for children 0-5 years that could be implemented over the next 3-year period in each LGA within the Cumberland Prospect Area.

The UNSW Consortium, a group of academics and researchers managed by the Social Policy Research Centre and including Families At Work, conducted the research.

The aim of the research activities was to map existing opportunities and issues and develop a strategic plan for the following three years. The methodology included a review of local and early learning literature; analysis of the Families First and other data bases; interviews with key stakeholders and families; and a Service Providers Forum to identify strategies that had been implemented and opportunities for development (referred to as ‘the Forum’ in this report).

Underlying the emphasis in current policy on the provision of services in the early years of life is the recognition that these years set the base for competence and coping skills that affect learning, behaviour and health outcomes throughout life.

Good models of early learning and local opportunities

The early learning opportunity plan builds on the strengths and experience of existing models. Models for early learning opportunities can be broken into four key types: formal early learning settings, resource-based, outreach and in-home models. The report describes some of the models and examples observed in Cumberland Prospect and other locations.

Difficulties for families accessing early learning opportunities related to understanding the potential benefits of this type of activity, cultural considerations in appropriateness of services, active recruitment of priority families and the shortage of formal opportunities in this area. They are discussed in the report.

Early learning opportunities, ranging from formal to flexible and integrated, are available to varying degrees to families in Cumberland Prospect. The current system was reported as suffering from a shortage of opportunities, particularly formal activities; severely limited resource-based programs, outreach programs and in-home programs; a shortage of trained staff; a need for information for families about potential benefits of early learning activities, particularly taking account of cultural diversity; and limited infrastructure for services to coordinate their activities. These findings informed the development of the following strategic plan.

Plan

The researchers prepared the plan to develop early learning opportunities in Cumberland Prospect over the following three years. The overarching principle is that every child can benefit from access to appropriate, good quality, equitable and affordable early learning opportunities before attending school.

The plan is a universal, broad strategy for inclusive early learning opportunities. The rationale for this is to reach the majority of families with a range of service types because of the diversity of need. For this reason the strategy concentrates on universal principles of early learning support, focussing on what could be possible for children in relation to early learning. In addition, consistent with the principles of Families First, strategies to address the needs of identified target populations, specific to the location are proposed.

Consideration needs to be given the types of families accessing formal early learning opportunities. There are three groups of families who could access services:

- families who are mobile and can get out of home to attend services;
- families who cannot get out of home, but would benefit from their children attending external services; and
- families who cannot get out of home, and need in-home or close to home services such as outreach programs.

Access to early learning opportunities within the local community helps support families, create information networks, build community infrastructure and trust in the service providers.

The universal principles state that early learning opportunities should be appropriate to the families accessing the services; affordable; accessible in terms of information and integration in to family life; good quality, with implications for existing opportunities and staffing; and equitable.

Early learning services need to adopt inclusive practices to ensure that target populations including ATSI and CALD communities, and children or parents with disabilities are incorporated into any program provision. Adoption of the universal principles work toward ensuring universal access to early learning opportunities and gives consideration to groups that require particular or additional assistance to participate effectively.

The ability of early learning services and providers to reflect target populations requires an understanding of the issues facing these groups, their particular requirements and flexibility to accommodate these requirements.

Strategies

The proposed strategies for early learning opportunities consider the universal principles, target group needs and model types described above. Strategies are prioritised to provide the greatest early learning opportunities to a diverse range of families and to enhance linkages between early learning opportunities for families. The priorities emerged from the research activities to aim to achieve universal, inclusive access given the diversity of need and scarcity of formal early learning services.

Weekly supported playgroups and home visits that promote in-home programs

Strategy – to link families to supported playgroups that model good examples of early learning and parent support. Playgroups could be operated from a variety of locations, including mobile services, formal early learning services both in and out of operating hours depending on availability of space, parent support agencies, other community services, or in the child’s own home depending on parent and child needs. They also provide a way to track children’s development and promote in-home programs, such as parents as teachers where appropriate.

Mobile outreach services with multidisciplinary teams

Strategy – to provide families and children with access to outreach services that can provide the greatest range of early learning opportunities and parent support through a multidisciplinary team that would comprise a variety of specialist allied health and early childhood partners. This would require an interagency approach linking Area Health Services, early intervention, early childhood services and other agencies depending on family and community requirements.

Enhance linkages between services and families

Strategy - linkage programs between early learning services, education services, early childhood clinics and parent support opportunities. A specific family liaison people would be employed to ensure referrals are made to appropriate organisations, both early learning and parent support as required, and families are followed up after the referrals to assist in transition or access to services. Where possible these people would be from a community language group. There is no particular requirement for location, although it is more practicable to be located in an early childhood setting, working between multiple local services. Examples of activities would be to establish and facilitate interagency communication such as case management, information exchange and referral mechanisms.

Promote positive relationships with families through flexible, opportunistic delivery

Strategy – to ensure that early learning opportunities are not only provided in formal settings, but are available informally, through opportunistic events or occasions. The Brief prepared for the Parent Support Strategies project outlines an approach to adding value to existing family activities within a CALD or ATSI community as a way to provide parent support information and resources. This approach would also lend itself to early learning information and resources, such as modelling beneficial ways to play and talk with children, general discussion of formal early learning and its importance for children, what school is about and how families can support children’s early learning.

The plan concludes with some of the considerations for management of the 3-year early learning strategy. They relate to management structure, funding, timeframe, communication, sustainability and review.

Families First funding complements core service funding. It is therefore important that as part of its role in the family services system, the Families First human service agencies actively seek secure and sustainable funding for core early learning services as part of its vision for children’s health and well-being. This includes universal access to affordable preschool and child care services.

Conclusion

The strategic plan sets out principles and strategies to aim to achieve universal, inclusive early learning opportunities throughout Cumberland Prospect over the next three years. Strategies include supported playgroups and early learning home-visits; mobile outreach services; enhanced linkages; and enhanced family and service relationships. The plan includes management considerations from which the Families First planning process can prioritise its forward planning in relation to the further implementation of early learning opportunities.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The objective of the Early Learning Project was to increase formal early learning opportunities for children 0-5 years in the Families First Cumberland Prospect Area (Auburn, Baulkham Hills, Blacktown, Holroyd and Parramatta Local Government Areas (LGAs)).

Formal early learning opportunities in this context mean structured early learning activities, for children in formal services, informal settings or at home. They might include pre-school, long day care, child care, supported playgroups and other structured child and relationship-centred activities, as well as in-home early learning ideas for families who are house-bound.

The project involved:

- documenting issues about groups who did not access formal early learning opportunities in the Cumberland Prospect Families First Area;
- identifying early learning models and strategies that would increase early learning opportunities for children 0-5 years from the identified groups; and
- developing a plan outlining priority strategies to increase early learning opportunities for children 0-5 years that could be implemented over the next 3-year period in each LGA within the Cumberland Prospect Area.

The UNSW Consortium, a group of academics and researchers managed by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) and including Families At Work (FAW), conducted the research.

The Families First implementation plan for the Cumberland Prospect Area was developed by an Interagency planning committee using information gained from a series of consultations in each LGA and a variety of demographic and service data. The consultations indicated that many families with children 0-8 years are not accessing formalised early learning opportunities.

Previous consultation with parents in Cumberland Prospect suggested a range of reasons why families were not accessing formalised early learning opportunities. These reasons incorporated issues of accessibility, affordability and culture including:

- lack of services in new estate areas and mobility to other areas;
- lack of culturally appropriate services and/or supports;
- language barriers;
- difficulty in understanding the early learning opportunities available;
- insufficient places in children's services and other early learning programs;
- an increase in the number of people with disrupted learning in their home country; and
- the need for referrals between appropriate services, and more outreach services to address the needs of this local population.

The results of this project will also feed into the Enhancement of Transition to School Programs for parents and families and take account of evidence of innovative early learning models in NSW and overseas.

Table 1.1 shows the LGA population profiles for Cumberland Prospect. Of note are the high population growth (9.6 per cent), high proportion of people from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds (35.7 per cent) and high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people (2.39 per cent in Blacktown). The only early learning data available, preschool attendance, shows highest use is in Baulkham Hills (23 per cent of children 0-5 years), almost double the lowest, Auburn (12 per cent).

Table 1.1: Cumberland Prospect Demographics by Local Government Area, 2001

	Blacktown	Auburn	Holroyd	Parramatta	Baulkham Hills	Cumberland Prospect (total)	NSW
Total population	256,364	56,379	85,760	144,490	139,404	682,397	6,371,745
Population growth since 1996	10.4	10.6	6.6	3.8	16.6	9.6	5.5
Born overseas Per cent of total population	34.4	56.7	39.0	39.6	28.9	36.7	23.1
Born overseas in NESCS* Per cent of total population	27.2	53.2	33.2	33.1	19.8	29.8	-
Speak another language Per cent of total population	30.6	72.3	42.2	41.4	21.3	35.7	18.8
Indigenous persons Per cent of total population	2.39	0.83	0.80	0.80	0.27	1.29	1.88
Number	6,093	464	680	1,147	372	8,756	
Couple families with children less than 15 years Per cent of all families	38.4	40.3	32.9	34.8	37.9	37.0	27.2
Number	36,976	7,611	11,366	18,144	23,544	65,804	
One parent families with children less than 15 years Per cent of all families	11.4	7.4	8.6	7.9	3.9	8.4	7.4
Number	12,741	1,998	3,822	5,825	3,479	14,973	
Children 0-5 years Per cent of total population	10.5	8.9	8.6	8.3	7.8	9.1	8.0
Number	26,838	5,039	7,357	12,006	10,875	62,115	
Children 0-5 years attending preschool Per cent of all children 0-5	16.6	12.0	16.2	16.8	23.0	17.4	19.5
Number	4,466	604	1,191	2,021	2,500	10,782	

Source: ABS Census 2001 Basic Community Profiles & ABS Census 2001 data analysed by WESTIR, *Families First in NSW – Cumberland Area Profile*

Note: * NESCS – non-English speaking country

Overall the Cumberland Prospect area has a fast growing population. It has significant populations of children between 0-5 years of age (9.1 per cent). Blacktown had the largest population of ATSI persons in the area (6,093) and has the largest population in any LGA for the state. Auburn had the highest concentration of its population born overseas in NESC (53.2 per cent) and the highest concentration of its population speaking another language (72.3 per cent).

Blacktown had the highest percentage of children between 0-5 years (10.5 per cent) followed by Auburn (8.9 per cent) and Holroyd (8.6 per cent). Blacktown also the highest percentage of one-parent families with children less than 15 years of age (11.4 per cent) followed by Holroyd (8.6 per cent) and Parramatta (7.9 per cent). Auburn had the highest percentage of couple families with children less than 15 years of age (40.3 per cent) followed by Blacktown (38.4 per cent) and Baulkham Hills (37.9 per cent).

Baulkham Hills had the highest percentage of children aged 0-5 attending preschool (23.0 per cent), but the lowest percentage of children aged 0-5 in the area (7.8 per cent). Auburn had the lowest percentage of children aged 0-5 attending preschool (12.0 per cent) and the second highest percentage of children aged 0-5 years in the area (8.9 per cent).

This is indicative of the inequitable uptake and availability of preschool places in the area, given the distribution of children aged 5 years or less by LGA. While ‘early learning’ for the purposes of this report is broader than attendance at pre-schools, ABS data is not available for participation rates in other early learning activities such as long day care.

1.2 Methodology

The aim of the research activities was to map existing opportunities and issues and develop a strategic plan for the following three years. The methodology included:

- a review of local and early learning literature;
- analysis of the Families First and other data bases;
- interviews with key stakeholders and families; and
- a service providers forum to identify strategies that had been implemented and opportunities for development (referred to as ‘the Forum’ in this report).

Details are listed in Appendix A. Findings from these activities informed the review and analysis of the current opportunities and the development of the plan.

Early learning providers, facilities, projects and networks were defined as including:

- formal children’s services (including, for example, centres, family day care, home-based care, occasional care, multipurpose, mobile; specialist such as Aboriginal services; multicultural; supported playgroups; preschools; SCAN, DoCS support for preschools accommodating children with additional needs);
- education (for example Schools as Community Centres, specialist education services, supplementary services such as priority schools, disability support units, language support and integrated support);
- programs attached to family and parent support agencies;
- specific services for ATSI communities;
- services for CALD communities, Temporary Protection Visa holders and refugees; and

- local government and other relevant family services and other interested generalist services such as community facilities and networks (eg community centres; public libraries; local government support; cultural and religious facilities).

In this report, Section 2 reviews the literature in relation to reasons for providing early learning opportunities and summarises four service types. It also reviews the opportunities in Cumberland Prospect. Section 3 describes the universal principles for facilitating the provision of early learning opportunities and the needs of target populations. Section 4 presents strategies for enhancing opportunities in Cumberland Prospect in the next 3 years. The final section describes management issues for consideration in the implementation of the strategies.

2 Review and Analysis

2.1 Review of findings from other locations

Research has shown that support for families prenatally, during infancy and early childhood helps create a healthy environment that fosters children's lifetime development, health and wellbeing, educational attainment, minimises the risk of abuse or neglect, and reduces the likelihood of future criminality and addiction (Provence and Naylor, 1983; Johnson and Walker, 1987; Miller and Whittaker, 1988; Oates et al, 1995; Child Protection Council, 1997; National Crime Prevention, 1999; McCain and Mustard, 1999).

Underlying the emphasis in current policy on the provision of services in the early years of life is the increased recognition of the importance of brain development during this phase of the lifespan. The success of brain development in early childhood has far reaching impact throughout life. In a review of a number of international studies on the significance of the first years of life to the development of children, McCain and Mustard (1999) indicated that the early years from conception to age six set the base for competence and coping skills that affect learning, behaviour and health outcomes throughout life.

Families First has a goal of universal access to formal early learning opportunities. Universal access can support targeted provision by acting as referral points for children and families with additional needs, and supporting early childhood professionals to develop competencies in assisting families (Woodruff, 2003). Mustard (2003:25) comments that 'if you do not have good early child development programs for all your population, it will be difficult to improve the performance of literacy by the school systems alone'. He further comments that an approach that combines both universal and targeted opportunities may be more useful than only universal or only targeted approaches. This ensures that overall, services are being supported toward universal access, while those groups that require additional opportunities are supported to access services. This could include, for example, groups that are currently defined with highest need or at greatest risk.

The Commonwealth Government has recently amended its priority of access guidelines for formal children's services that access the Child Care Benefit. The first priority now is for families and children 'at risk of serious abuse or neglect' (Child Care Benefit Determination 2000). Risk is not clearly defined. Need or risk could vary depending on the types of families in a geographic area, for example large numbers of families not in the paid workforce or new immigrant groups. While the Commonwealth Government has recognised the importance of targeting services to families and children at risk, there has not been a commensurate increase in funds or programs to support these families.

Children who have not been assessed as in high need also benefit from early learning opportunities. Ochiltree (1994) identified that child attendance in preschool activities assisted in reducing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups of children in the early years of school. However, universal access will not be reached by assuming equivalence among children and groups of children. Funds for targeted groups need to be managed in a flexible manner to enable service providers to adapt programs as child and family needs change, while still ensuring accountability of funds.

2.2 Good models of early learning

Throughout this report early learning opportunities have been defined in a very broad way to accommodate a greater variety of services and early learning opportunities than had traditionally been defined, through Australian Bureau of Statistics and the like, that limits

early learning to formal children's services such as long day care and preschools. The definition has been broadened to maximise a child's opportunity to participate in early learning, and recognising that these opportunities do not always present within formal children's services, but could be made available in association with parent support programs, other types of community services such as community centres or libraries, and existing family networks and social occasions such as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) gatherings.

The early learning opportunity plan should build on the strengths and experience of existing models. There are many models for early learning opportunities in use internationally and in Australia. These models can be broken into four key types: formal early learning settings, resource-based, outreach and in-home models. This section describes some of the models and examples observed in Cumberland Prospect and in other locations (see also Appendix B).

There is a significant amount of literature describing the types of programs that support early learning opportunities. Outcome measures for centre-based early learning opportunities relate to better academic achievement, fewer behaviour problems and better school performance (Gilliam and Zigler, 2000; Grantham-McGregor et al, 1997; Ramey, 1990; Campbell et al, 1994; Berruta-Clement, 1984; Schweinhart, 1993).

Studies of Australian early learning models do not include measurements of outcomes and long term impacts on children and families. The longitudinal study of Australian Children, *Growing Up in Australia*, that will follow a cohort of 10,000 children in two groups, babies and four year olds will include measuring two elements that will provide useful data for outcomes of early learning opportunities. First, what early learning experiences support children's emerging literacy and numeracy, and secondly, what experiences in early childhood promote a positive fit between child and transition to school (Millward, 2003).

Formal early learning settings

The first type of early learning is formal early learning settings such as long day care, preschool, family day care, home-based care, in-home care and supported playgroups. These were identified in the Forum as a key platform for formal early learning opportunities, both now and into the future. Centre-based formal services can provide one-stop shop opportunities for families where these services operate as a community hub supporting families and children with a range of information and resources. Attendance at these types of program assist in school preparation and regular attendance in early school years (Gilliam and Zigler, 2000).

Forum participants agreed that multifunction services incorporating a range of child and family needs such as supported playgroups, long day care, occasional care and preschool programs provided good opportunities to meet child and parent needs.

Some services such as Children First, a small regional operation based in the Blacktown LGA (ex-Blacktown Kindergarten Association), have added to its provision of long day care with supported playgroups, supporting children with additional needs through Itinerant Early Childhood Intervention Advisory Service and SCAN programs, building on existing resources to reflect the changing needs of the community and families. It also provides different children's services types through several individual services (preschool, long day care and a multipurpose children's service providing long day care and occasional care).

It also provides a SCAN program for state funded services (preschools, occasional care and state funded vacation care) in the Sydney Metro West which includes Cumberland,

Blacktown/Baulkham Hills and Nepean Network areas; an early intervention program that operates as an outreach service providing speech therapy, occupational therapy and a special educator; and a mobile intervention service that supports playgroups and facilitates children with additional needs to participate in these playgroups.

Centre-based opportunities have high infrastructure and recurrent costs due the nature of services provided. There are some efficiencies where services link together to minimise administrative and other infrastructure costs. Larger service providers such as Burnside and SDN Children's Services (formerly Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association), that manage multiple services, are examples of the provision of sustainable early learning opportunities.

Forum participants commented that there were a variety of children's services and other opportunities for formal early learning for children 0-5 years available across the Cumberland/Prospect area. Forum participants also added that there is a shortage of formal early learning opportunities, particularly culturally-specific services and services in new growth areas (Section 2.3).

Resource-based programs

The second type of early learning opportunities is resource-based programs. These include mobile libraries, supported playgroups and toy libraries. Forum participants identified these resource-based programs as effective current practice that should be built on to increase access for families and children.

Resource-based programs enable flexible delivery, depending on how they are designed and implemented. The Birth to Kindergarten literacy project operating in the Parkes area provides a good example of flexible delivery across a number of service providers (Birth to Kindergarten, 2002). The project utilises informal information dissemination to new parents about the benefits of reading, talking, singing and playing with their child. Information is provided through the Parkes Maternity Ward, early childhood centre, community health centre, all local schools shops and library. A local committee from each local school manages the project.

The *Books in Homes* program is a successful example of an international initiative (New Zealand) now being implemented in Australia. The aim of the program is to raise literacy levels in children who may not have access to books in their home through facilitating the child selecting their own new books nine times a year. The Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training pays for the books and provides them free to children. The program is currently operating in Northern Territory, Queensland, and northern NSW (Parents and Citizens Association, 2003: 32). The New Zealand Council for Education in research conducted and analysed in 2002 found that in schools that started using the scheme in 1996 'showed the 2001 mean reading scores were significantly greater than the 1996 scores' (TVNZ, 2002).

Burnside currently uses a multidisciplinary program for families, where tutoring is provided to low income families, along with supported playgroups and parent groups to enhance early learning opportunities and parenting skills to support children. Burnside's aim is to demonstrate the value of formal early learning prior to school entry and to utilise all opportunities to put such early learning in place.

Mt Druitt-Blacktown Learning Difficulties Support Group is a small non-profit service, funded by DoCS, that provides local practical support and resources to families of children

with learning difficulties. For a modest fee (\$16 for an individual per annum) they provide support and information to families with children with learning difficulties, drop in support meetings, individual family support, telephone advisory service, and access to a book and video library of information. They link with other local services such as schools and children's services to disseminate information and support service personnel with information and resources. The services also links early learning opportunities with parent support. Another flexible model in this service type is Schools as Community Centres (eg Lethbridge Park Primary School), which responds to local early learning opportunities and needs.

Forum participants commented that networking opportunities for resource-based services supported their role in providing referral information to families, particularly those currently using formal children's services.

Outreach models

Forum participants commented that access to affordable transport often limits families' access to services. This can be managed in two ways, either by providing low cost or free community transport to services and resources or providing outreach services to residents close to their homes. Depending on the types of activities, outreach services can be provided at local parks, community centres, schools, children's services, local shopping centres or other child safe areas.

Outreach programs can enhance early learning and parent support, create local community linkages and assist in supporting informal and formal parent networks. The Forum identified several existing outreach programs including the Marayong preschool outreach bus for early intervention where the service visits families in their own homes and the Mobile Outreach Therapy Team, Western Sydney Area Health Service (MOTT). The MOTT is a pilot mobile outreach team that includes an occupational therapist, speech pathologist, psychologist and social worker as required, linking with formal early learning services as opportunities present. This team visits disadvantaged families and families without capacity to provide support prior to the child starting in school. Another example is the Paint and Play model in Campbelltown.

Mobile services providing a range of child and parent services are provided in both rural and urban settings. Activities could include mobile playgroups, early intervention support, child games and activities, and parent information and resources. There was much discussion regarding the possibilities these types of services could have for families and children in Cumberland Prospect, given the current success of the Mt DrUITT Community Health Mobile Service.

The possibility of multidisciplinary outreach services to families who do not have access to existing service was viewed very positively. Families could access the mobile at a local park or other child safe area on a regular basis.

In-home programs

Lastly, in-home programs support parents and children in their own homes, and include programs such as Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) and Parents as Teachers.

HIPPY is a program from Israel that is managed in Australia by the Brotherhood of St Laurence. It is a two-year early education program that provides for home visits and parent group meetings to help parents with limited formal education prepare their four and five year olds for school entry. Parents from the community are trained and employed as home visitors. Several HIPPY programs are currently running in NSW, one of these is located La Perouse,

assisting Aboriginal parents prepare their children for school. This program was funded under the Commonwealth Government's Stronger Families Program for \$200,000. An application of the program in Melbourne has adapted the content to specific families speaking a language other than English. To date no evaluation of this program is available.

Parents As Teachers is a program that commences at birth and aims to continue through to the child's third birthday. It operates from Whalan Public School, Mt Druitt. Home visitors assist parents to strengthen their parenting skills and knowledge of child development and to prepare their children for school. A similar program that is focussing on home based learning for parents of young children in running in Ourimbah (NSW), funded through the Commonwealth Government's Stronger Families Program for \$175,000.

These programs have a high personal time commitment, combined with a relatively high family attrition. Some are prescriptive such as HIPPPY, while other enable flexible implementation and design. The Forum identified these types of programs as useful and requiring ongoing resources for future sustainability and expansion.

2.3 Current early learning opportunities and networks

Formal early learning opportunities exist in each LGA in a variety of forms. Cumberland Prospect covers a diverse region in relation to socio-economic opportunities, culture and linguistic background. Concurrent research on the Service Network maps the extent of services available in Cumberland Prospect. An initial mapping is included in Appendix B.

The Early Learning Opportunities Forum attended by providers and associated services identified a number of current programs available. Many current opportunities focussed on meeting specific family and child needs.

Access to early learning opportunities

Forum participants highlighted difficulties for families accessing early learning opportunities that related to understanding the potential benefits of this type of activity, cultural considerations in appropriateness of services, active recruitment of priority families and the shortage of formal opportunities in this area. Each of these is briefly discussed below.

Forum participants identified a number of existing models and strategies that were effective in enhancing access to formal early learning opportunities. These services successfully combine formal opportunities, outreach services, linkages to other services and more informal group activities. The NEWPIN program provided by Burnside provided a number of linked services including parent education, counselling, supported playgroups and child care. This combination of parent support and early learning opportunities supports both parent and child.

Services reported that some families are unaware of the potential benefits of early learning. This is a major contributor to families not accessing services and is combined with, particularly for CALD families, a lack of understanding of how children's services work, what they do and when to access them. Woodruff (2003) describes a parent who after many years and many attempts to seek help to deal with family violence and abuse through traditional sources such as local doctors and informal parent support groups was eventually referred to the NEWPIN program. Here she was supported to develop new ways of interacting with her children to develop trust, self esteem and more effective and appropriate parenting.

Current models of early learning are not necessarily compatible with the aspirations of many parents, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds. For example, much long day

care educational program planning in Australia is play-based, with activities and learning experiences determined from child observation and interest. The focus is to develop and enhance children's learning through play, developing a child's social skills and independent learning abilities. The *NSW Curriculum Framework for Children's Services* states that 'playfulness, fantasy, fun, humour, silliness and occasionally even the ridiculous have a place in children's services' (Office of Childcare, 2002: 27).

In some cultures, such as ATSI and Somali families, children are expected to be more passive in their learning, with the primary requirement to respect the family and learn traditional ways (Brennan, 1999; Alcorso, 2003). Learning is more structured, based around cultural norms, and traditional experiences. Children are taught to view themselves as part of an extensive family community, rather than as an individual with the extended family involved in child rearing and learning is 'important as it relates to the people, the time and the place' (Brennan, 1999:22). Some families are unaware of formal early learning opportunities and so do not access them. Other families that are aware of services may also hold concerns that these opportunities may undermine cultural norms, which could create barriers to accessing services.

Some services such as the MOTT use mobile outreach with a multidisciplinary team to support families. However, many formal early learning providers reported they do not have the time and resources to actively seek out new families, and rely on current networks and activities to attract families and children. Service providers such as Burnside use their combined services to facilitate access, with parent support workers able to refer families and children to other Burnside or community services as appropriate. Smaller stand alone services do not have this ability.

The exhaustion and over-stretching of a number of services also acts as a barrier to active priority recruitment of families. Services with waiting lists and insufficient support to meet the needs of existing clients are unlikely to prioritise recruitment of families.

Forum participants identified a number of issues in relation to access to formal early learning opportunities. The overarching concern of participants was about the lack of places in formal children's services, as these were most often perceived by families to be the preferred location for early learning opportunities. The impact of lack of formal child care places was noted as a barrier to recently arrived women who needed child care to access English or pre-employment classes (Alcorso, 2003). Children's Services Advisers and other service providers reported there are insufficient child care places to meet current demand. To this end it is important for the Families First infrastructure to secure the State allocation of funding to increase the number and affordability of formal children's services places especially in new growth areas.

Many Forum participants stated that formal children's services are community hubs that should and could provide appropriate formal early learning that is culturally and linguistically sensitive, while supporting and linking families to relevant community organisations and supporting transition to school. The notion of formal children's services as community hubs is particularly important as they are viewed as places to provide trusted, unbiased information and support (Kingwell, 2003; Holloway et al, 1995), where families seek support and advice prior to Government sources.

Several participants felt very strongly that, given the current shortage in places due to lack of funds to support existing services, it was incongruent that they were being asked to consider new and innovative strategies.

Many children's services and related early learning opportunities receive core funding from NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS), Department of Employment and Training and NSW Health. This core funding facilitates services providing primary care and support to children and parents. It usually does not allow scope to develop non-core early learning opportunities. Families First funds support programs, usually to existing services to provide value add programs for children and parents, it is not a substitute for or source of funding for core children's services. Formal children's services, while a very important part of formal early learning opportunities are not the only location that these opportunities are and could be provided to children and families.

Summary

Early learning opportunities ranging from formal to flexible and integrated are available to varying degrees to families in Cumberland Prospect. The current system was reported as suffering from a shortage of opportunities, particularly formal activities; severely limited resource-based programs, outreach programs and in-home programs; a shortage of trained staff; a need for information for families about potential benefits of early learning activities, particularly taking account of cultural diversity; and limited infrastructure for services to coordinate their activities. These findings informed the development of the following strategic plan.

3 Principles and Targets

Following the review of current early opportunities described in Section 2, the researchers prepared this plan to develop early learning opportunities in Cumberland Prospect over the following three years. The overarching principle that informs this discussion is that every child benefits from access to appropriate, good quality, equitable and affordable early learning opportunities before attending school.

The structure of the plan is:

- universal principles; and
- target populations.

Specific strategies follow in Section 4.

The plan has been written as a universal, broad strategy for inclusive early learning opportunities. The rationale for this is to reach the majority of families with a range of service types because of the diversity of need. For this reason the strategy concentrates on universal principles of early learning support, focussing on what could be possible for children in relation to early learning.

In addition, consistent with the principles of Families First, strategies to address the needs of identified target populations, specific to the location are proposed.

The plan is not separated by LGA because many of the stakeholders provide services that cover multiple LGAs. While there are specific needs within each of the five LGAs in Cumberland Prospect, it is recommended that part of the funding be provided to services that offer opportunities to a broad scope of families in a flexible service delivery form and prioritise target groups to get the best return from dollars invested.

3.1 Universal principles

The principles were developed from the local and international research. They relate to considerations to enhance child and family early learning opportunities, which work towards creating and supporting resilient family structures, where families can become key educators of children (summarised in Bennett et al, 2002; Woodruff, 2003). Elements of early learning models should operate from a strengths-based perspective, reinforcing existing family relationships, and supporting how a family is organised, how it functions, manages resources and copes with internal and external stress (Snow et al, 1991).

Consideration needs to be given the types of families accessing formal early learning opportunities. There are three groups of families who could access services:

- families who are mobile and can get out of home to attend services;
- families who cannot get out of home, but would benefit from their children attending external services; and
- families who cannot get out of home, and need in-home or close to home services such as outreach programs.

Access to early learning opportunities within the local community helps support families, create information networks, build community infrastructure and trust in the service providers.

The principles are summarised as early learning opportunities and should be appropriate to the families accessing the services; affordable; accessible in terms of information and integration in to family life; good quality, with implications for existing opportunities and staffing; and equitable. Each of these is described below.

Appropriate – promoting positive relationships between families and services

The provision of formal early learning opportunities needs to be considered in the context of how families perceive the value of the opportunities. Parents are receptive to information and resource provision when this provision ‘furthered their own goals for their children’ (Holloway et al, 1995). Whatever early learning opportunities are provided to families must consider family needs first, thus multiple models are required to facilitate congruency between family needs and early learning opportunities from which the child may benefit. This means that for all families, particularly CALD and ATSI families, a clear understanding of their goals for their child and how this fits with cultural expectations is imperative in any strategy developed. Alcorso (2003: 10) comments that the bringing together of families with common interests such as their children, supports the needs of CALD families, facilitating socialising and sharing parenting skills.

For parents the most important considerations are developing trust relationships with service providers (Kingwell, 2003), ensuring that their family and cultural needs are understood and respected (Office of Childcare, 2002).

Affordable

Affordable services are essential to enable families to access suitable early learning opportunities (Alcorso, 2003). Forum participants and stakeholder interviews identified cost as a barrier to access. One Forum group commented that whatever early learning opportunities were provided must be ‘affordable care that is in tune with family economics’. That is, consideration must be given to the target group and their ability to pay or not. Many target families were described in the stakeholder interviews as living in poverty. Families were described as being in survival mode, having ‘food insecurities’ and lacking other resources that would enable families to participate in early learning opportunities.

D’Urso et al (2001) referred to formal early learning opportunities as one of the service types that required particular attention in relation to affordability. Difficulties experienced by families wanting to access early learning opportunities included:

- formal children’s services such as long day care were not seen as a financially viable option for families due to the high costs of care and low income of families. This left many women housebound and isolated from the community; and
- the need for more affordable child care centres and preschools to provide respite care opportunities, enabling mothers to alleviate the sense of loneliness and isolation experienced, expose their children to formal early learning opportunities prior to commencing school, and allowing them to attend personal development course, English classes and other training courses such as women’s health, child health, child behaviour, and dental care.

In the strategic plan implementation, affordability considerations could include free services, means-tested fees or access to services, access to Commonwealth Child Care Benefit, provision of Department of Education preschools and preference for low-cost opportunities.

Accessible - integrated into family life

Children are often viewed as the common thread to draw families, who may have limited social contacts, together (Alcorso, 2003; Holloway et al, 1995). Providing opportunities to integrate early learning as part of regular family activities facilitates and supports informal social networks for families, while providing important learning opportunities for children. This principle works in two directions: providing activities that are compatible with family interests and encouraging families to participate in community activities.

Programs that are child-focussed benefit children more than parents, while programs that are parent-focussed benefit parents more than children (Gomby et al, 1995). Woodruff (2003) identified several programs that combine child focussed learning with high level parent support and involvement – Perry Preschool, Carolina Abecedarian, Head Start and Sure Start – all showed significant positive results for both children and parents.

Stakeholders and Forum participants both commented that practical assistance, for example linking early learning opportunities with lunch clubs, clothes swaps, cooking classes or laundry facilities could enhance opportunities for parents and children. Play facilities where skilled facilitators can work with children and model parenting skills while parents were occupied with other responsibilities could be such an approach. A service provider noted,

One of our dreams would be to have a ... fully equipped laundry where people could come and do their laundry while they're learning other stuff.

Some Forum participants felt that providing recreational opportunities, for example leisure activities, or respite for families could help support and promote early learning. These provide parents with opportunities for social contact while facilitating early learning outcomes for children.

Helping families become part of local community networks would assist in integrating early learning into family life. Aside from cultural and linguistic barriers to access, often one of the reasons families do not access these types of programs is that they are not part of any formal or informal network of support. Some families may be concerned that services represent a potential intrusion into their family and place subsequent risks on the family unit. For families where a child has a disability the care needs of the child may make it difficult for the family to be part of a network of support. Opportunities for early learning can also be a link to parent support opportunities. A service provider reported they would like to see

gathering families to talk and share about their ... concerns or their needs or their situations or ... even work things out for families, so gathering people in informal settings, and taking opportunities to build from their experiences to things that ... they might be hoping to respond to or participate in.

For some CALD families this is a vital consideration, where individuals are 'obligated to contribute to the family's welfare rather than maximising [their] own resources' (Holloway et al 1995, 467).

Many formal early learning opportunities such as formal children's services, supported playgroups and Schools as Community Centres rely on families being mobile and able to

attend services. There are many families and children, for example children or parents with disabilities, for whom this is not possible. There are limited in-home services that can support children and families with services in their own home, or to make to transition to external services.

Accessible - information and communication

Articulating the potential child development benefits of early learning activities and of play as an early learning mode can support parenting in all families. Many families do not see a connection between play and learning (Holloway et al, 1995), but could see the links to the physical and emotional benefits of play. Holloway found that some parents with less education or from CALD backgrounds viewed a more didactic and formal approach to early learning as the preferred mode of education for young children.

Lack of information for both for families and services/providers regarding formal early learning service types was considered a barrier to access. Some Forum participants identified the need for a family support liaison person to facilitate transition into and between services. This person could provide information and support to families and services to ensure the process was positive for both parties. A service provider reported,

there is isolation ... a fear of trying to make those initial networks, of going somewhere new where you don't know people.

Consideration needs to be given to effective means of targeting information to families and children. New parents can access information associated with pre or post natal care, through home nursing visits and appropriate mothers groups (Alcorso, 2003). For example information provision and support to new parents while they are still in hospital may create linkage opportunities to early childhood clinics. However, multiple methods of communication are needed to meet the diversity of the community and the immediacy of need at different stages of children's development.

Using local resources and contacts as a means to disseminate information about local early learning opportunities to parents such as community services, doctors surgeries, housing offices, chemists, local shopping centres and the like is one way to support communication. Information needs to be available in writing and pictorial form as not all potential recipients may be literate in English, and while it is possible to translate this information into community languages this also assumes that recipients are literate in their first language. Using a family's existing networks can assist in reaching those families who may not currently utilise formal early learning opportunities.

One stakeholder commented that while many families who accessed her service did not have English as their first language, they had an adequate level of functional English making it easier to access early learning services as required. Her concern was that there were many families with little or no English, who are not literate in first languages and do not get access to any services. One service provider noted,

you can have data bases and you can have posters and this and this and this and pamphlets, but we're talking about people that can't read or don't have the English or just don't have the literacy skills to deal with that, who need it in another format, you know the mums that go to the local shopping centre but wouldn't pick up a pamphlet but have the TV on all the time.

Information needs to be provided in a variety of formats to reach the greatest number of families.

Good quality - building on existing opportunities

Use of existing services, resources and community connections enhance early learning opportunities. Early learning opportunities must be sustainable and ongoing to assist in creating trust and partnership between families and service providers. If programs are not sustainable it makes it more difficult to reflect community needs in a practical way. Kingwell comments that by building on existing opportunities through being ‘unobtrusive (as possible), interested and caring’, effective community linkages are created, minimising the notion of ‘outsiders and blow ins [who] are generally regarded with apprehension and suspicion’ (2003: 3).

Engendering a sense of ownership by the local community in available early learning opportunities lifts the profile of that provision and facilitates grass roots communication and support for the service. This building of social cohesion also strengthens the informal social networks and integration of early learning into family life.

For example it may be possible to extend existing mobile services that optimise a multidisciplinary approach while facilitating opportunities for formal early learning and supporting parents. This is particularly important in areas such as Mt Drutt, where there is limited access to public transport or where families do not find it easy to access existing services. It may also be possible to combine mobile early childhood clinics with toy libraries. A service provider reported,

if families don’t have transport, we’re not able to provide a home-based service ... so a lot of families would not be able to access services because they can’t get here.

Any funding for early learning opportunities must consider longer-term sustainability for both the service providers and the programs offered (Alcorso, 2003; Kingwell, 2003; Woodruff, 2003). A criticism at the Forum of Families First was the fragmentary approach to funding, without an apparent consideration of over all service profiles and potential for linkages between services to more effectively meeting family and child needs.

Good quality and appropriate - staff training and support

The availability of appropriately trained and experienced staff is a critical issue impacting on children and families accessing services (Warrilow and Fisher, 2003). This impact is severe in formal children’s services such as long day care and preschool, and is starting to impact on other types of providers. One service provider reported,

we’re in Western Sydney, and lots of professionals do not live in Western Sydney, so getting people like ... experienced speech pathologists and OTs, and those sorts of areas can take a lot of time, so we might have the funds, and not be able to get the people.

For CALD communities, lack of appropriate staff inhibits access to care. Identifying appropriately trained and experienced staff from existing and newly emerging cultural groups to link with families who may not be aware of early learning opportunities and services, or are not comfortable working with services who may not be aware of their culture often resulted in delays for these children and families having opportunities for access (Alcorso, 2003).

Services and staff need to be supported to take a dynamic approach to identifying the next set of potential family and child needs, assisting these families develop familiarity with early learning and facilitating access to these opportunities.

Early learning services and providers need to be supported to provide sustainable, ongoing programs so that they are aware of:

- the changing needs of their community so that their program and resources are dynamic, accommodating these changes;
- the need to upgrade skills and training as required, for example understanding different cultural backgrounds and how this may impact on accessing early learning opportunities;
- communicating effectively with each other through effective local networks;
- not all services having to provide the same things, but rather sharing resources. For example it may be possible to implement an effective local intranet site or email list (assuming means to facilitate internet access); and
- placing the child's needs as central to whatever is implemented. For example, at the Forum one participant commented as problematic that 'if we advertise then more people will want to use the service'. However, the inability to meet a real and growing need for formal early learning opportunities impacts on all services, as there are not adequate places in formal children's services to meet current demand, particularly for children aged under two years.

Many services that provide formal early learning opportunities have dedicated staff who work to the best of their ability to meet child and parent needs to ensure that the programs provided continue to meet the changing needs of the community. Staff need to have access to resources and training to upgrade skills as required. This may involve, for example, training to facilitate understanding of different cultural backgrounds and how these may impact on access to available formal early learning opportunities, and support to ensure communication through effective local networks. To maximise the efficacy of any Families First funding in Cumberland Prospect staff training and resources need to form part of any successful funding applications. It could also link to Families First provided training.

Professional support for staff that builds on strengths and capacity enhances their potential to work at a high level with children and families. Facilitating effective communication and coordination between services results in staff being able to refer and support families as required.

Good quality services need to plan and demonstrate how staff would be supported to develop and enhance skills to provide appropriate opportunities to children and families.

Equitable - links to and from other service types

Specific needs for equitable access by target populations is discussed in Section 3.2. A second principle for equitable access is service links to promote priority access to appropriate services.

In order to optimise equitable access to early learning opportunities, service providers need to be able to link families to a range of community services. Optimising early learning opportunities relies on service providers being able to support families through effective

linkages with a range of community services as required. A reliance on linkages assumes that service providers have the means and ability to communicate formally and informally to provide the best possible support for families and children. It may be that Families First needs to take a more proactive role in facilitating and resourcing these linkages through regular service forums and network meetings (Kingwell, 2003).

The researchers found patchy evidence of collaboration and coordination between services providing formal early learning opportunities or of their actively seeking out priority families and children who do not have access. Parramatta Children's Services Network was an example where the network provided regular opportunities for providers to share information on how they were working with families and children, peer support and examination of future opportunities.

Another example of a local network is the Early Childhood Intervention Co-ordination Program (ECICP), funded by the NSW Departments of Health, Education and Training, and Aging, Disability and Home Care (DADHC). ECICP is managed by local area committees to provide network and referral opportunities for all practitioners involved in working with children prior to school age with disability needs and their families. Attendees can include SUPS workers, community health therapists, disability workers, aging and disability personnel and those working in supported playgroups. ECICP also has an information line operated by the Early Childhood Intervention Association and funded by DADHC that lists all local early childhood agencies who work with children with additional needs.

When services are fragmented and often do not have opportunities or resources to be responsible for this coordination, communication between services can break down. Some services do not have access to adequate information sharing resources such as computers and internet access. An example was Early Childhood Clinics, which are often an initial point of contact after the birth of a baby for new parents and are an important link in parent support information and facilitating transitions to early learning opportunities. Access to IT and associated systems would enable services to communicate with each other, potentially minimising duplication of resources and information, and provide a higher level of networking and support for services, and ultimately families and children.

Many services attend networking opportunities, but this was only possible when there were adequate staff. Facilitating networking and information sharing was seen as essential to providing positive early learning opportunities. Service providers reported,

Networking/communication between services can be a means of providing services with support/assist with problem solving ... real demand for this something that can be instigated by DoCS.

What is lacking is the leadership and the central coordination of all those mechanisms to be able to meet the needs as they present in an immediate way.

Local interagencies, shared resource material, referrals, assisted transitions between services and joint service provision are some good ways that early learning providers could enhance opportunities for families. Families are often not sure where to go, or what other early learning opportunities may exist. Creating more effective linkages between pre and post natal services such as hospitals and early childhood clinics and early learning opportunities would provide potential opportunities for all families with babies born in local hospitals. An example of this could be any services that liaise with families taking responsibility to provide

community information and network opportunities for and between existing and new early learning services and families. Parents reflected,

once the mother's group is finished then there's nothing. And if you don't want to join a playgroup then there really isn't anything else unless you all get into going to each other's houses and do that kind of stuff.

I've got the pamphlets stuck in there somewhere and I haven't referred back to them once.

Linkages between services must cross over between early learning and parent support (Woodruff, 2003). It is not possible to look at early learning in isolation from parent support. To create family resilience that supports early learning opportunities in the home, parenting skills must be effective (Gomby et al, 1995). Opportunities to link existing parent support activities with early learning, or vice versa through possible joint service provision maximises parent and child potential. For example, one service provider said they did not go into homes with domestic violence. Rather they pick them up free babysitting for mother, which is opportunistic early learning situation for kid. Another provider reported,

We provide transport, free ... all our programs are free ... and we usually build them around food. So that there's a meal sharing part of it ... or some kind of ... hospitality.

Good examples of links to and from other service types include outreach programs from existing early learning services to provide transition from home to formal early learning opportunities, for example supported playgroups operating from long day care services, parent support programs or similar. A service provider said,

people ... I think feel the need for greater home, you know in-home services, you know home visiting or opportunities for working with families inside the house.

3.2 Target populations

Early learning services need to adopt inclusive practices to ensure that target populations including ATSI and CALD communities, and children or parents with disabilities are incorporated into any program provision. Adoption of the universal principles will work toward ensuring universal access to early learning opportunities, but consideration needs to be given to those groups that require particular or additional assistance to participate effectively.

The ability of early learning services and providers to reflect target population needs requires an understanding of the issues facing these groups, their particular requirements and flexibility to accommodate these requirements. Holloway comments that it is important for services to be aware of and manage the overarching unwritten cultural assumptions regarding 'authority and social relations' (1995: 470) which are implicit in early learning practices and provision. These implicit practices may not always reflect target population expectations and requirements.

Indigenous communities

Inclusion of ATSI families and children requires careful consideration of culturally appropriate formal early learning opportunities (Brennan, 1999). Forum participants believed that looking at ways to assist in family and child transitions between parent support programs,

early learning opportunities and other community services requires specific Aboriginal facilitators to support this process.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholder interviewees reiterated the need to have appropriate ATSI representation to facilitate access for parents and families. One stakeholder commented,

They're doing the gig the right way ... if we're going to do things in multicultural communities, make sure that all the structures and hierarchies actually mirror who we are.

Service and resources need to be provided at no or very low cost as many ATSI families do not have capacity to pay for services.

ATSI communities are not the only communities beset by poverty and its associated problems of family violence, however, these issues were identified by stakeholders as particularly urgent for ATSI families. Access to culturally appropriate early learning opportunities were considered essential in a context of some families living with poverty and violence.

Cultural and linguistic diversity

Concurrent with this project, specific investigation into the needs of CALD families and communities was conducted (Alcorso, 2003). The findings of the CALD research have impacts for any current and future early learning opportunities.

The most significant challenge is addressing the perception that for some CALD families that child-focussed early learning activity can undermine the need to consider traditional learning and communities (Holloway, 1995).

Early learning providers and services need to develop methods for overcoming language barriers, both verbal and written. Some services still assume that all parents are literate in their first language, or have access to people that can translate English documents. This is not always so.

Content of early learning activities needs to include culturally specific material and methods. Understandings and expectations of early learning vary dramatically across cultures. For example the importance of childhood immunisation is not well known throughout all immigrant populations. Alcorso (2003) comments that many privately sponsored refugees are not familiar with early childhood centres, as they are not always provided with the referral information that a DIMIA-funded refugee may be. A parent said,

They can still work with Pakistani people but I don't feel very comfortable, sometimes I need Pakistani, need some information about my language, so there is no service for this or I don't have idea.

The way that programs are delivered needs to accommodate the needs of the particular CALD group being targeted. Mobile outreach bi-lingual workers can support CALD mothers who are not always able, nor encouraged, to access support outside their home or cultural group (Families First, 2002). The formality of a classroom, hospital environment or early childhood clinic can intimidate potential attendees (Alcorso, 2003). Locating services and resources in the local community may facilitate participation by CALD mothers particularly. Additionally, some families considered providing women-only services important, as well as mixed classes when appropriate.

Disability (children and parents)

Children and parents with disabilities face a variety of issues when trying to use or find out about early learning opportunities. Meeting the early learning needs of children with special needs requires additional support for families: access to early intervention services, support for parents and staff training.

There are a number of existing State and Commonwealth funded programs to facilitate children with disabilities attend formal early learning opportunities. These programs (SCAN, SUPS and SNSS) have limited funds that result in limited access to services. This is exacerbated if the child or parents have a CALD or ATSI background, with many services not having the skills or resources to manage both (or singular) needs effectively.

Children with disabilities often require multiple interventions and funding does not always translate across service types. This results in a child receiving adequate support and resources in one service, but not necessarily the next or concurrent service (Llewellyn, 1996).

Children with disabilities are not always identified as many do not access early learning. While there are early intervention agencies and support available, if families are either not aware of these services or children who may require these services are not identified, a child may not present with an identified disability until they start school (Alcorso, 2003). Early identification is essential. However, not all disabilities can be identified early, for example, autism cannot easily be identified until a child is around 2 to 3 years of age. The dilemma is to create ways of staying in contact with a family for long enough to be able to identify any emerging issues or concerns.

Access to adequate and affordable transport is also an issue for children with disabilities. If a family relies on public transport this decreases the likelihood of a family being able to access services outside of the home, given the limited disabled access to public transport. Providing transport links between services or home/local visits to enhance early learning opportunities for children with disabilities is vital to maximise their potential for participation.

Other target needs

Strategies for single parents and young mothers were not specifically identified in the research as a group that currently required specific support. Some Stakeholders noted the Plumpton Young Mums program as an inclusive model, supporting mothers and providing early learning opportunities for their children and several commented that many ATSI parents were aged 15 to 18 years and required additional support as discussed above. This does not mean that single parents and young mothers residing in Cumberland Prospect do not require assistance, but is more a reflection of Forum participants and Stakeholder backgrounds and interests.

Western Sydney Area Health Service, Women's Health completed a research project, Blacktown Teenage Pregnancy Initiative, in 2003.

4 Strategies

The proposed strategies for early learning opportunities below consider the universal principles, target group needs and model types described previously. Strategies have been prioritised to provide the greatest early learning opportunities to a diverse range of families and to enhance linkages between early learning opportunities for families. The priorities have emerged from the research activities to aim to achieve universal, inclusive access given the diversity of need and scarcity of formal early learning services.

It may be appropriate for strategies to be located across a number of services providers to maximise opportunities for families to access the services. It may be possible to provide the strategies under a joint model, thus enhancing linkages between services. For example the weekly supported playgroups could be operated from an existing mobile provider as part of its multidisciplinary approach to support families and children.

Weekly supported playgroups and home visits that promote in-home programs

Strategy – to link families to supported playgroups that model good examples of early learning and parent support. Playgroups could be operated from a variety of locations, including mobile services, formal early learning services both in and out of operating hours depending on availability of space, parent support agencies, other community services, or in the child's own home depending on parent and child needs. They also provide a way to track children's development and promote in-home programs, such as Parents as Teachers where appropriate.

Goal - to enhance family information and activities in relation to early learning and parent support through a variety of locations including close to home and within existing services.

Target - playgroups can target specific groups such as children or parents with disabilities, CALD or ATSI families.

Rationale – to provide structured early learning opportunities for children in small group or individual settings depending on child and family needs and requirements.

Resources – varied depending on location of playgroups, community needs, and whether existing infrastructure and resources are available. Supplementing the resources of existing supported playgroup providers may be most cost effective. For example, one such supported playgroup in the Area costs approximately \$65,000 per annum, for salary and on-costs for two part-time early childhood qualified staff for two supported playgroups per week for children with additional needs, with additional home visits to families on the waiting list or transitioning to other services. Families make a small contribution. Other operating costs, such as office infrastructure, toy libraries and administrative staff and resources are covered by the organisation.

Time – first 12 months of 3-year strategy for roll out of initial playgroups.

Mobile outreach services with multidisciplinary teams

Strategy – to provide families and children with access to outreach services that can provide the greatest range of early learning opportunities and parent support through a multidisciplinary team that would comprise a variety of specialist allied health and early childhood partners. This would require an interagency approach linking Area Health Services,

early intervention, early childhood services and other agencies depending on family and community requirements.

Goal – to attract families and children who are not easily able to attend external services, who are not familiar with early learning opportunities or who may need some assistance with transition to more formal early learning or school.

Target – specifically CALD, ATSI and families with disabilities, or families who are not able to easily access external services.

Rationale – to provide structured early learning opportunities for children in small group or individual settings depending on child and family needs and requirements, in local areas close to or at family homes. The use of opportunistic events, in locations close to the families' homes would assist in building good working partnerships with families and encourage mobiles to respond to local community need. The use of multidisciplinary teams would link families to other support.

Resources – vary depending on services currently provided, additional multidisciplinary team members required and other resources available eg toy library, child leisure activities, play resources etc. Funds should be prioritised to existing mobiles who have the relevant service and transport infrastructure, and would need to include new funds to assist with modifications to fit out, operating costs and service upkeep. Additional costs could include time for agency partners to develop infrastructure to support collaborative planning, and subsequently for multidisciplinary team members to plan, release time from existing work and to network as required.

Time – first six months identification of need and additional resources required by existing mobile services to extend their services; roll out of multidisciplinary mobiles next 6-12 months of 3-year strategy.

Enhance linkages between services and families

Strategy - linkage programs between early learning services, education services, early childhood clinics and parent support opportunities. A specific family liaison people would be employed to ensure referrals are made to appropriate organisations, both early learning and parent support as required, and families are followed up after the referrals to assist in transition or access to services. Where possible these people would be from a community language group. There is no particular requirement for location, although it is more practicable to be located in an early childhood setting, working between multiple local services. Examples of activities would be to establish and facilitate interagency communication such as case management, information exchange and referral mechanisms.

Goal – to assist early learning and other family services to communicate regarding family needs and outcomes, including referral opportunities, greater understanding of services available, reduce duplication of service provision, joint service opportunities and cross training and resource development for service staff.

Target - CALD, ATSI and families with disabilities, vulnerable and at risk families.

Rationale – to increase early learning opportunities through providing agencies with an external point for information and support. Through increased awareness of other services appropriate referrals or similar can be made, with families being assisted to access and use

referred agencies. Families would be able to access appropriate information to support their transition between services and schools as required.

Resources – an identified family liaison person per early childhood setting. Costs would include salary and on-costs, resources (depending on service infrastructure), development of family and service resources, transport and communication strategies.

Time – second year of 3-year strategy. The first 12 months of the position would be an establishment phase.

Promote positive relationships with families through flexible, opportunistic delivery

Strategy – to ensure that early learning opportunities are not only provided in formal settings, but are available informally, through opportunistic events or occasions. The Brief prepared for the Parent Support Strategies project outlines an approach to adding value to existing family activities within a CALD or ATSI community as a way to provide parent support information and resources. This approach would also lend itself to early learning information and resources, such as modelling beneficial ways to play and talk with children, general discussion of formal early learning and its importance for children, what school is about and how families can support children's early learning.

Goal - support families and children in ways that uses parents' goals as a way to facilitate early learning.

Target – families who are not accessing formal early learning opportunities, but who may participate in informal, family-based community activities.

Rationale – many families do not have access to formal early learning opportunities for a variety of reasons including lack of places, cost, transport and lack of information about the potential benefits of early learning activities. Supporting opportunistic early learning is one way to target families currently not in formal services. It is also a way to provide early learning information and resources in a culturally sensitive way, within the relevant community and in a safe place for families who may be vulnerable or at risk. Examples would be activities at mosques, Tots and Mums morning sessions, churches and shopping malls, antenatal clinics and Schools as Community Centres.

Resources – initial funding through Parent Support CALD brief. Promotion and publicity relating to the final methodology and its applicability to early learning opportunistic events. Limited funding to providers to develop and provide early learning opportunistic models.

Time – year 3 of 3-year strategy. Early learning in this instance may not necessarily be provided by a traditional early learning organisation or institution, it may be more effective for families to access early learning through other community services that may have links, formal or informal, back to an early learning service or provider. This enables accommodation of opportunistic events for providing early learning and fosters communication between and within early learning and community services and agencies.

5 Management

This section lists some of the considerations for management of the 3-year early learning strategy. They relate to management structure, funding, timeframe, communication, sustainability and review.

Management structure

Recommendations from this research provide the Cumberland Prospect Families First Implementation Group (FFIG) with a framework for current and future funding plans.

We recommend that any future Families First Reference Groups that manage subsequent funding grants continue to maintain an oversight of the strategy as a whole, in addition to the individual projects funded. In this way, the establishment and operation of the programs will continue to be managed in the context of ensuring continuity of the strategy objectives over the three year budget period and longer if appropriate.

Many of the suggestions are prioritised for target populations. It may therefore be useful to include resource and support representatives from the specific target groups in the future Reference Groups to assist in enhancing appropriate and relevant child and family outcomes.

Funding

Families First funding complements core service funding. Some Forum participants were not aware of the funding structure for Families First. Clarifying this for service providers would enhance the effectiveness and acceptance of Families First strategies.

It is also important that as part of its role in the family services system that supports families and children, the Families First human service agencies actively seek secure and sustainable funding for core early learning services as part of its vision for children's health and well-being. This includes universal access to affordable preschool and child care services.

Funding for Families First projects in Cumberland Prospect must reflect the needs and ability to pay of local target populations. For example, funding for toy libraries should prioritise locations where families are less likely to have the ability to contribute or purchase suitable early learning toys and equipment. This may also impact on the potential for a service to provide a sustainable program. It may be appropriate to specify priority funding to services in locations depending on the capacity of families in that area. Considerations described in the review of current services (Section 2.3) include family income and other measures of disadvantage, transport and availability of other services.

Timeframe

The timeframe has been developed to allow for development of project briefs, community response, allocation of funding and roll out of the approved program.

Weekly supported playgroups and home visits - first 12 months of 3-year strategy for roll out of initial playgroups.

Mobile outreach services with multidisciplinary teams - first 6 months identification of need and additional resources by existing mobile services, roll out of multidisciplinary mobiles next 6-12 months of 3-year strategy.

Enhance linkages between services and families, assist in transition between services and school - second year of 3-year strategy for first 12-month establishment phase.

Promote positive relationships between families and services through flexible, opportunistic delivery - year 3 of 3-year strategy.

Communication and publicity

Forum participants commented on the value of the day, having an active role in the future of Families First in Cumberland Prospect. Effective communication of Families First strategies, services that are funded and outcomes would enhance the current level of provision of early learning services. It may be useful to consider how ongoing service participation, information sharing, feedback from current and future Families First programs can form part of a regular Families First process for the area.

All early learning and parent support services should receive information regarding all Families First funded programs as they are established. This is important in order to increase linkages between all services and thereby to assist in supporting more effective program to families and children.

Sustainability

One of the critical issues facing programs that aim for higher-level intervention, is funding sustainability. The strategy should be funded and implemented through a progressive process that builds in existing services, skills and resources, and only where necessary add new services and resources. For ongoing and successful programs, funding should be applied to services with current viable programs that could be adapted or extended, have the internal capacity to look at opportunities for self funding (full or partial) and have a commitment to effective community partnerships.

Alcorso echoes this in her research, stressing the importance of continuity of funding to 'allow strong programs to be developed, workers to become known and trusted and different program options to be trailed' (2003: 17). This is even more critical for CALD and ATSI families who need firstly to find out about a service and then to develop trust in the workers and services provided.

Review of funding outcomes and evaluations

Evaluation needs to be incorporated into the strategy to monitor the success of the programs funded from the perspectives of Families First, service providers, communities, families and children.

Outcome measurements from Families First projects need to be flexible enough to accommodate the macro Families First goals, while ensuring that local needs are not lost, with opportunities to track data as a means to evaluate and establish evidence of good child outcomes.

Outcome measures for children accessing early learning opportunities should be included in funding contracts, drawing upon the Families First Outcome Framework. Formal early learning services such as long day care centre have access to state licensing and national accreditation systems, but these rely on a service demonstrating its ability to meet family needs. (The accreditation system includes a written parent survey, which relies on parents being literate in English.)

Conclusion

This strategic plan set out principles and strategies to aim to achieve universal, inclusive early learning opportunities throughout Cumberland Prospect over the next three years. Strategies include supported playgroups and early learning home-visits; mobile outreach services; enhanced linkages; and enhanced family and service relationships. The plan includes management considerations from which the Families First planning process can prioritise its forward planning in relation to the further implementation of early learning opportunities.

Appendix A Methodology

Literature review

A literature review of documents relating to the initiative was conducted to identify key concerns for early learning strategies in the local government areas, Cumberland Prospect Area, NSW national and international and to assist in the service and utilisation mapping exercises.

The review also included early learning models from other national and international jurisdictions to develop options for future directions in the service plan for the Area. Focus was on strategies that remove barriers to access for target groups, address needs of families and build on the strengths of existing services and networks. The findings from the literature review were situated in the local context. This included:

- local and NSW *Families First* research on early learning strategies, existing service directories and past research;
- contact with services and interagency mechanisms;
- materials referred to in the brief (attachments, consultation report, plan, New South Wales Child Health Survey (Centre for Epidemiology and Research (2002)), Quinn (2002));
- Families First data base; and
- a brief review of related Australian and international research.

Interviews with key stakeholders and families

Stakeholders were recruited through initial stakeholder representatives recommending further key informants.

Information to be collected included type, description and size of service; number of clients and type of target groups; facilitators or obstacles to access; suggestions for early learning access improvement; models of best practice; and family consultation.

A total of twelve key stakeholders were interviewed. Representatives of the following organisations were interviewed.

- Barnardos
- Children First (formerly Blacktown Kindergarten Association)
- Children's Services Advisers, Department of Community Services
- CORRE – Women's Activities and Self-help House
- Early Education, Rouse Hill/Auburn, Holroyd, Parramatta
- Hebersham Aboriginal Youth
- Holy Family Centre, Mt Druitt
- Mt Druitt –Blacktown Learning Difficulties Support Group
- Parents As Teachers
- Parent Effectiveness Training

- SDN Children's Services, Focus Support Service, Parramatta
- Telopea Family Support Service.

Fieldwork to gain a consumer perspective was conducted, particularly targeting family types with priority status for the Families First strategy and Cumberland/Prospect plan. Five family interviews were conducted. The fieldwork explored the views of families' experiences accessing early learning services, child and family early learning needs, facilitators and barriers to access and suggestions for improvements.

Because of the diversity of willingness and ability to engage in consultation, a range of methods was available, although only face to face interviews were conducted. Families were paid \$30 for participation in the research. Where necessary interpreters were engaged to assist in meeting the cultural needs of families.

Questions to families focused on: their experience of service provision for themselves or their family members, their participation in early learning services, their unmet early learning needs, suggestions to make services and information more relevant and accessible.

Children were not interviewed or observed because of the short time frame, which prevented an accessible focus on the child's experience of different early learning services. The project relied on the literature review to reveal children's experience of the issue.

Early learning forum

A half day Forum of early learning providers was organised to inform the development of the three year strategic plan. Information discussed included existing early learning opportunities, characteristics and capacity, what's working well and issues in relation to early learning and what could be possible for early learning in the next three years. Approximately 35 service provider representatives attended.

Appendix B Selected Map of Early Learning Services

Selected services as listed in databases held by DoCS July 2003.

Service provider details	Description	Capacity	Location	Area served	Cost
Blacktown					
Blacktown Kindergarten Association Inc	Small family Centre	20 places for children 3-5	Blacktown	Blacktown LGA	
Blacktown Roving Child Care Inc			Plumpton		
Blacktown South Children's Activities Centre Inc	Before and after school care, vacation care activities		Blacktown	Blacktown	
Coolamon Cottage Child Care Centre			Blacktown		
Margaret Druitt Day Care Centre	Educational program for the individual child needs		Plumpton	Blacktown	
Kids Activity Centre Ltd – Mount Druitt Community cottage	Provides a range of community development activities including information and referral services, before and after school hour's care and vacation care. Also runs adult interest classes, activities to assist in developing parenting skills and a mobile resource unit.		Mt Druitt	Blacktown LGA and Penrith LGA	For some services
Mt Druitt Occasional Child Care Inc			Mt Druitt		
Yawarra Community & Child Care Centre Ltd			Mt Druitt		
Mt Druitt Church of Christ Child Care Centre Inc	Long day care child Centre		Mt Druitt	Sydney Metro	
Marist Education Centre			Granville		
Blacktown Bunyip Inc	Mobile pre-school operating in the Blacktown Local Government Area.		Blacktown	Blacktown LGA	
Blacktown-Mt Druitt Community Health Service			Mt Druitt		
Auburn (no data)					

Service provider details	Description	Capacity	Location	Area served	Cost
Holroyd					
Happy Days Kindergarten	Educational pre-school program for 3 - 6yrs. Community based pre-school - state funded. Priority given to children going to school the following year.		Wentworthville	Holroyd	\$24 per day full rate, \$14 per day
Westmeadow Child Care Centre	Provides long day care for children aged 6 weeks to 5 years and evening care for children aged 6 weeks to 12 years. Also provides vacation care for primary school children.		Wentworthville	Parramatta LGA (Westmead area)	
Merrylands Christian Pre-School Association Inc			Merrylands		
St Mary's Guildford Pre-School			Guildford		
Churches of Christ Community Care	Provides a range of voluntary welfare services, including a crisis Centre.		Pendle Hill	NSW	
Merrydays Kindergarten Society Inc	Long day care Centre offering an educational based program for children 2-5 years old.		Merrylands	Holroyd	\$43 per day, CCB applicable
Parramatta					
Toongabbie Baptist Christian Community School			Toongabbie		
SDN Children's Service			Harris Park		
Teloopa Family Support Services	Information and Referral Family Worker Services (in home & Centre based) Supported craft group Playgroup Nutrition program Groups Community Development Emergency relief	9 staff working the equivalent of 4.7 full-time positions; usually working in home with about 30 client families at any one time	Teloopa	Provide services to Eastern part of the Parramatta LGA	
Baulkham Hills					
Baulkham Hills Pre-School Association	Early childhood education. Extended hours by arrangement.		Baulkham Hills	Baulkham Hills LGA	\$25 per day

Service provider details	Description	Capacity	Location	Area served	Cost
The Hills Community Kindergarten Inc	Pre-School 3-5 Years		Baulkham Hills	Baulkham Hills LGA	2003 Fees - \$27 per day; \$13.50 per half day
Castle Hill Pre-School Kindergarten Inc	Pre-school 3-6 years		Castle Hill	Baulkham Hills LGA	\$28 per day (2003)
Kids of the Castle Occasional Care Centre Inc	Occasional child care		Castle Hill	Baulkham Hills LGA	Annual Registration Fee of \$25.00, then \$5.50 per hour
Kellyville Pre-School Kindergarten Inc	Preschool care and education (community based). Assistance provided for children with specific needs from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and from non-English speaking backgrounds. Parent Management Committee and Parents Club - Fundraising.		Kellyville	Baulkham Hills LGA	2003 - \$28.50
Thomas Pattinson School			North Rocks		
North Rocks Pre-School Inc	Offers an educational program to children aged 3-5 years. The service also offers a unique English as a second language program to children of non-English speaking backgrounds.		North Rocks	Baulkham Hills LGA	\$24.00 per day
North Rocks/Carlingford Casual Child Care Centre			North Rocks		
Waratah Montessori Pre-School			North Rocks		

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