



Lighting the way, together.

Connecting Families SA

Rapid Evaluation

December 2024

 Lumenia

Acknowledgement of Country

Lumenia respectfully acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first peoples of Australia, and the Traditional Owners of the land, recognising that sovereignty was never ceded.

We acknowledge the wisdom and strength of their Elders, and the enduring role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders play in empowering families and communities across the sector.

We pay our respect to Elders, knowledge holders and leaders of the past, present and future.



'Community Connections'

Tamara Murray (MaraMayArt),
Barkindtji, Yorta Yorta and Dhudaroah
Commissioned by Lumenia, 2024



Contents

- 1 Executive Summary
- 2 Evaluation Overview
- 3 Program Logic
- 4 Evaluation Methodology
- 5 Evaluation Results



Executive Summary

Connecting Families SA

Connecting Families SA has been providing intensive family preservation services in South Australia for over two decades. With a focus on strengthening family relationships and enhancing child wellbeing drawing on evidence-based therapeutic models, Connecting Families SA works collaboratively with parents, carers, children, and their extended networks to address complex family issues. Their practitioners focus on building on family strengths, promoting safety, and fostering resilience to support children and young people to return from Out of Home Care (OOHC) safely to their families.

Evaluation

In 2024, Lumenia undertook an evaluation of Connecting Families SA's family reunification services. The evaluation utilised a mixed-methods approach, combining analysis of existing program data with bespoke qualitative data collection from key stakeholders, including staff, referrers, service partners and other professional stakeholders.

Outcome Snapshot

A broad range of outcomes were indicated to be enabled by the service's work.

Reunification was achieved for 66% of children and young people referred to the service during the 3-year evaluation period. This included rates of reunification success of 71% for non-Aboriginal children and young people, and 55% for Aboriginal children and young people.

Stakeholders described observing significant change in families who had engaged in the service regardless of reunification outcome, including in their parenting skills and confidence, their engagement with services and in the strengthening of relationships between children, families and kin. They highlighted the systemic impacts that the team's work drives in enabling reunification and building the best practice evidence base.

*“ Thank you for transforming our lives and teaching us great skills, treating us so respectfully. [Our Connecting Families SA practitioner] always had my child's and my best interests at heart... the ability to point out strengths and affirm positivity steered us in a powerful direction that will never leave our hearts
- Parent working with Connecting Families SA*



Economic assessment finds that \$98 million dollars in avoided life-time costs of OOHC* were generated resulting from reunifications by the service over the 3-year evaluation period compared to the status quo.

This equates to \$14.8 in avoided lifetime OOHC costs per each dollar invested in the service.

*The avoided costs refer to direct care costs and associated support services and take into account different care types and probability of children subsequently entering care following reunification. "Lifetime" refers to the duration of a child or young person's life in the OOHC system.



Evaluation Overview



Evaluation Overview

Connecting Families SA Background

Connecting Families SA has been providing intensive family preservation services in South Australia for over two decades. With a focus on strengthening family relationships and enhancing child wellbeing. Drawing on evidence-based therapeutic models, Connecting Families SA works collaboratively with parents, carers, children, and their extended networks to address complex family issues. Their practitioners focus on building on family strengths, promoting safety, and fostering resilience to support children and young people to return from out-of-home-care (OOHC) safely to their families.

Evaluation Approach

In order to explore the impact of Connecting Families SA's work, Lumenia was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of Connecting Families SA's family reunification services.

The evaluation utilised a mixed-methods approach aligning to *South Australia's Department of the Premier and Cabinet Evaluation Guidelines (2022)*, combining analysis of a range of primary and secondary data to explore a range of key evaluation questions which supported the service in understanding the impact of its work and informing its ongoing service delivery.

The evaluation was guided by a Program Logic which built on the service's existing Theory of Change. This Program Logic is presented overleaf.



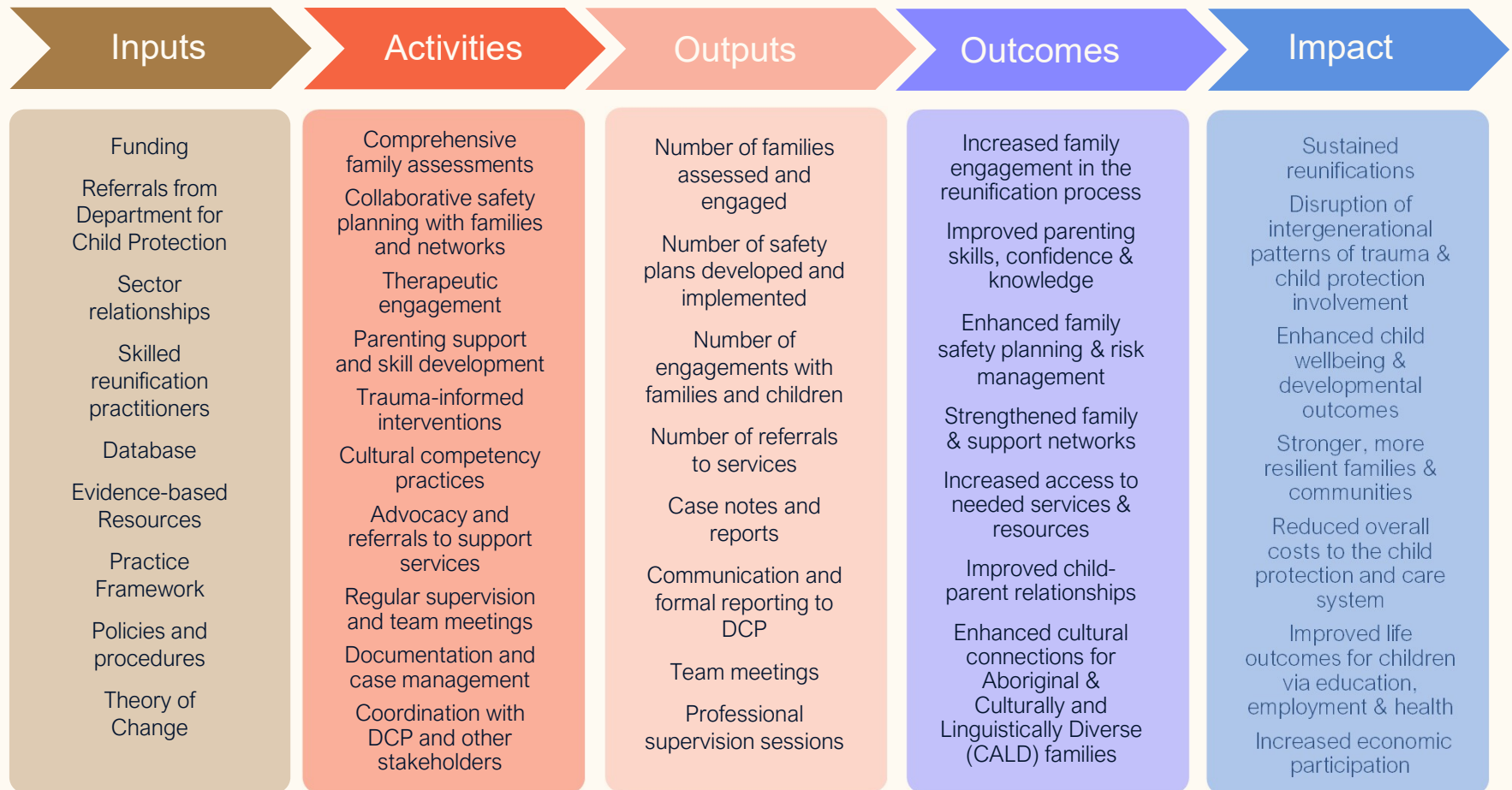
Program Logic



Program Logic

Problem Statement: Families of children and young people on interim orders require specialised services to enable ongoing safety and connection in order to achieve reunification

Program Objective: Supporting safety, wellbeing and connection for children and young people and their families through child focused, family centred and strengths based reunification services



Assumptions: Specialised, evidence-based reunification support delivered in partnership with adjacent tailored support services enable families and children to thrive

External Factors: Families of children and young people on interim orders will continue to be referred by DCP with the service receiving ongoing funding to enable its sustainability



Evaluation Method



Evaluation Method

Key Evaluation Questions

The rapid evaluation considered the appropriateness, efficiency and effectiveness of Connecting Families SA's family reunification services, aligned to *South Australia's Department of the Premier and Cabinet Evaluation Guidelines (2022)* guidelines.

The following questions were explored through the evaluation:

- What makes the service unique in the views of stakeholders?
- Who benefits from the service in the short- and long- term?
- What short-term outcomes are being driven by the service for these beneficiaries, considering comparison to the status quo?
- What long-term outcomes are being driven by the service for these beneficiaries, considering comparison to the status quo?
- What are the economic impacts of the service, including its cost to serve and the relative value it creates?
- What opportunities exist to refine the service and support its impact and ongoing sustainability?

The current document represents the final evaluation report, examining findings against each of the above key evaluation questions.



Data Collection Approach

The following primary and secondary data was drawn on during the evaluation of the Connecting Families SA's family reunification services:

Secondary data, leveraging existing program data, including:

- **Administrative data** including descriptive characteristics of children and young people and their families supported by the program, and characteristics of service provision, such as time of supports and nature of supports
- **Outcomes data** contained within the services' administrative dataset, including reunification achievement, timing to reunification, and any other available data on connection with families, kin and culture which the service enables
- **Funding and cost data** including data on staffing and/or service funding and costs to enable calculation of the costs of service delivery relative to benefits
- Data drawn from a selection of **client feedback forms** to be provided by Connecting Families SA
- **Case studies** provided by the Connecting Families SA team

Primary data, including bespoke data collection via workshops and small group discussions with key stakeholders, including:

- **Connecting Families SA Practitioners** via in-person workshop
- **Referrers** (e.g. Departmental local contacts) and **Partners** (e.g. Reily Foundation, KWY Aboriginal Corporation, other key partners including Health) via online workshops
- **Departmental staff**, including local and head office representatives via online discussions
- **Reunification Youth Court representative** via in person discussion.

The findings arising from analysis of these data sources against each evaluation question are presented in the following section of this report.



Evaluation Results



Service Snapshot

About

Connecting Families SA has been providing intensive family preservation services in South Australia for over two decades.

With a focus on strengthening family relationships and enhancing child wellbeing drawing on evidence-based therapeutic models, Connecting Families SA works collaboratively with parents, carers, children, and their extended networks to address complex family issues. Their practitioners focus on building on family strengths, promoting safety, and fostering resilience to support children and young people to return from out-of-home-care (OOHC) safely to their families.

From July 2021 – July 2024, the service served a total of **412 children** from **238 families**.

The characteristics of children and families served throughout the 1 July 2021 – 30 June 2024 period are described below.

Service Snapshot

Regionality: 65% of families supported by Connecting Families SA arose from referrals from metropolitan DCP offices, with **35% from regional areas**. This included 7% of families referred from Eyre and Western offices, 2% from Yorke and Mid North, 4% Murray and Mallee, 4% Far North, 5% Mt Gambier, 9% Gawler, and 4% from Mt Barker.

Cultural identity: 33% of children and young people served by Connecting Families SA identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ($n = 135$). 10% ($n = 40$) were identified as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse.

Prior placement type: 49% of children and young people were **residing in kinship care** ($n = 202$) at the time of commencement of service, with **23% in foster care** ($n = 93$) and **20% in residential care**, alongside other placement types.

“

We see the adult in the child that we're working with- that child will be an adult at some point, and they need their family, they need strong connections and a sense of belonging to community and wider connections

- CEO, Connecting Families SA

Reunification was achieved for 66% of children and young people ($n = 272$), with an average of 204 days of post-reunification service provision for those children whose cases were closed.

Reunification for non-Aboriginal children: Reunification was achieved for 71% of the 277 Non-Aboriginal children and young people served by the program ($n = 197$), with a further 8% of children for whom reunification was still in progress at the end of the period ($n = 21$).

Reunification for Aboriginal children: Reunification was achieved for 55% of the 135 Aboriginal children and young people served by the program ($n = 75$), with a further 11% of Aboriginal children and young people for whom reunification was still in progress at the end of the period ($n = 15$).



What Makes the Service Unique?

Stakeholders indicated that Connecting Families SA is unique in the service provision landscape due to its:

Extensive Experience and Knowledge: The team is perceived to have longstanding experience in the Child Protection sector and in working with DCP, which equips them with a deep understanding of policies and procedures. This knowledge allows them to navigate complex cases effectively and advocate for families within the system.

Diverse Expertise and Therapeutic Approaches: The service employs a range of therapeutic techniques, such as EMDR and Marte Meo, tailored to meet the specific needs of each family. The team's makeup, including strong Aboriginal women was also highlighted by stakeholders as a strength in their service delivery. Stakeholders perceive that this flexibility allows practitioners to adapt their strategies based on what best suits the family, rather than adhering to a one-size-fits-all model.

Child-Centric Focus: A core tenet of Connecting Families SA is placing the child at the center of all interventions. This approach ensures that children's needs and voices are prioritised, fostering environments where families and children feel heard and supported.

Flexibility and Accessibility: Stakeholders indicate that unlike many services, Connecting Families SA is willing to travel to families, provide out-of-hours support, and work in ways that best suit each family's unique circumstances. This includes offering support during weekends and outside regular business hours, which is perceived by professional stakeholders working within the sector to be crucial for building trust and engagement.

Risk Intelligence: Partner agencies highlighted that the Connecting Families SA team demonstrates a high degree of risk intelligence, understanding the nuances between risk and danger. This is perceived to allow them to work with high-risk families by providing graded and nuanced responses which other services might not offer

Holding Hope: Maintaining hope, using strengths focused approaches and language, and supporting families in non-judgmental ways, communicating with families and with stakeholders to build the family's capacity without losing sight of safety

“*Their team bring a genuine solutions focused, safety-organised, restorative practice approach – these are clearly their core values. They really value families and their expertise in their own lives... The team deeply understand critical distinctions between risk and danger that other services don't, and provide graded responses*”

- External Agency Stakeholder

Training and Experience

Many stakeholders referenced the extensive experience and diverse training of the Connecting Families SA team throughout the evaluation data gathering.

The team undertakes core training programs including Partnering for Safety, Invitations to Responsibility, Cultural Awareness and Triple A Model of Therapeutic CARE Training. Additionally, multiple members of the team have training in a range of specialised interventions, including: Narrative Therapy, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Signs of Safety, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing Therapy, Marte Meo and Safe and Together. Collaboratively, the team reports that they have over 400 years of experience working with families which shapes and guides their work.



Who Benefits from the Service?

Stakeholders suggested that key beneficiaries of the service included children and young people, parents and families, kinship and other carers, the Department for Child Protection and broader child protection and other service systems

Children and Young People

Stakeholders believe that children and young people experience benefits from building safe connections with their families and kin, having their voices heard and validated, experiencing healing and gaining agency and autonomy. Their increased connections enable their overall well-being and future success, regardless of if reunification is achieved.

Parents and Families

Stakeholders believe that as a result of the work of Connecting Families SA, families gain confidence as caregivers, feeling safe, respected and listened to. As a result of the time taken to build relationships and support parents in their healing journey, they develop stronger relationships with their children and extended family, and experience increased sense of safety to engage with future services to meet their family's needs.

Carers

Stakeholders believe that carers experience changes in their views of parents through the strengths focused nature of Connecting Families SA's work, alongside strengthening the carer's compassion for and relationships with parents and changing carer views on reunification.

The Department for Child Protection and Broader Service System

DCP stakeholders described witnessing direct knowledge transfer, with the Connecting Families SA team modelling practice which supports newer career child protection workers to integrate strengths-focused and relationships centred practice into their own work, alongside the team's work enabling the integration of broader embracing of reunification across the sector, supporting practice development of ACCOs, and facilitating knowledge of best practice reunification approaches.



Short-Term Outcomes

The evaluation evidence indicates Connecting Families SA achieves high rates of reunification and enables healing and connection for children and families



The intensity of work that they do is unique. They are on a different level to other providers; they build deeper relationships with parents, and they are working with highly complex parents but are not afraid to have honest conversations with parents, which earns them respect and trust... Some of the changes I've seen for parents [as a result of their work] are extraordinary. The issues that they've had to address with these families and turn around is really quite inspirational... Their complex cases wouldn't have resulted in reunification without the Connecting Families team's involvement
- Youth Court Representative

Reunification Outcomes

Reunification was achieved for 66% of children and young people referred to the service within the evaluation period, within an average of 114 days from commencement of services

Reunification for non-Aboriginal children: Reunification was achieved for 71% of the 276 Non-Aboriginal children and young people served by the program ($n = 197$), with a further 8% of children for whom reunification was still in progress at the end of the period ($n = 21$).

Reunification for Aboriginal children: Reunification was achieved for 55% of the 135 Aboriginal children and young people served by the program ($n = 75$), with a further 11% of Aboriginal children and young people for whom reunification was still in progress at the end of the evaluation period ($n = 15$).



Broad Short-term Outcomes

- **Rapid Engagement and Trust Building:** The service is seen by stakeholders to quickly establish trust with children and families through strengths-focused, flexible engagement strategies tailored to individual needs. This rapid engagement enables the addressing of immediate safety concerns, supports the elevation of the voices of children and young people, and builds a foundation for long-term family change, with trauma-informed practice which is seen by external stakeholders to support healing.
- **Improved Family Connections:** Improved family understanding and communication is achieved through the non-judgmental accountability approaches which the service applies. Safety conscious yet more natural and relaxed, independent family time (contact) arrangements between families and children are facilitated through this work regardless of reunification outcomes.
- **Sector Impacts:** By working closely with DCP and partner agency staff, Connecting Families SA facilitates knowledge transfer, helping external practitioners develop strengths- and trauma-informed strategies for engaging with families. There is reduced need for DCP involvement as a result of the service's direct capacity building with families, and more competency in and commitment to reunification practice across the sector as a result of this work.



Long-Term Outcomes

The evaluation evidence indicates Connecting Families SA enables long term connection and healing for children and families.



"They are able to drive systemic change through their expertise, willingness to partner, their trust and commitment to work collectively, share risk and to drive best outcomes... the importance of early intervention has been well recognised by the sector, but Connecting Families has raised the profile in reunification and collected an evidence base on what works... We see less children coming back into care [where Connecting Families SA has provided supports], and because families have a positive experience in engaging with providers through this work- this has impacts in building trust and engaging in ongoing services, with families more likely to reach out for future supports. Their work creates genuine, long-term change
- DCP Stakeholder

Reunification Stability and Enduring Connection

Linked data from DCP was unavailable for the evaluation to explore breakdown rates for reunifications achieved through Connecting Families SA's work. Anecdotal evidence from the Youth Court and from other key stakeholders suggests few breakdowns for families reunified with supports from Connecting Families SA.

The service's client feedback indicates the enduring nature of these impacts, *"My friendship with [Connecting Families SA's practitioner] changed the way I feel and approach people, situations good and bad in the present now and in the future."* – Mother, Service Client

For children reunified during the evaluation period, an average of **204 days of post-reunification service provision** were provided to families. Stakeholders spoke to the essential need for these ongoing supports, with the flexibility in their provision by Connecting Families SA highlighted as a key element of the success of their service in driving positive outcomes for families.



Broad Long-term Outcomes

- **Sustained Family Preservation:** The intensive work conducted by Connecting Families SA was reported by broad stakeholders to result in long-term changes that keep families together and reduce dependency on child protection services in the future.
- **Intergenerational Healing:** By involving children and parents in decision-making processes and prioritising their voices, the service enables intergenerational healing that strengthens family bonds over time, even where reunification is not achieved.
- **Health and Wellbeing Outcomes for Children and Families:** Stakeholders indicate that the service enables long-term health and wellbeing outcomes for children through maintained connections to kin and families, including through perceived increases in school engagement, health service support engagement and in reducing long-term housing instability and justice interactions, with the trust built with families enabling them to seek support when navigating future challenges.
- **Systemic Change in Reunification Value and Practice:** Numerous stakeholders highlighted the leadership and role that Connecting Families SA has played in elevating reunification within the child protection continuum. Their strengths-focus is perceived to influence other providers, and a focus on evidence-based approaches contribute to guiding best practice in reunification.



Supporting Family Reunification

The following case studies highlight the critical role of tailored and culturally sensitive and trauma-informed support in achieving reunification and long-term family healing

Case Study 1: *Connecting Families began supporting a rural family to reunite two teenage girls with their mother and stepfather. The family had experienced the removal of other children. The family faced challenges, including the stepfather's health issues, the girls' history of trauma, and mistrust towards child protection services. Connecting Families provided weekly home-based support, focusing on parenting, mental health, and improving family relationships. The mother gained confidence, participated in volunteering and employment, while the girls re-engaged in school, excelling academically and socially. The family's reunification has been stable, with the girls thriving in school and forming stronger bonds with their mother. Connecting Families will continue supporting the family to ensure ongoing stability and address emerging needs.*

Case Study 2: *An infant was referred to Connecting Families after presenting to hospital with unexplained injuries. The infant's parents could not account for these injuries but were committed to working with the DCP, presenting with strong parenting foundations and a supportive network of family and friends. Connecting Families used the Resolutions Approach to address the complexities of unexplained infant injuries. Work with the parents included developing a safety plan with their support network, engaging in hypothetical scenarios, and completing therapeutic programs such as Circle of Security, Marte Meo, and EMDR. The infant was reunified with their parents with the support of a strong safety network. Post-reunification support continued for a further 5 months, with ongoing contact with the family thereafter; the child and their recently born sibling are thriving.*

Case Study 3: *Connecting Families was referred to assess the viability of reunifying a teenage child in residential care with his family in regional South Australia. The teenager was one of a number of siblings, some of whom had previously been removed due to concerns including family violence, substance misuse, neglect, and harmful behaviours among siblings. The case was highly complex, involving intergenerational trauma, the teenager's history of harmful sexual behaviours, and the community's negative perceptions of the family. Connecting Families assigned two workers: an Aboriginal practitioner to build trust and support cultural healing, and a non-Aboriginal practitioner to address systemic barriers and advocate for the family with other agencies. This work encompassed restorative justice principles, addressing trauma and promoting accountability within the family. The team also worked with external stakeholders to shift deficit-focused narratives and recognise positive changes. The teenager was successfully reunified with his family following this intensive work, and relocated to country to support healing. His mother has embraced openness about past harms, promoting unconditional love and acceptance within the family. The young person is now thriving, is well settled and recently obtaining their learner's permit, and the family maintains contact with Connecting Families, continuing to do well.*



Economic Impacts

Economic assessment finds that net economic benefits of **\$98 million** in lifetime avoided OOHC costs* were generated by the service for reunifications achieved during the 3-year evaluation period compared with the status quo. For each **\$1** invested in the service, there are **\$14.8** returned in benefits in the form of avoided OOHC costs alone.



The work of the Connecting Families SA team has huge financial impacts, reducing the number of children placed under long term orders unnecessarily and reducing the cost of this to the Department and taxpayers, with fewer children in foster care long term and less need for future DCP intervention. Their work builds social capital by increasing parenting capacity that can be passed down throughout generations
 – Partner Agency Stakeholder



Avoided Out of Home Care Costs: Economic Assessment Method

Economic assessment was undertaken to explore the service's cost and consider the benefits it delivers relative to the status quo for children in care. The analysis included consideration of Connecting Families SA's service:

Costs: The analysis considered the actual expenditure costs provided by Connecting Families SA to inform an analysis of costs associated with delivery of their services, noting that there is close alignment between the service's funding and expenditure, with inflation adjustments to express costs (and benefits) in 2024 dollars.

Avoided Costs: The analysis considers the avoided costs of out of home care for children who experienced reunification during the evaluation period. As actual DCP funding averages related to each placement type (e.g. residential care, kinship and foster care) were not available for the evaluation and the Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services does not break down to this level, this analysis drew on available avoided costs of out of home care from benefit libraries from other jurisdictional government departments. These validated and evidence-informed avoided costs estimates provide lifetime average avoided costs of out of home care for reunified children, integrating appropriate calculations to adjust for likely reunification breakdowns alongside high- and lower- costs forms of placement.

Baseline: Developing an assessment of economic impacts of any initiative requires an understanding of outcomes in the absence of the program. In the absence of the provision of DCP data, the analysis contrasted the rates of reunification for children referred to Connecting Families SA to those of the broader out of home care population in South Australia, obtained via the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The evaluators suggest that additional analysis drawing on DCP data would strengthen these findings.



Opportunities

A range of opportunities to increase the impact of Connecting Families SA's work were highlighted by stakeholders throughout the evaluation



They're a small organisation, but they have an opportunity to provide leadership to drive systems change it would be great if their program could be funded for family preservation too. This would support them in bridging the gap between service continuum from family preservation to out of home care... There is an opportunity for the sector as a whole to improve reunification practice and Connecting Families SA is well placed to drive this.
- DCP Stakeholder

Key opportunities suggested by Connecting Families SA's service team and stakeholders included:

- **Expanding into Family Preservation Services and other areas of OOHC:** Many stakeholders suggested that the aligned skillset of Connecting Families SA would benefit families who are earlier in the child protection system, with potential to formally extend their expertise into family preservation efforts, providing early intervention supports that prevent entries to care and providing family findings and strengthening services to a broader range of children in care to support their contact to kin and parents
- **Extended Post-Reunification Support:** Stakeholders suggested that by staying involved with families longer post-reunification, Connecting Families SA can help buffer against setbacks during transitional periods, and that additional funding would support this to be achieved
- **Strengthening collaboration with DCP and Connecting Families SA:** Enhancing collaboration between DCP and the service was felt by stakeholders to be likely to enable more integrated service delivery models that leverage both organisations' strengths effectively. Considering opportunities for more standardised approaches to referral, shared decision making, ensuring awareness of the service across DCP and facilitating processes to enable ongoing collaboration were raised by key stakeholders as potential areas of opportunity
- **Supporting messaging:** including across Health and other government stakeholders on how risks are able to be held whilst keeping safety in view and driving outcomes for children and young people to ensure shared understanding of the evidence-based methods being used by the service, and to elevate the work adjacent reunification services are delivering through building the evidence base
- **Leadership in Sector-Wide Improvement:** As a small but impactful organisation working in a space which has minimal practice evidence and guidelines, stakeholder suggested that Connecting Families SA has an opportunity to drive systems change across sectors by sharing their expertise widely to enable an understanding of what works in reunification, and highlight the potential to create enduring reunification and connection outcomes for families in challenging circumstances.



Contact Us



Mark Galvin

Phone +61 422 009 718

Email mark.galvin@lumenia.com.au

Connect [LinkedIn](#)



Dr Melissa Kaltner

Phone +61 402 804 259

Email melissa.kaltner@lumenia.com.au

Connect [LinkedIn](#)

www.lumenia.com.au

Lighting the way, together.

