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Family Relationships Services Program Review

Final input technical report

Australian Institute of Family Studies

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1. Introduction

The Australian Government Attorney-General's Department (AGD) has commissioned the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) to undertake research to support a review of the AGD-funded Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP). The FRSP Review ('the Review') was undertaken by Mr Andrew Metcalfe AO, who was appointed by the Attorney-General.

The report first details the background and aims of the Review and the methodology for each component of the research. It then sets out findings from each component of the research after a summary chapter synthesising the key findings from each of these research components, with reference to each term of reference for the FRSP Review.

Background

The FRSP has 2 parts. The first part is a suite of family law services described as 'activities' in the Department of Social Services (DSS) Data Exchange (DEX) that include:

- Family Relationship Centres
- Family Relationship Advice Line
- Family Dispute Resolution
- Regional FDR
- First Nations FDR
- Family Law Counselling
- Children's Contact Services
- Parenting Order Programs/Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Program and Supporting Children after Separation Program.

The second part of the FRSP covers the Family Law Pathways Networks that are intended to support the development of cross-sector professional relationships.

These various programs aim to 'improve the wellbeing of Australian families, particularly families with children, who are at risk of separating or have separated' (AGD, 2024a). In addition, the FRSP has responsibilities in providing networks to support the development of cross-sector professional relationships for the purpose of training and networking (known as Family Law Pathways Networks (FLPN)).

As part of the 2006 family law reforms, the Australian Government expanded the FRSP significantly, in an effort to strengthen cost-effective, non-court-based services for separating families. These reforms included a staged rollout of 65 Family Relationship Centres (providing advice, support and family dispute resolution (FDR)), the introduction of the Family Relationship Advice Line (including Telephone Dispute Resolution Service) and Family Relationships Online (Kaspiew et al., 2009). Additionally, other FRSP services, including Children's Contact Services, the Parenting Orders Program and family relationship counselling services, were expanded.

There have been significant developments in the family law system since the introduction of the FRSP. These developments include improved awareness of the dynamics of family breakdown, the increased awareness of risk factors present for families, the increasing complexity of cases engaged in family law litigation, as well as successive legislative reform.[1] The Family Court of Australia and the Federal Circuit Court of Australia were also restructured into the Federal

[1] See e.g. *Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Act 2011*(Cth) and more recently, the *Family Law Amendment Act 2023* (Cth), and note the proposed reforms in the Family Law Amendment Act 2024.

Circuit and Family Court of Australia (FCFCoA), with its expanded psycho-social supports, together with the introduction of the Lighthouse risk assessment and triage process and dispute resolution in the court system.

The expansion of the FRSP program in 2006 reflected a policy shift toward FDR being provided in the community rather than the court sector for parenting matters. However, the change to the FCFCoA model has reinstated the role of courts in providing FDR in parenting matters. Furthermore, the FRSP space has significantly changed in the last 5 years with developments in dispute resolution including online platforms such as amica (an online dispute resolution tool), legal aid commissions and private providers of FDR.

An important focus of this Review is to ensure that the future FRSP provides access to services for separating and separated families that assist them to effectively meet their post-separation needs in a connected way, noting the FRSP's role as being complementary to formal legal intervention. In doing so, consideration will be given to the interaction between different professionals and service providers in different parts of the family law system and the implications of this for families. More broadly, the Review assesses whether the FRSP funded by the AGD is designed and effectively implemented in the context of the contemporary family law system and the evidence base on the needs of families.

Aims of the Review

The aims of this Review are articulated in the terms of reference and are based on a review of current administrative data and other benchmarking data, recommended unit costs/funding levels per service and location (metro, regional, rural). The specific terms of reference are to:

A. assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the current FRSP through the collection and analysis of data (qualitative and quantitative) from a range of sources such as program and administrative data, FRSP services, professionals and clients accessing the service, and make an assessment of:

1. the extent to which current elements of the FRSP are meeting the needs of families, including supporting First Nations people or other families that require approaches to managing conflicts associated with family separations
1. the extent to which current and future planned activities of the grant recipients are aligned to grant requirements and meeting the needs of families
2. the services that are best meeting the needs of families and any services that may require modifications or may no longer be suitable or are not frequently used
3. services that are not able to be accessed through the program but directly support the program's aims of supporting separated and separating families to resolve disputes outside of court
4. the extent to which the program complements and supports the broader family law sector (including other professional services accessed by separating families)
5. the services that are most efficiently delivered in combination, to provide necessary supports to families in a connected, holistic manner
6. the outcomes/output measures that best capture the impact and value of services, for future reporting.

B. develop a robust model to forecast demand for FRSP services for the next 10 years through using relevant data (such as general population, demographics, projected growth trends, etc.) and identify priority locations, delivery method of services (online or remote service

delivery) and identification of cost-effective delivery of services to the community, specifically including:

1. a plain English guide to/summary of the modelling and its conclusion
2. clear bases for projective service requirements per capita
3. proposed optimal geographic distribution of services to meet demand (including growth forecasts)
4. an assessment of the impact of accessibility issues, particularly for regional areas where populations are less dense and travel distances may be prohibitive
5. alternative service delivery models that feed into the demand projection outcomes, particularly in relation to meeting the needs of families unable to access face-to-face services.

Methodology and component samples

The empirical research conducted by AIFS for this Review comprised of 10 components outlined below. Each component is mapped against the Terms of Reference (see Appendix A):

1. **Stakeholder consultations** were conducted in conjunction with the Reviewer and have included relevant personnel at the AGD and Department of Social Services (DSS) including Child Support; and other key stakeholders such as Family Relationship Services Australia and family law system services; representatives from First Nations communities (including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Legal Services); culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups and groups representing people with disability.

   The aims of these consultations were to:

   - refine the project plan and methodology
   - support an in-depth understanding of the current operations of services funded under the FRSP and how they fit with the broader landscape of services
   - clarify the nature, scope and quality of administrative and program data available.

2. **Stakeholder interviews/focus groups (semi-structured)** were conducted with representatives from stakeholder groups to obtain more detailed data on clients' needs, how well the FRSP activities are working to meet their needs and how this varies for different client groups. Specifically, these interviews/focus groups focused on:

   - what FRSP activities are provided and in what combination
   - FRSP activities used by separating/separated families and those which have less relevance
   - which FRSP activities (related to separation) do families tend to need that are currently outside the existing program guidelines
   - how are these needs being met
   - the interface between the FRSP and broader family law system services.

   As stakeholders are located across multiple states and territories, most stakeholder interviews were undertaken online, using Microsoft Teams. The interviews/focus groups were approximately 90 minutes in duration and were conducted either on an individual basis or in small groups. Interviews with more than 5 participants were run as focus groups and breakout rooms were used to facilitate input from all participants where required.

In total, 59 stakeholders participated in 11 focus groups or one-on-one interviews during the study period (22 November 2023 and 22 March 2024). All were transcribed and analysed for inclusion in the Review reports.

These data informed the consideration of what (if any) changes may be required to meet the needs of families in the future, and whether there is evidence to support the aggregation of services in a particular way to produce the best outcomes for families.

The findings from these data are presented in chapter 6 of this report.

3. **Administrative and program data** sources for this Review include:
   - Submission of data request to DSS for FRSP services DEX data
   - A request for information:
     - program data from FRSP service providers
     - program data from providers of non-FRSP services intended to support out of court dispute resolution.

   These DEX and program data, together with census and population projections, form the main basis for the demand estimations for FRSP services for the next 10 years. The demand estimations consider historical trends in service use, demographic characteristics of FRSP clients and the general population, and the growth of core populations for FRSP services. The demand estimations were also informed by findings from other elements of the Review such as client interviews and desktop reviews for additional estimates, along with a set of explicitly defined and justified assumptions. Geographical granularity (SA3 level) was determined in consultation with AGD, other relevant stakeholders and subject matter experts.

   Information and definitions relevant to the interpretation of the DEX data are presented in Appendix C1 and preliminary findings from these data are presented in chapter 5 of this report.

4. **Desktop reviews** undertaken for this Review include reviews of relevant Australian and international literature on FRSP and family law system services, with a focus on the reform of these systems and services. They include consideration of post-separation support programs providing services similar to FRSP activities and consider different dispute resolution mechanisms as well as how to incorporate children's perspectives and what elements supportive services for children should incorporate. The reviews include evidence of promising opportunities for smoother pathways through family services and separation, such as integrating services into hubs and building case management approaches that include referrals. They also provide an overview of the impact and opportunities provided by technology. These findings are presented in chapter 3 of this report.

5. **Quantitative and qualitative survey data** were collected from professionals and from separating/separated adults or other adults using FRSP and non-FRSP activities.

   The data sources from professionals and separating/separated adults are:
   - an examination of separated families to assess needs drawing on the Evaluation of the 2012 family violence amendments – Experiences of Separated Parents Study data and child support program data
   - a survey of FRSP and other Family Law Service System Professionals – this survey captured quantitative and qualitative data on the views and experiences of the broad range of professionals involved in managing, operating and providing activities funded under the FRSP, as well as professionals involved in referring clients to these service

providers (inclusive of judicial officers, registrars, legal practitioners and FDR practitioners)

- a survey of separating/separated adults and FRSP activity users and adults in separated/separating families who have not used FRSP activities – this survey captured quantitative and qualitative data on their views and experiences of service provision and data to understand unmet needs where FRSP and non-FRSP activities have not been accessed.

The findings from these components of the Review are presented in chapter 6 and chapter 7 of this report.

6. **Qualitative data from in-depth, semi structured interviews with adults** in separating/separated families who have used or are using FRSP activities and adults in separating/separated families who have not used FRSP services.

   Topics covered in the interviews included:

   - needs of/issues facing adults interviewed and their family members (including family violence, mental health, etc.)
   - FRSP and other professional family law system services used, and in what order and combination
   - reasons for using or not using particular FRSP and non-FRSP activities and how this relates to participants' circumstances and needs
   - experiences of specific FRSP and non-FRSP activities (e.g. accessibility, timeliness of access, format and cultural safety and/or appropriateness) as a whole and the process of accessing and navigating through the system
   - perception of whether FRSP and non-FRSP activities meet needs, and other supports participants needed but were not able to access
   - unexpected and/or unintended impacts of FRSP and non-FRSP activity use (positive or negative impacts on client/family wellbeing)
   - client journey mapping.

   The qualitative interview participants included:

   - separated adults who identify as lesbian or bisexual (we were unable to recruit gay, transgender, intersex or asexual people to the qualitative interviews)
   - First Nations and CALD families
   - families where an adult or child has disability
   - families affected by complex issues such as family violence, child safety concerns, mental ill-health and substance dependence
   - families in regional, rural and remote settings.

   The findings from these components of the Review are presented in chapter 7 of this report.

7. **Family law system service mapping** drew on data from components 1 to 6 to build a picture of the current services available to separating/separated families in Australia. The service mapping collated and examined the infrastructure of both FRSP and non-FRSP providers within the family law system.

   This service mapping component is presented in chapter 4 of this report and in the Power BI data visualisation submitted to the AGD with this report.

   A client-focused aspect of this component has also been developed to present client journey mapping based on data collated from qualitative interviews and survey data with

separating/separated adults and on available DEX data. Analytics of client trajectories through the family law system are presented to assess the role that FRSP services play in these trajectories and the extent to which these services are concurrently or sequentially used with non-FRSP services. These analyses are presented in chapter 5 of this report.

8. **FRSP post-2025 – Program Logic, Theory of Change and Outcomes Framework** was developed for the recommended structure of the FRSP drawing on program documentation and data collected in components 1–6 and the overarching findings of this Review.

   This component was submitted to the AGD together with this final report.

9. A **dynamic user interface** was developed using the Power BI platform containing the demand estimates for FRSP activities for the next 10 years, population profile and client demographic profile at a SA3 geographical level and other relevant data (such as delivery method of activities including online or remote delivery, to most cost effectively deliver services to the community).

   The demand projections from this component are presented in chapter 9 of this report and the Power BI dashboard and training materials was submitted to the AGD together with this final report.

10. A **cost-effectiveness analysis** drew on data from components 1–6, with a focus on cost data and on DEX activity use and program outcome data.

The findings from this component are presented in chapter 9 of this report.

2. Summary of findings from the empirical research

This chapter presents a synthesis of the findings from the literature and empirical research collected and analysed for this Review of the effectiveness and efficiency of the current FRSP, as presented in the substantive chapters of this report (see chapters 3–9).

These synthesised findings are set out according to their relevance to the Review terms of reference and are intended to support consideration of the research questions that had been developed to inform the Lead Reviewer's report against each term of reference.

Needs of separating and separated families

Separating and separated families using the FRSP are commonly characterised by a range of complex needs as evidenced in each of the quantitative and qualitative elements of this research program. These needs arise from a range of risk issues including family violence, child safety concerns (e.g. child maltreatment, child abuse and neglect), mental health issues, and addictive behaviours in relation to substances and gambling. Family violence, child safety and mental health issues were most likely to be identified by survey and interview participants, and across the FRSP activities by service providers participating in the request for information (RFI), with limited differences in the complex issues experienced by clients of FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Consistent with Australian and international research literature, the complexity of clients' circumstances was highlighted by the multiple and co-occurring relationship problems and safety concerns found across the survey and interview components. Professionals reported seeing increasingly complex needs in their clients using FRSP activities, non-FRSP services or a combination of both. This complexity was identified as potentially involving high levels of dependency on services, a greater need to use services over the longer term, and a need for higher levels of holistic support with more intensive case management and coordination of services. Similar observations were made in the client data.

In relation to the service needs of clients, the most common service needs were for information in relation to making post-separation parenting arrangements, assistance with resolving disputes about post-separation parenting arrangements and assistance to manage personal or interpersonal issues and/or build better post-separation relationships. Professionals also indicated that most of their clients needed individual counselling, education and skills programs and therapeutic support for those experiencing family violence, as well as support for clients' mental health.

Interestingly, the data show that FRSP professionals were more likely to report client needs relating to support for adult clients to understand and focus on the needs of their children post-separation. Non-FRSP professionals were more likely to report client needs for information about post-separation property/financial arrangements and child support payments and processes.

Provision of FRSP activities

In 2022/23, 72 organisations were identified as providing a range of FRSP activities in the DEX data. New South Wales had the highest number of outlets (*n* = 140), followed by Victoria and Queensland (*n* = 86 and 79, respectively). Smaller numbers were in South Australia (*n* = 56),

Western Australia (*n* = 30) and the Australian Capital Territory (*n* = 3), with 12 and 10 outlets in Tasmania and the Northern Territory, respectively. Approximately one-half of outlets were in major cities, 3 in 10 outlets were in 'Inner Australia' (*n* = 122) and 66 outlets were in 'Outer Australia'. There were 15 outlets in remote areas and 4 in very remote areas in 2022/23.

The number of outlets providing these FRSP activities varies according to the activity type. The Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL) is provided nationally but Family Law Counselling has the largest number of outlets (204 outlets in 2022/23), followed by Family Relationship Centres (FRCs; *n* = 140, including outlets providing the services of an FRC in addition to other activities). There are also relatively large numbers of outlets providing Children's Contact Services (CCSs) and a Parenting Orders Program (POP).

The DEX data also indicate that it is common for an outlet to provide services under different activities, with 22% providing 2 services and 24% with 3 or more activities in 2022/23. The number of outlets for each of these activities may not align with the number of outlets receiving direct Commonwealth grants because of activities across multiple locations additional to the outlet funded, including through funding arrangements through their lead organisation.

In terms of the types of services provided through these FRSP activities, the DEX data show that the provision of information, advice and referrals was the most common service provided by FRCs, Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) and Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR) (32%–35%), together with processes such as intake/assessment (32%–41%). Dispute resolution and advocacy/support were the other main services provided (6%–15%). Most sessions for the FRAL were to provide information/advice/referral (84%).

Counselling represented the most common service type provided by Family Law Counselling and Supporting Children after Separation (65% and 55%, respectively). For CCSs, supervised changeover/contact accounted for 47% of sessions. The types of services provided by Parenting Order Programs were more evenly spread compared to other FRSP activities.

Use of FRSP activities by separating and separated families

Who uses FRSP activities?

The characteristics of the families using the FRSP differ from the general population in age and household composition but are similar to the general population in other demographic characteristics. The DEX data show that people aged 25–49 years are over-represented among FRSP clients (74%) compared to the average Australian population (34%; 2021 Australian Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021). This is more pronounced for FRCs, FRAL, FDR (and regional FDR) and Parenting Order Programs (78%–83%) compared to other activities. As expected, one-parent families with dependents are more common among FRSP clients (43% cf. 8%).

There are also differences in the proportion of FRSP clients, including from regional, rural and remote areas, clients from (CALD) backgrounds and people with a disability when compared to the general population. CALD client representation and clients with a disability are well below population representation. Consistently, only a small proportion of professionals in the survey reported that these groups comprised the majority of their clients. On the other hand, professionals surveyed were more likely to report that substantial proportions of their clients were from regional, rural and remote settings (40% FRSP cf. 43% non-FRSP) or that they were children and young people (33% FRSP cf. 28% non-FRSP).

There are significant barriers to First Nations peoples accessing the support that they need when separating. This is despite data indicating that First Nations people using FRSP services represent a higher proportion than in the general population (5.4% cf. 3.2%). This usage data needs to be considered in the context of a higher occurrence of single-parent families among First Nations families compared to the general population and indicates an under-utilisation of FRSP activities.

The number of people using FRSP activities

After peaking at approximately 160,900 in 2018/19 and 2019/20, the number of individual clients using FRSP activities declined during the COVID-19 pandemic period, with the downward trend continuing in 2022/23 when 127,357 individual clients used the FRSP. Over recent years there has been a decline in the number of individual clients across jurisdictions and in remote areas. Specifically, these data show that the number of individual clients was lower in 2022/23 than in 2015/16 across all states and territories except Victoria. The decline from 2019/20 onwards was notable in most states, except for Tasmania, and in the territories as well as for major cities and inner cities.

FRCs represent the largest FRSP activity in terms of number of individual clients (41% of FRSP individual clients), followed by FRAL (22%), with the proportions of FRSP clients using other FRSP activities ranging from 4% to 11%. The number of individual clients using FRCs and FRAL peaked in 2019/20 before declining, and there was a slight decline in the proportion of clients using FDR. The number of Family Law Counselling and Parenting Order Program clients has also fallen. However, the declining trend has been reversed for CCSs, likely reflecting additional funding that supported the expansion of operating hours and reduction of waiting lists (Carson et al., 2023).

Specific insights into the proportions of clients using the FRSP show that client rates fluctuate when based on the number of clients in the general population or the number of clients in the core age population using the FRSP, as well as on the number of one-parent families with dependents. In 2022/23, there were 4.9 clients per 1,000 residents in the population using FRSP activities, with 14.2 clients per 1,000 people aged 25–49 years using FRSP activities. In relation to people living in one-parent families and people affected by separation, FRSP usage was at 66.9 and 25.4 clients per 1,000 people respectively.

Tasmania had the highest rates of clients using the FRSP, while New South Wales had the lowest rates, with Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory above the national levels, and Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory lower than the national levels. Regional areas had higher client rates based on resident population and on resident population aged 25–49 years than major cities, but the inner regions had higher client rates based on residents living in one-parent families with dependents. This places additional complications on service provision in regional areas. Of all the FRSP activities, FRCs had higher client rates for all jurisdictions over time than other FRSP activities.

Client pathways and complexity of clients using the FRSP

Separating and separated families commonly use multiple services, including a range of FRSP activities and non-FRSP services, as evidenced by professionals and clients participating in the surveys and interviews. The combination and order of services used varied depending on a range of client circumstances. These circumstances included engagement in and status of their legal proceedings, the complexity and/or uniqueness of their needs, and their perceptions about

the quality of private versus government-funded services, including both FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Key reasons for using FRSP activities included their lower cost, the expertise of FRSP service providers, and the flexibility of these services to adapt to clients' needs and to meet their needs holistically and over the longer term, as identified by survey and interview participants.

In terms of the order of services used in the FRSP, the DEX data show that clients are most likely to first use FRCs (38%) and FRAL (28%) before other FRSP activities, and 13% of clients were reported to use another FRSP activity within 12 months of using their first FRSP activity. Clients using the Parenting Order Program, FRAL or Regional FDR were most likely to report using another subsequent FRSP activity. The most common client pathways were FRAL followed by FRCs. The next most common was FRCs followed by the POP.

In addition to identifying the complexity of clients using FRSP activities by their reported needs and risk issues, FRSP client complexity may also be identified in the client usage data. These DEX data show an increase in the overall number of client sessions in FRSP activities when considered together with the decline in client numbers. The average number of sessions per client/support person has steadily increased from 4.1 in 2015/16 to 5.5 in 2022/23, while the number of clients and the number of attendances per session has shown a downward trend. This pattern suggests that FRSP clients may be presenting with more complex needs than in prior years of the FRSP and are therefore requiring more sessions. It also means that the services provided need to be more tailored to the needs of individual clients.

Extent to which FRSP activities are effective in meetings families' needs

The FRSP is generally identified as effective in meeting families' needs, as evidenced in most of the quantitative and qualitative elements of this research program. Professionals described FRSP services as delivering high quality and effective services to families. Many clients expressed high levels of satisfaction with, and gratitude for, the support they received to deal with the emotional, legal and practical challenges of separation.

Positive outcomes for clients were reported for each FRSP activity using the DEX SCORE domains of improved circumstances, achievement of goals, and satisfaction with service delivery. Specifically, Family Law Counselling and the Supporting Children After Separation Program achieved the highest improved circumstances and achievement of goals. However, the improvements in client circumstances have subsided in recent years for FDR/Regional FDR and Supporting Children After Separation, which may reflect the more complex cases using these FRSP activities.

The mean ratings of client satisfaction were highest for FRAL but were consistently high across all FRSP activities. Client satisfaction with FDR and mediation that supports better decision making where there are power imbalances, positive assessment of the CCS activity and improvements in post-separation relationships and adjustment for children through parent and child focused programs, are also evident in the research literature and survey data. Most professionals surveyed agreed that FDR and FRC services are delivered effectively (77% and 69% respectively). Clients surveyed reported higher levels of satisfaction with counselling and mediation and FDR as a main pathway.

Site specifications, staff qualifications, employment checks and training (including in family violence and trauma-informed practice, child safe practice and culturally aware practice), together with screening, intake and assessment procedures, were identified in RFIs as

facilitating access to the holistic support that clients require for their diverse needs. This includes triage to other programs internal and external to the FRSP service provider, with interview participants indicating that FRSP service providers are committed to delivering effective services to clients who have high needs and/or complex issues.

Nevertheless, areas of unmet need were also evidenced in elements of this research program. Likely unmet need was identified for FRSP target groups in the core age group of 25–49 years and for one-parent families with dependents, with some SA3s identified as having high rates of these populations but low client rates of FRSP use. These DEX data indicate under-utilisation of FRSP activities and, consequently, unmet need, and suggest a need for increased service provision in some disadvantaged and remote/very remote areas.

A greater need for domestic and family violence (DFV)-informed and trauma-informed service provision was a substantial theme in survey and interview data, as well as in the review of Australian and international research literature. The largest differences between client needs and services used were identified in the survey data as relating to education and skills programs, various therapeutic supports (including for those using and experiencing DFSV and adult mental health issues), as well as supports to help adults focus on the needs of their children.

Gaps in service delivery relating to services for men (including men's behaviour change programs), lawyer-assisted services and family counselling and therapy were specifically identified by professionals. Although not specific to FRSP activities, clients and professionals reported concerns about effectiveness arising from difficulties navigating post-separation services, a lack of understanding of services, having to try multiple service providers to receive the service required, as well as experiencing geographical and financial barriers, delays, time-limited service provision, perceptions of bias, a lack of safe service provision and duplication of services.

Although demand for FRSP services is high, the survey and interview data (supported by the research literature) show lower levels of client engagement with FRSP services from First Nations clients. First Nations stakeholders interviewed reported that First Nations people who are separating or have separated do not often seek support from FRSP services due to general mistrust of western legal systems. They described a lack of services delivered by First Nations-led organisations and staff. These stakeholders indicated that pathways into FRSP services often involve court orders (for CCS users, for example) or engagement at the instigation of a non-First Nations party such as a former partner/spouse.

The geographic and cultural barriers to access are evident in the desktop review and qualitative data for First Nations families. The need for family law system service responses designed by engagement with and delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) is an important consideration, particularly in the context of a recent review by the Productivity Commission (2024). The Productivity Commission (2024, p 3) found that across government agencies, 'progress toward implementing the reforms has, for the most part been weak and reflects tweaks to, or actions overlayed onto, business as usual approaches'.

Barriers to service were identified where post-separation family services are not suitably child safe or child-centred, with the research literature and empirical data in this project identifying a need to provide safe and effective options for children and young people to participate in decisions relevant to their care. This participatory approach to making safe and appropriate post-separation arrangements that accommodate the needs of individual children and young people was identified as an unmet need in the qualitative data from professionals. The need for

education regarding child development and child inclusive practices was evidenced in the survey and interview data with professionals.

Access to services for rural, regional and remote families; CALD families; families with disabilities and families with an LGBTQA+ person were evidenced in the quantitative and qualitative elements of the research program as further areas of improvement for accessible and effective service delivery. Although demand for FRSP services is high, the survey and interview data (supported by the research literature) showed lower levels of engagement with FRSP services from clients who are culturally and linguistically diverse or with disability.

Barriers for these groups included language/literacy barriers, limited resources and unequal access to digital platforms. For CALD people, specifically, barriers also arose from distrust of government or other authorities and unfamiliarity with or isolation from culturally appropriate networks through which to access family law system services. Barriers identified for families with an LGBTIQA+ person arose from heteronormative discourses that can create biases, both conscious and unconscious, for practitioners that may result in assumptions in service provision, which can ultimately impact LGBTIQA+ people negatively.

Additionally, the demand projections show that the projected number of FRSP clients, irrespective of different assumptions and projection methodologies, is expected to increase by 14.1% across Australia during the projection period 2022–34. Victoria and major cities in 8 states/territories will experience the largest increase in client numbers over the projection period. The growth of the population, particularly in Victoria and major cities, including the growth of the core age group of 25–49, is critical for future projected growth in client numbers. The demand projections also show a strong positive correlation is also anticipated between population (including core age group) client growth rates across SA3 areas.

Extent to which FRSP activities are delivered efficiently

Overall, the FRSP is identified in the quantitative and qualitative data as an efficient and cost-effective program. Some professionals and clients raised concerns relevant to efficient service delivery, noting delays and a lack of coordinated service delivery that can lead families to seek support from multiple services over a prolonged period, potentially increasing duplication and costs and exacerbating issues for families. Nevertheless, the cost-effectiveness analysis identifies the FRSP as yielding sufficient benefit to justify its cost.

The analysis demonstrates that FRSP activities provide an improvement in client outcomes and a cost saving to government by supporting clients to resolve their post-separation arrangements without them initiating legal proceedings or limiting their reliance on these proceedings. The assessment considers the base cost to deliver a one-point SCORE improvement, ranging from $682 for the FRAL and up to $2,412 per point for FRCs. When incorporating wider improvements across the SCORE domains and the avoided court costs, the incremental cost-effectiveness ratio used to assess cost-effectiveness drops for all activities by between $150 and $280.

FRAL becomes ‘dominant’ and is the most effective activity due to its low average cost per client. The next most cost effective are Supporting Children After Separation and Family Law Counselling, which both deliver large improvements in client outcomes despite relatively high costs. FDR/regional FDR deliver similar client improvements and have similar costs per client. They have a similar cost effectiveness to Children’s Contact Services, which costs more per client but delivers larger improvements. FRC and Post Order Programs broadly cost the same

per client but deliver lower improvements, and so are comparatively the least cost-effective of the FRSP activities.

Potential changes to the FRSP to support effective and efficient service delivery that meets families' needs

A range of potential changes to the FRSP were identified by professionals and clients and in the review of Australian and empirical literature. The most frequently suggested changes to enable FRSP activities to better meet families' needs were a greater use of child inclusive practices (60%). This suggestion from surveyed professionals is consistent with research literature in the Australian context as a means of supporting more durable arrangements that meet the safety and best interests of children.

Holistic/coordinated service provision was also commonly suggested (59%), as was increased availability of support services (i.e. hours of operation or reduced waiting lists) to better meet demand (58%); improved collaboration with non-FRSP family law system services (46%) and improved collaboration with other FRSP services (43%) (Survey of Professionals).

Case management is another service delivery strategy identified as improving service coordination, decision making and client service experiences. A single point of contact into the system and effective case management were identified as potential solutions to the challenges described by clients in the survey and interviews. Case management approaches in previous research show that responses to family and domestic violence are required to address safety during service use and in the outcomes reached as a result of service engagement. In addition to nominating greater case management and more holistic service delivery, professionals in the interviews described the need to facilitate greater inclusivity, flexibility and tailoring in service delivery to accommodate clients' unique needs. Identified strategies to improve the integration of service delivery for users – for example, through the establishment of central service hubs – has also been recommended in previous reviews of family law services and family violence services and other research literature to accommodate the increasing presentation of clients with multiple and complex problems.

Communities of practice emerged as another strategy to potentially improve multi-disciplinary collaboration in the delivery of integrated services. Relevant research literature suggests communities of practice may benefit professionals working in those services, including through shared knowledge and support, as well as having flow-on benefits for services users (e.g. improved referrals). Local needs and financial resources of services are among the considerations needing to be addressed when establishing communities of practice.

Specifically for First Nations families, service responses designed with ACCOS and delivered by ACCOS were identified as facilitating self-determined approaches that are better tailored to meet the diverse needs of First Nations peoples in culturally safe and appropriate ways. The limited availability of First Nations-led services and the lack of First Nations staff working in services were identified in the research literature and consultations as compounding distrust of government services due to fear of child removal. The need for improved collaboration, an appropriately trained workforce to operate in culturally safe ways to best support families, and the importance of adaptable service provision that could accommodate individual family needs were also evident in the research literature and qualitative data.

Technology improvements in service design and delivery were also identified as having the potential to increase opportunities for more timely, cost-effective and, in some instances, safer models of service use compared to face-to-face. Technology could also improve accessibility across the wide geographic spread of the Australian population. Service provision of this nature needs to be accompanied by improvements in accessibility to communication technologies and in digital literacy to facilitate effective service delivery.

A call for broadening the suite of services to address critical gaps, especially for men's behavioural change programs, lawyer-assisted services and family therapy/counselling, was also evident in the survey and interview data and literature review. Expanded access to timely and affordable legal information and advice was identified by clients as critical, as was further service development to ensure FRSP services are accessible, tailored and culturally safe and appropriate for families with diverse needs and experiences.

Collaboration with local communities, facilitating employment of people from diverse backgrounds and the co-location of services were responses identified as improving access to support for CALD families. This includes those in settlement and newly arrived communities, particularly for families experiencing family violence, without English language/literacy, who have limited resources, hold a distrust of government or are unfamiliar with or isolated from culturally appropriate networks to access family law system services. Improved funding was also suggested by professionals and clients to ensure that service providers can meet the demand and provide services at a pace and in a manner that appropriately and sustainably meets clients' needs.

Non-FRSP services supporting separating and separated families to resolve their post-separation arrangements outside of court

A broad range of non-FRSP family law system services supporting separating and separated families were identified in the service mapping and survey data. It is common for clients to use multiple services, including both FRSP and non-FRSP services, to resolve their post-separation arrangements, as evidenced in the quantitative and qualitative data from professionals and clients.

The range of non-FRSP services included legal services, as well as family and relationship services and specialised family violence services, together with state and territory based DFV services, post-separation support programs, parenting support programs, men's behaviour change programs and services for children. Private practitioners including accredited family law specialists, accredited mediators and FDR practitioners are identified as providing services to separating families. Allied services are also providing support to families for the identified risk issues characterising separating and separated families such as mental health services, alcohol and other drugs services, and counselling services. Aboriginal community controlled legal and non-legal services are also critical to the provision of support for separating and separated First Nations families.

The mapped non-FRSP services identify broad coverage in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, with good coverage in the remaining states and territories. The non-FRSP data have been built into the Power BI dashboard as an additional feature to support an assessment of the extent of coverage between non-FRSP and FRSP services for separating and separated families.

Interface between FRSP activities and non-FRSP services for separating and separated families

The most common referrals to FRSP activities were to FDR and Family Law Counselling, followed by referrals to the Post Order Program/Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Program as evidenced in the Survey of Professionals. However, non-FRSP professionals were more likely to refer clients to private FDR practitioners/mediators, while FRSP professionals were more likely to refer clients to Community Legal Centres (including Women's Legal Services) and DFV Services.

The FLPN may improve the interface between FRSP activities and non-FRSP services. When the survey referral patterns were analysed by whether professionals participated in FLPN events, those who regularly attended events had higher levels of referrals compared to those who did not. The 2 exceptions were referrals to private mediators and court FDR/mediation – professionals who did not attend FLPN events had a higher level of referrals to these 2 service types compared to those who regularly attended. It is notable, however, that these differences in referral patterns were not statistically significant.

Positive reflections on the FLPN and its role in promoting collaboration among service providers to better meet the needs of clients and providing education and professional development opportunities for practitioners were evident in the interviews with professionals. However, professionals also indicated that information sharing, coordination and referral between the FRSP services and the broader family law system were ad hoc and dependent on the effort and knowledge of individual practitioners.

3. Desktop review: Australian and international literature

This chapter presents a review of international and Australian research literature of relevance to services for separating and separated families and focused on reform of these systems and services. It includes consideration of post-separation support programs providing services similar to FRSP activities, particular supports for fathers, and those aligned to resolving family disputes prior to court-based actions. The review considers the effects on children of family disputes and ways to ameliorate the most detrimental of these effects. The literature reviewed considers different dispute resolution options and considers how to incorporate children and young people's perspectives and what elements supportive services for children and young people should incorporate. The review includes evidence of promising opportunities for smoother pathways through family services and separation, such as integrating services into hubs and building case management approaches that include referrals. It also provides an overview of the impact and opportunities provided by technology.

The methodology applied for this element of the FRSP Review involved comprehensive database searches to identify refereed evaluations, empirical research and commentary, as well as grey literature regarding service delivery for separating or separated families. The search terms employed included the names and types of services currently offered under FRSP and similar programs – for example, contact services, family dispute resolution and cooperative parenting.

The search period applied was 2013–24 in Australia, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, Europe and the United States of America. The search was applied to a broad range of Australian and international databases including Australian Family & Society Abstracts, Attorney-General's Information Service, Australian Public Affairs Information Service, Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse, PsycInfo, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection and SocINDEX.

These searches were supplemented with searches of key websites, including key overseas agencies such as the UK Ministry of Justice, CAFCASS, the Nuffield Foundation, the New Zealand Ministry of Justice and the Canadian Ministry of Justice. High-level expertise of the AIFS family law team guided the inclusion of relevant Australian and international reports and reviews.

The initial results were examined for relevance and, when irrelevant references were removed, the final sample of literature included over 400 references reviewed by the AIFS research team. A further assessment of relevance was conducted to determine the most appropriate sources to include in this review, given the restricted time frames and topics of focus. Some additional sources were included to ensure the most up-to-date information was included in the review.[2]

Key messages

This literature review demonstrates that aspects of the evidence base on the Australian family relationships services and family law system are more well-developed than in international jurisdictions, but that there are gaps in relation to research on other aspects of post-separation support services for Australian families. The evidence base would benefit from contemporary large-scale data on service user experiences and longitudinal data, including about the needs of

[2] An example was a program in Denmark that was included to illustrate an alternative approach to supporting separating and separated families.

groups of service users (e.g. families with an LGBTIQA+ person, families where a member has disability) and about aspects of the family law system outside the scope of this FRSP Review but that impact the long-term wellbeing of separated families (e.g. child support).

Overall, key messages across the substantial literature reviewed are:

- The experiences of Australian separating couples with and without children are diverse. Experiences range from amicable separations where workable outcomes can be safely reached, through to a substantial minority who experience short-term or long-term complex issues and difficulties separating, particularly when interparental conflict, family violence and child safety concerns are present. These experiences can be associated with negative social, emotional and financial effects, especially for children and women.
- Parents who access family law system service pathways (family dispute resolution, lawyers and courts) have a concentration of family violence, child safety concerns, mental ill-health and substance misuse issues, including co-occurrence of these issues. The need for trauma-informed services for separated families and capacity to respond appropriately to family violence is a substantial theme in recent Australian and international research – however, there are challenges and barriers to implementation.
- Literature about access to services for rural, regional and remote families; First Nations families; CALD families; families with disabilities and families with an LGBTIQA+ person indicate further areas of improvement required for accessibility and delivery of family relationship services to safely and appropriately meet their needs.
- Family dispute resolution and mediation have become cost-effective and efficient methods of reaching post-separation arrangements, normalised in their use since the 2006 family law reforms and recently expanded for property matters. These services are associated with positive satisfaction for users and may support better decision making where power imbalances exist, referrals to support services and an increased focus on the needs of children and young people. Challenges in the provision of FDR/mediation include non-engagement of one party and not reaching mutually acceptable outcomes, including when there is a history of family violence or safety concerns, and potential systems abuse.
- Post-separation parenting, relationships, and adjustment for children and young people have been supported positively with a range of parent focused, child and parent focused and child focused programs. Programs in Australia and internationally have been evaluated to varying extents. Further attention is needed to support fathers in their experiences of engagement with programs and positive co-parenting. Evaluations and research on children's contact services provide a mostly positive view of service provision with some areas of improvement, including for children's experiences.
- Supporting the needs of children and young people in post-separation family relationship services requires options for them to participate or be heard safely and effectively, and reaching arrangements that meet each individual child/young person's needs. Services must have child safe practices and standards as well as strategies to address barriers and challenges for participation of children and young people.
- Previous reviews of family law services and family violence services and other literature have identified strategies to improve the integration of service delivery for users via hubs, particularly given the increasing presentation of clients with multiple and complex problems.
- Case management is another service delivery strategy identified in previous literature as a way to improve service coordination, decision making and client service experiences. Case management approaches in previous research show that responses to family and domestic

violence are required to address safety during service use and in the outcomes reached as a result of service engagement.

- Communities of practice emerged as another strategy to potentially improve multi-disciplinary collaboration in the delivery of integrated services. This literature suggests communities of practice may benefit professionals working in those services, including through shared knowledge and support, as well as have flow-on benefits for service users (e.g. improved referrals). Local needs and financial resources of services are among the considerations needing to be addressed when establishing communities of practice.
- Technology improvements in service design and delivery have been shown to provide significant benefits, including increasing opportunities for more timely, cost-effective and safer models of service use compared to face-to-face service delivery. They can also improve accessibility across the wide geographic spread of the Australian population. However, varying accessibility to communication technologies (e.g. poor internet and mobile phone access in parts of Australia), varying digital literacy, impacts on professional practices and language barriers are identified disadvantages.
- Although many international jurisdictions with comparable family law services to Australia have also moved to increase non-legal service pathways for separating families, there continues to be an emphasis on access to support in the context of court proceedings. Access to publicly funded support services, including legal advice, continues to be a challenge in other jurisdictions.

The service needs of separating families

Aims of the FRSP

The FRSP involves a suite of services aimed at improving 'the wellbeing of Australian families, particularly families with children, who are at risk of separating or have separated' (AGD, 2022a). The services include Family Relationship Centres (FRCs), which provide information and support as well as Family Dispute Resolution (FDR/mediation) including Regional FDR and First Nations FDR, the Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL), Family Law Counselling, Children Contact Services (CCS), Parenting Orders Program/Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Program and the Supporting Children After Separation Program (SCASP).

The FRSP was established in 2006 as part of a wide-ranging set of changes intended to support separating and separated families to resolve post-separation arrangements outside of court and to encourage both parents to be involved in the lives of children after separation (Kaspiew et al., 2009).

The 2006 family law reforms were consistent with directions also evident in other western countries such the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand (NZ), Canada and the United States of America (USA) in their emphasis on non-court-based dispute resolution, supporting cooperative relationships between separated parents and encouraging increased father involvement in children's lives after separation (Kaspiew et al., 2009; Wilson-Evered & Zeleznikow, 2021).

Families' experiences of post-separation services

Social, emotional and financial effect of separation on families

Relationship breakdown can be accompanied by significant social, emotional and financial consequences. At a population level, analysis of HILDA data shows that divorced or separated people experience lower life satisfaction than their partnered counterparts (Wilkins et al., 2020) and separated mothers are more likely to experience parenting stress than non-separated mothers (Wilkins et al., 2024).

Over the past 15 years, a body of Australian research has demonstrated significant diversity in the way that Australian families respond to separation, which most commonly involves children aged 10 and younger (Kaspiew et al., 2015; Qu et al., 2014). AIFS research shows that most former couples negotiate separation and consequent parenting and financial arrangements between themselves and report positively on their own wellbeing and that of their children (Kaspiew et al., 2015; Qu et al., 2014). A substantial minority, however, who report complex issues including family violence, mental illness, substance dependence and safety concerns, experience more difficulty managing separation and parenting and property arrangements and are substantially more reliant on services than those who are not affected by these issues (Kaspiew et al., 2015). The presence of these complex factors, particularly family violence and child safety concerns, is associated with more complex and protracted processes for parenting and property arrangements (Kaspiew et al., 2015; Kaspiew et al., 2017).

Social and emotional effects

The diverse nature of separation experiences from emotional, psychological and developmental perspectives is reinforced in international and Australian research. This literature provides a mixed picture of the impact of parental separation on children in the short and long term. Historically, research has demonstrated that children who experience parental separation experience a wide range of disadvantages compared to peers who do not experience parental separation, particularly in the areas of wellbeing, mental health, education, parent relationship quality and social problems (Deegan, 2020). However, the vulnerability to negative effects and trajectories of post-parental separation can vary substantially depending on individual factors (e.g. socio-economic status), family characteristics (e.g. family violence, inter-parental conflict), duration of children's negative symptoms, quality of parenting, and access to support and therapeutic interventions (Baxter et al., 2011; Deegan, 2020; Di Manno et al., 2018; Kaspiew et al., 2017; Van Dijk, 2020).

Several studies have analysed the impact of parental separation over time using Australian Temperament Project data. The Australian Temperament Project is a longitudinal, representative study across 3 generations of children, including more than 2,000 children born in Victoria between 1982 and 1983 and a third-generation study of 1,000 offspring. Baxter and colleagues (2011) compared children aged 6–7 years who lived with both parents and those who experienced parental separation. Although children living with both parents tended to have better emotional wellbeing than children living with one parent, inter-parental hostility was a key factor in explaining young children's emotional wellbeing. Children whose parents had a hostile inter-parental relationship tended to have poorer emotional wellbeing regardless of family type.

Similarly, Di Manno and colleagues' (2018) analysis of the Australian Temperament Project data found most adolescents who experienced parental separation were well-adjusted but 2

groups of participants were assessed to have a moderate or high risk of depression and/or anti-social behaviour at adolescence. Children's temperament (including negative personality traits, higher levels of aggression, poorer social skills, and higher anxiety, conduct and attention problems) and parenting practices (e.g. higher levels of conflict between parents, decreased parental warmth, decreased parental supervision) were differentiating factors for the 2 negatively impacted groups (Di Manno et al., 2018). These studies add to an extensive evidence base on the negative role of interparental conflict and parental hostility and family violence for children's wellbeing after parental separation (e.g. Kaspiew et al., 2017; Qu et al., 2014).

Financial effects

Separation and divorce come with initial financial costs together with long-term financial impacts for separating adults, particularly women, and children whose parents separate. In this context, it is noteworthy that, on average, separated families with children have very limited financial resources, with financial stress a common experience reported by separated parents (Kaspiew et al., 2015). Modest asset pools of less than $500,000 are the norm among separated parents, with most comprised of the former family home, household chattels, motor vehicles and superannuation (Qu et al., 2014). Even those who litigate often have very limited asset pools (Carson, De Maio et al., 2022).

Separation brings significant average reductions in household income, particularly for women (Broadway et al., 2022; Chapman & Taylor, 2022). Recent research has shown that the risk of entry into poverty after separation is heightened for some groups of women. Broadway and colleagues (2022) found that for separated women with preschool-aged children, poverty risk increased by 16 percentage points compared with partnered counterparts. This risk remained elevated for women with older children (13 percentage points). For women without children, poverty risk is still elevated at 10 percentage points.

It is significant to note that while men recover financially over the medium term, financial disadvantage is sustained for women even into older age, internationally and in Australia (De Vaus et al., 2017). The extent of the negative economic impact for women persists 6 years post-divorce and is influenced by:

- access to effective social security systems, child support and spousal maintenance
- women's labour and work conditions (including earnings), noting that Australian women tend to have lower employment post-divorce
- the extent to which women re-partner, with re-partnering leading to improved income for Australian women (De Vaus et al., 2017).

Experiences of family violence are particularly associated with barriers to obtaining appropriate post-separation property and financial settlements (Qu et al., 2014, see also Carson, Qu et al., 2022). Women experiencing parental separation in the context of domestic and family violence have been found to have high rates of poverty and rely on government payments in addition to wages they might earn (Summers, 2022). Mothers who separated from a partner in the context of violence have an average of $7,500 a year less than mothers separated without reported experiences of violence (Chapman & Taylor, 2022).

Experiences of parental separation during childhood also have long-term negative financial consequences for children through to adulthood. Using nationally representative HILDA data, Lersch and Baxter (2015) found that adults who experienced parental separation before the age of 15 years had significantly lower economic wealth outcomes compared to adults who did not experience parental separation during childhood. The differences in net wealth averaged up to

38% less for adults who experienced parental separation during childhood (Lersch & Baxter, 2015, p 22).

There is limited research about Australia's child support system and the financial and social impact of the system on parents and children and young people, and research evaluating the effectiveness of the public child support agency, private arrangements and family tax benefits over time (Cook et al., 2023; Skinner et al., 2017; Smyth et al., 2020). Current sources of data and longitudinal data are particularly limited. Child support, when it is received, does reduce the degree of poverty for women post-separation in Australia, and this is to a more positive extent than in the United Kingdom (Skinner et al., 2017).

However, research based on survey data collected prior to the 2008 child support reforms identified concerns about child support arrangements being susceptible to underpayment or overpayment for differing reasons, including to protect or encourage parent–child contact, manage conflict over parenting arrangements and improve perceived fairness (Smyth et al., 2020; Vnuk et al., 2020). Although child support arrangements can be based on parental cooperation, some female payees accepted less child support than required due to intimidation or pressure, whereas other payees reported issues about maintaining contact with their children (Smyth et al., 2020; Vnuk et al., 2020).

In the context of financial circumstances after separation, recent research has increasingly highlighted the significance of financial abuse, including in the context of child support. The most current available research is from an opt-in general population survey (Cook et al., 2023). Cook and colleagues (2023) found a large majority of mothers reported experiencing substantial financial abuse via post-separation child support and economic arrangements. The financially abusive tactics included:

- deliberately withholding or non-payment of child support
- minimisation of child support liabilities
- ex-partners threatening to not return children after spending time with them
- being subject to excessive court action or threats of court action
- being reported or threatened to be reported to government agencies as a strategy to cause financial harm.

Negative effects of post-separation financial abuse as reported by mothers, also affecting children, included food insecurity, forgoing medical treatment, housing difficulties and struggling to afford basic necessities (Cook et al., 2023).

Access to services

Families who are separating draw on a wide variety of supports, ranging from informal supports, such as family and friends, to formal supports, such as lawyers, counsellors, DFV services and FRSP services. The most commonly reported source of support is family members, with more than two-thirds of participants in a representative parent sample reporting drawing on this resource in an AIFS study (Kaspiew et al., 2015b, Table 4.1). Services providing counselling, FDR/mediation and relationship support, and lawyers are also commonly accessed, with close to half of the sample in the same study saying they had sought assistance from these sources.

In the past decade, a significant issue that has come into focus is the complexity of a sub-population of separated families, who are affected by a range of difficult issues including family violence, safety concerns as a result of ongoing contact with the other parent, mental ill-health and substance dependence (Carson, Kaspiew et al., 2022; Kaspiew et al., 2022; Kaspiew et

al., 2015; Qu et al., 2014). As noted in the preceding section, this is the main user group of the family law system, and the challenges of meeting their needs have been at the forefront of recent developments and analysis (e.g. Australian Law Reform Commission [ALRC], 2019; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, 2017). The ALRC, for example, concluded that families engage with the family law system at a time of 'heightened vulnerability' and the system offers 'a critical opportunity for intervention with families that can potentially reduce the factors that might compromise a child's wellbeing' (ALRC, 2019, 2.26).

Access to legal services has also been identified as a high priority. A recent review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP) funding (an agreement between Commonwealth and the states to fund legal support for marginalised and in need Australians) found there was a need for increased investment to improve access to justice for Australians needing legal support, particularly at difficult times in their lives (such as separation) (AGD, 2024b). The review found that although the NLAP had contributed to integrated and effective legal assistance for Australians in need, substantial investment was needed to reduce unmet legal need and to improve the efficiency of funding legal services (AGD, 2024b).

Families experiencing domestic and family violence

Family violence is a prominent issue in Australia. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, citing ABS Personal Safety Survey, 2021–22) estimates that more than 1 in 4 (27%) adult women in Australia and around 1 in 8 (12%) adult men have experienced intimate partner violence since the age of 15 (AIHW, 2024). AIFS research shows that family violence is very common among separated families, with only about 4 in 10 **not** reporting experiences of emotional abuse, physical hurt or both (Kaspiew at al., 2015, Table 2.5). More than half of participating parents (58%) reported that they experienced violence before or during their separation. For a substantial minority of families (about 45%), family violence continues beyond separation (Qu et al., 2014, Table 3.6).

It is notable that the parents who use the more formal family law system pathways – family dispute resolution, lawyers and courts – have a particularly significant concentration of family violence, child safety concerns, mental ill-health and substances misuse issues, including co-occurrence of these issues. AIFS research demonstrates that, of parents who reported using FDR/mediation to resolve parenting arrangements, three-quarters had experienced emotional abuse, with this proportion rising to 86% for those who used lawyers (Kaspiew et al., 2015, Table 2.2).

More recent insights based on data from the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia collected as part of the triage and risk screening process in the Lighthouse program indicate that 60% of parenting disputes in the court screen as high risk and 8 out of every 10 matters screened include allegations of at least one serious risk factor such as family violence, child abuse, mental health issues or substance abuse, with nearly half of these cases indicating 4 or more of these risk factors (Pringle, D., Senate Estimates, February 2022).

The need for services for separated families to be DFV-informed, trauma-informed and shaped to respond appropriately to family violence is a substantial theme in recent Australian and international research. A range of challenges and barriers have been identified, including:

- legal processes that are likely to be retraumatising for victims of family violence (e.g. Carson et al., 2018; Carson, Kaspiew et al., 2022; Domestic Abuse Commissioner UK, 2023; Douglas, 2021; Kaspiew et al., 2015, 2017; Salter et al., 2020)

- a culture favouring time spent with both parents that may be prioritised ahead of family violence and a DFV-informed assessment of sufficient, safe and workable outcomes (Carson, Kaspiew et al., 2022; Kaspiew et al., 2015; Kaspiew et al., 2022; Ministry of Justice UK, 2020)
- a lack of understanding about the nature, dynamics and different forms of family violence, particularly patterns of coercive control and non-physical forms of violence, among professionals (e.g. ALRC, 2019; Carson et al., 2023; Carson, Kaspiew et al., 2022; Domestic Abuse Commissioner UK, 2023; Kaspiew et al., 2015; Ministry of Justice UK, 2020; Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2023)
- in a recent UK inquiry, victims and survivors reported encountering a culture of disbelief, the minimisation of family and domestic violence, an absence of children's voices and the harmful impacts of some court processes on children and young people (Domestic Abuse Commissioner UK, 2023).

One example of effective delivery of family law services to families experiencing family violence was demonstrated in a 2018 review of the Family Advocacy and Support Services (FASS) program. FASS provides risk and safety planning and aims to improve service connection for families experiencing family violence, including between state and federal services. The review found FASS was a valuable program that was filling a gap in family law and social services by combining legal support and specialist support services (Inside Policy, 2018). The findings considered that the timely provision of legal advice combined with social services delivery supported timely and satisfactory resolution of disputes and contributed to reduced risk with regards to DFV (Inside Policy, 2018).

Emerging research is starting to explore the features of 'good' DFV legal practice, which are also informative for practitioners in contexts such as FRSP service delivery. A recent study shows that DFV legal service provision is specialised and requires specific knowledge and skills to work in the context of trauma and violence but that, currently, there is no requirement for Australian lawyers to receive DFV training to be admitted to practice (Wangmann et al., 2023). The study identifies that important features of a 'good' DFV lawyer include:

- having knowledge about DFV and how it may present
- being trauma-informed about DFV and the impacts of trauma
- being able to document, describe and name the DFV (this was particularly important in relation to non-physical forms of abuse)
- having legal knowledge including cross-jurisdictional knowledge
- being able to deal with tensions and constraints (e.g. believing clients but also testing their claims to build a case).

The research explicitly highlights the value of establishing professional competencies for lawyers working in family violence contexts and the benefits this would bring to good professional practice (Wangmann et al., 2023).

Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) has developed a model for providing legal advice to clients in family violence contexts. The organisation worked with lived experience experts and stakeholders to design a new model of working with families experiencing family violence to ensure that 2they receive the benefits of legal services. A recent interim review found that the model was improving access to information and legal advice but included further suggested improvements, largely focused around expanding knowledge and connecting related stakeholders working in the system with the model (VLA, 2023).

Rural, regional and remote families

Service provision in Australia is frequently considered in the context of the challenges of large geographic distances and diffused populations (Wendt et al., 2015). In the Australian Parliament's review of the family law system, submissions to the Commonwealth Joint Select Parliamentary Committee highlighted the challenges that people from regional, rural and remote communities face trying to access support services.[3] These challenges include lack of specific services, the need to travel and the impact of unique stresses and uncertainties of living in rural communities (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee, 2020) where lives can be affected by uncontrollable factors such as drought and floods and other natural disasters. Mental health challenges are exemplified by higher rates of suicide than in urban communities (Productivity Commission, 2020).

The 2006 reforms that introduced the FRCs established these largely in local communities to enable direct service to families. For families located in remote locations or otherwise travelling longer distances, the travel to services is sometimes identified as a potential barrier to access (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee, 2020; Wendt et al., 2017), though social isolation may be an even greater factor to consider (Wendt et al., 2017). Additional challenges can impact families who live beyond urban centres. Some of these include:

- privacy concerns – that others in a small community will know their business or that practitioners and community members know each other in social contexts (Campo & Tayton, 2015; Wendt et al., 2015)
- social norms around stoicism and self-reliance in rural centres that impede help seeking (Campo & Tayton, 2015)
- lawyers in regional, rural and remote areas who may not be specialists in family law but conduct this work as part of their general practice and may have less access to relevant training and professional development (ALRC, 2018)
- lack of transportation options to get to service centres in a timely and safe way (Campo & Tayton, 2015; Carson et al., 2023)
- specific challenges for First Nations women living in rural and remote locations to access supports including for DFV, which compounds the challenges that First Nations families face in accessing services (discussed below) (Langton et al., 2020; Meyer & Stambe, 2022)
- the issue of workloads and staffing to cover large areas and retain skilled staff for regional service coverage (Carson et al., 2023; Wendt et al., 2015).

Research indicates that service access has some additional complex dimensions for women who live in regional areas and experience family violence (Wendt et al., 2015). Help-seeking decisions can be disparate and highly influenced by their own informal networks of relationships and social supports, with women mostly tapping into informal networks first (Wendt et al., 2015). The social isolation that is an element of experiencing family violence can be a greater factor than physical isolation from social contacts (Wendt et al., 2015). The practitioners interviewed indicated that geographical distance and isolation did, however, impact service responses to DFV (Wendt et al., 2015).

Challenges for delivering services in rural, regional and remote locations include the need to deliver to diverse groups of people over large areas, recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce,

[3] See for example Australian Commonwealth Joint Select Committee Interim Report (2020) citing Submission 606 (Relationships Australia).

accessing professional development and building cultural diversity into a team to support access and cultural safety (Zheng et al., 2023). Opportunities to ameliorate some of these access challenges for remote families and families of diverse structures will be discussed below in the technology and remote service delivery section.

First Nations families

The AIHW's (AIHW, 2024) recent analysis of ABS data (2021–2022 Personal Safety Survey) identifies that 2 in 3 First Nations people (67%) over 15 years of age who had experienced physical harm in the previous 12 months, report that the harm was perpetrated by a family member (a current or former intimate partner or other family member). These data highlight the high rates of family violence in the lives of many First Nations Australians who are overrepresented as both victims and perpetrators of family violence (AIHW, 2024).

A critical aspect of the policy environment in service delivery for First Nations families is the National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap. Priority Reform 1 under this agreement requires decision making to be shared between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and government. Priority Reform 2 focuses on Building the Community Controlled Sector so that services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are designed and delivered by ACCOs. The overarching intention of the Closing the Gap agreement is to 'overcome the entrenched inequality faced by too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so that their life outcomes are equal to all Australians' (Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet, 2020, para 15).

A recent review by the Productivity Commission (2024, p 3) has found that across government agencies, 'progress toward implementing the reforms has, for the most part been weak and reflects tweaks to, or actions overlayed onto, business as usual approaches'. In relation to Priority Reform 1, the review found that governments were reluctant to relinquish control over decisions and frequently adopted an approach of consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rather than sharing power substantively. In relation to Priority Reform 2, the review found that government approaches indicated a stance 'that does not actively recognise the value of the expertise and knowledge that ACCOs bring to developing services models and solutions that are culturally safe and suited to communities' (Productivity Commission, 2024).

Recognition of the need for family law system responses to be shaped by engagement with community and ACCOs emerged in the 2012 Family Law Council report, *Improving the Family Law System for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Clients*. Although there have been some promising developments, such as the new culturally safe and appropriate First Nations Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) announced in 2022, formulation of approaches to meet the needs of First Nations families is a work in progress in the family law system. In the 2022–23 financial year 9 ACCOs received grant funding for First Nations FDR:

- Aboriginal Resource and Development Services (ARDS Aboriginal Corporation), located in Winnellie, Northern Territory
- Bungree Aboriginal Association, located in Gosford, New South Wales
- Dhulawang Aboriginal Corporation, located in Kempsey, New South Wales
- Ebenezer Aboriginal Corporation, located in Balha, Western Australia
- Helem Yumba Incorporated, located in Rockingham, Western Australia
- Institute for Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH), located in Windsor, Queensland
- Ngunya Jarjum Aboriginal Corporation, located in Lismore, New South Wales
- Orange Aboriginal Corporation Health Service, located in Orange, New South Wales

- Southern Aboriginal Corporation, located in Albany, Western Australia.

Further, in 2024, the Australian Government announced that $11.7 million would be invested into the First Nations FDR Pilot from 2024–25 (Australian Government, 2024).

The Productivity Commission's analysis would suggest there needs to be much greater emphasis on shared decision making and ACCO-led service design and delivery.

There has been long standing concern about barriers to access for First Nations families in the family law system (ALRC, 2019; Family Law Council [FLC], 2012a). These include a lack of awareness of the system among First Nations communities, concerns about cultural safety in the system and a wider reluctance to engage with justice and government systems among First Nations groups arising from past injustices and continued overrepresentation in the child protection and criminal justice systems (ALRC, 2019; FLC, 2012a; KPMG, 2016). Recent analyses have demonstrated that distrust of services continues to inhibit engagement, and a focus on the need for First Nations-led service provision is gathering pace.

Several analyses have highlighted the need for improvement in family law system responses to First Nations families (ALRC, 2019; Carson et al., 2023; FLC, 2012a; KPMG, 2016; Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). Previously, the Family Law Council (2012a) also recommended building collaboration and enhancing service integration with family law services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services providers and organisations. This recommendation included that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations provide advisory and other support for family law system services.

More recently, the Evaluation of the Children's Contact Services Activity, drawing on data from the Survey of Professionals and qualitative interview data with First Nations Professionals, identified similar themes (Carson et al., 2023). These included the absence of First Nations-led services and the lack of First Nations staff working in services. The theme of distrust of government services due to fear of child removal was present in this study too. The study identified the need for an appropriately trained workforce to operate in culturally safe ways to best support families. Interviews with First Nations professionals also identified the importance of adaptable service provision that could accommodate individual family needs (Carson et al., 2023).

A recent evaluation of FDR/mediation services developed to specially support First Nations and other culturally diverse families outlined barriers for these families in accessing services (McDonnell & Wright, 2022). These included infrastructure barriers where building design and location is not welcoming to First Nations families as well as a lack of cultural training in the workforce, compounded by language barriers. For some, the gendered nature of many family services provided a deterrent for men, who felt uncomfortable accessing what seemed to be female spaces. A lack of privacy and fear of other people in the same cultural group knowing their business was also cited as a concern (McDonnell & Wright, 2022).

Similar themes are acknowledged in the introduction to a Victorian Legal Aid (VLA) framework for First Nations FDR/mediation (VLA Family Dispute Resolution Service, 2020), which acknowledges the barriers to access outlined in the Family Law Council's (2012a) report on improving access for First Nations people. The model of FDR/mediation offered by Victoria Legal Aid aims to provide a culturally safer way of working with First Nations Families (VLA Family Dispute Resolution Service, 2020). It was developed in conjunction with clients of the service and other relevant stakeholders. The model focuses on addressing 5 key barriers for First Nations family to use of FDR/mediation – these include access to the service; the assessment and preparation of the sessions; design and management of the sessions; follow-

up after the sessions and listening to draw in continuous improvement. The framework was reviewed in 2019 and updates made in 2020 (VLA Family Dispute Resolution Service, 2020).

A 2022 discussion paper from the Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department in relation to FDR/mediation (AGD, 2022b, p 8) outlines known barriers and includes:

- lack of transport or digital communications that could lead to inaccessibility
- the specific fear of gossip where local interpreters were being used from a small pool of local language speakers
- perceptions of services' bias against men (AGD, 2022b).

The ALRC (2019) review of the family law system made multiple recommendations to improve cultural safety for First Nations families – for example, by ensuring that the broader concepts of family and kinship used by First Nations people, which extend beyond the traditional nuclear family, are included in definitions of family (ALRC, 2019). Recent legislative reforms have responded to these recommendations with changes to the *Family Law Act 1975* – however, recognition of First Nations family concepts remains an important consideration for family law service design.

In the specific context of DFV, similar themes are evident. In researching DFV services for First Nations people, Langton and colleagues (2020, citing Willis, 2011 & DSS Third National Action Plan) refer to estimates that 90% of DFV incidents perpetrated against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are not being disclosed. This presents additional challenges for service responses supporting women experiencing DFV, and also for those using violence who are not then held to account or able to receive support themselves. One element feeding into this unwillingness to report is the overrepresentation of First Nations men in the criminal justice system (Langton et al., 2020; Milroy et al., 2021). Women experiencing violence from First Nations men may be less willing to report them due to concerns that it will result in further criminal justice system contact or because of financial reliance on the family member using violence (Langton et al., 2020).

Milroy and colleagues (2021), in an analysis of First Nations people and the law, note the need to consider specifically the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations people to ensure effective supports. This means considering wellbeing in relation to social determinants such as stable housing but also emotional wellbeing, such as their connection to country, and community wellbeing overall (Milroy et al., 2021).

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families

As with First Nations Families, there is longstanding concern about limited engagement in the family law system among CALD families (Carson et al., 2023; Family Law Council, 2012b; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, 2017; KPMG, 2016).

Recent analysis of CALD representation in the FRSP Dex data for the FRSP Review indicates that CALD families are underrepresented as FRSP clients in proportion to their representation in the population (21% according to ABS Census data, 2021). This was also observed in the DEX data analysis in the Evaluation of Children's Contact Service Activity (Carson et al., 2023)

A recent evaluation of a pilot service model partnering a community legal service in Melbourne with a settlement service supporting newly arrived communities (Matthews & Nunweek, 2023) provides a summary of the issues likely to be faced by people from newly arrived communities in accessing services – in this example, the justice system. These are also reiterated in

research supporting better pathways to services for women in CALD communities (Koleth et al., 2020) and in a 2015 ANROWS review of international and Australian literature about immigrant women's experience of family violence services (Vaughan et al., 2015). Both studies identify the fear of losing children as a key issue if reporting violence. Among most clients participating in the pilot service model (Matthews & Nunweek, 2023), challenges faced included:

- lack of English and English literacy levels
- an unfamiliar legal system with unfamiliar laws
- distrust of authorities and governments
- limited financial resources
- cultural isolation and lack of culturally appropriate networks
- unequal access to digital platforms/equipment and digital skills.

Family law service provision was beyond the scope of the community legal service trial. However, the model of providing services in co-locations to support settlement and newly arrived communities with social service provision as a way of reducing social inequities is of interest for consideration to improve access and engagement with family services by those facing these issues. Furthermore, the ANROWS study by Vaughan and colleagues (2015) notes that, overall, immigrant communities' experiences of racism can impact the way they view police and government agencies and therefore influence decisions to report violence or seek help.

The *Beyond the Barriers* (McDonnell & Wright, 2022) evaluation report also identifies factors that provide potential barriers for CALD clients participating in FDR/mediation. Barriers identified include cultural expectations around family roles, lack of knowledge about services and lack of a culturally competent workforce to provide the services – for example, where a lack of male staff can result in a cultural barrier for some groups. McDonnell and Wright (2022) observed that perceptions of the buildings and infrastructure as 'white' can unwittingly create an environment that is not welcoming for some cultural groups. Shame related to the need to use family services was also identified as potentially problematic (McDonnell & Wright, 2022; Vaughan et al., 2015), particularly where interpreters from the same cultural background may be required and fears around privacy impede participation.

Migrant families experiencing family violence can have a particularly challenging path to accessing support (Koleth et al., 2020; McDonnell & Wright, 2022; Vaughan et al., 2015) This is due to multiple factors such as language, fear of reporting to police, lack of knowledge about their rights and concerns about community exclusion (McDonnell & Wright, 2022; Vaughan et al., 2015). For refugees, backgrounds of traumatic circumstances can affect their mental health and influence perpetration and the impacts of family violence (McDonnell & Wright, 2022).

The McDonnell and Wright report stresses that it is important to understand that family violence is not a cultural issue (Koleth et al., 2020; McDonnell & Wright, 2022). Rather, there are structural issues that render migrant and refugee women more vulnerable in these circumstances and potentially more in need of family services or specially adapted services. Supportive cultural networks can also be helpful for women experiencing family violence (McDonnell & Wright, 2022) although these can also be a source of shame and pressure to maintain family (Vaughan et al., 2015).

Other research indicates measures that are likely to improve service engagement with CALD families include:

- building trust with local communities
- introducing cultural safety training and cultural partnerships to build capacity in mainstream services

- access to and broad dissemination of information about services
- promoting positive, gender equal relationships in local communities, including with men
- encouraging and supporting bicultural workers in services (Koleth et al., 2020).

Vaughan and colleagues (2015) note that, overall, they found that features of effective (family violence) services for immigrant women included those that took their disclosures seriously and provided information, options and referrals. Cultural competency was considered important and included the service having bicultural staff, good strategies for overcoming language barriers and an understanding of cultural contexts and specific cultural or religious requirements (Vaughan et al., 2015).

Families with disabilities

There is a lack of current research about separation and experiences of families where one or more family members has a disability, including service experiences of parents and children with a disability, and how decision making, parenting agreements and court orders respond to parents or children and young people with disabilities. People with disability face additional complexities in accessing services and resolving family disputes, with family violence firmly in focus.

People with disability are 2.6 times more likely to have experienced intimate partner violence in the past 12 months (Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2020). Women with a disability are at greater risk of experiencing family violence from a partner (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2020, citing ANROWS submission), and this is demonstrated in data showing 36%, compared to 21% of women without a disability, having experienced intimate partner violence since age 15 (Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2020, citing ABS Personal Safety Survey). Experiences of family violence intersect with other elements of disadvantage that people with a disability experience. These include being more likely to be from low socio-economic backgrounds and experiencing difficulties making formal complaints about their experiences of DFV (Beckwith et al., 2023, citing Harpur & Douglas, 2019).

Women with disability are almost 15% more likely to experience coercive and controlling behaviour from a parent or intimate partner than women without disability (Beckwith et al., 2023 citing Reeves et al., 2021). This is due to factors such as a lack of economic security, unstable housing and difficulties accessing care and support services (Beckwith et al., 2023). In a qualitative study of Australian women with disability, victim-survivors reported having limited access to disability support payments and, consequently, economic security was a significant concern for them (Reeves et al., 2021). Victim-survivors with disability also indicated that their dependence on those using violence against them to provide care and support limited their options, including leaving abusive relationships (Beckwith et al., 2023). Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics also identifies women with disability are ‘more likely to experience multiple incidents of violence by a male perpetrator’ (ABS Personal Safety Survey, 2021–22).

In the context of dispute resolution, service support may need to incorporate responses to address issues in awareness and understanding (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2020, citing AWAVA Submission) that can disadvantage clients with particular disabilities. This may provide additional challenges for dispute resolution where service staff are not equipped to support clients with disability due to a lack of skills and training (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2020 citing AWAVA submission).

Around 18% of the Australian population have a disability (AIHW, 2022), and this amounts to a significant group potentially facing barriers or exclusion from family law services. Acknowledging some of these barriers, the ALRC (2019) report made a recommendation for a supported decision-making framework (Recommendation 46) for people with disability to be included in the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) to aid people with disability to exercise their rights and maintain their legal capacity rather than have a substitute decision maker appointed for them. This aligns with Australia's human rights obligations (ALRC, 2019). The government is currently considering how such a framework would operate (Australian Government, 2021).

Challenges with infrastructure that does not enable equal participation has also been noted, including no physical access to legal settings, the lack of accessible legal services and legal information not available in accessible formats (Carson et al., 2023, citing Domingo-Cabarrubias et al., 2023).

The recent Evaluation of Children Contact Service Activity provided some insight into the experience of family service delivery for people with disability, with 1 in 10 CCS clients in that study reported as having disability (Carson et al., 2023). Although survey data responses from CCS professionals reported appropriate infrastructure and staff receiving training in disability service support, there was less agreement from some referring professionals (as well as parents and carers) surveyed. They cited issues with transport and highlighted a need for staff training (particularly in relation to children experiencing mental health issues or neurodiversity; Carson et al., 2023).

Acknowledging the continued role for face-to-face interactions in service delivery, the KPMG (2016) review observed that digital channels have the potential to support greater accessibility of family law services for a range of clients, including people with disability, those at risk of violence or intimidation and shift workers (Smart, 2018). Technology and family law services are discussed in greater length in a separate section of this report.

LGBTIQA+ families

Existing literature aimed at understanding the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and/or asexual (LGBTIQA+) people's use of separation and other family services is minimal. The available literature has focused on the experiences of same-sex parents, including those from 'guild parent' families who have more than 2 parents (e.g. 2 lesbian women and a gay man) and had planned to permanently co-parent as a family (Gahan, 2019).

Armstrong and Fernandez Arias' (2019) scoping review of academic literature relating to experiences and access to family law support by rainbow families (those led by LGBTIQA+ people) identifies that prevailing heteronormativity in services and, more broadly, in society create additional pressures for families in same-sex family structures. A submission from Better Place Australia (2020, p 26) to the Australian Parliament's 2020 review of the family law system describes LBTIQA+ families as being largely ignored by the family law system.

Socialisation with heteronormative discourses can create biases, both conscious and unconscious, for practitioners, resulting in assumptions for service provision, which can ultimately impact LGBTIQ+ people negatively. This may create a barrier to service access either through fear of discrimination or actual direct or indirect discrimination (Armstrong & Fernandez Arias, 2019). Furthermore, Gahan's (2018) study of same-sex parents found that participants felt pressured by expectations not to disrupt campaigns for social and political acceptance of same-sex families – creating experiences of isolation and invisibility for them in the separation process.

In a review of same-sex parents' views of services and service providers, Gahan (2017) suggests that potential service users face greater efforts to plan and instigate service contact with providers that are not LGBTI+ specific. This adds an additional layer of challenge for families, while they are simultaneously dealing with separation, sometimes leading people to miss out on services and supports. Participants in the qualitative study of 22 same-sex parents reported mixed experiences with mainstream family services, with some participants reporting very difficult interactions with service providers, while others had found the experience better than they had anticipated (Gahan, 2017). Others reported that LGBTI+ specific services did not have an adequate understanding of separating parents' needs (Gahan, 2017), indicating the need for training and focused efforts on improving access and inclusivity at family service providers.

Armstrong and Fernandez Arias' (2019) scoping review found that practitioners lacked confidence in their knowledge of working with rainbow families, made assumptions and, consequently, did not ask questions; whereas parents would have liked service providers to take a lead. It also reiterated parents' concerns that services and dispute resolution processes inherently preferred biological parents.

Likewise, Gahan's (2017) qualitative study, considering separated same-sex parents' experiences of mediation services, identified concerns that these dispute resolution services were not targeted to the specific issues experienced by same-sex couples or were not always supportive of same-sex couples engaging with these services. This was particularly the case for those mediation services that were located in FRCs (Gahan, 2017).

Issues raised by participants in Gahan's (2017) study included perceived attitudes of favouring biological parents over non-biological parents in negotiations, concerns that mediation would not be appropriate for guild parent families (those in which gay men and lesbian women have jointly created a family and are co-parenting together) and that they sought out LGBTI+-specific services.

However, some participants felt the smallness of the LGBTI+ community meant that their privacy was at risk when engaging with LGBTI+ specific services and raised the issue of a lack of these services in rural areas. There were positive experiences, however, where separating couples reported that they felt understood and respected by the mediation providers and supported to reach agreement on post-separation arrangements (Gahan, 2017).

Overall, the limited available literature indicates that training and competencies for services are important to understand the specific issues of rainbow families and to create culturally safe environments that are welcoming and supportive of all families. There is also a lack of literature on the experiences of transgender, intersex and/or asexual parents accessing separation services.

Services to support cost-effective and efficient resolution of post-separation arrangements: family dispute resolution and mediation

A key feature of the 2006 family law reforms involved the introduction of the requirement for parents to attempt to resolve their parenting disputes by FDR/mediation (the term FDR/mediation will be used in this discussion as it primarily relates to FRSP services) prior to making a court application for parenting orders (*Family Law Act 1975* s 60I(1)). Together with the significant expansion in community-based family dispute resolution (FDR/mediation)

services, this requirement to attempt FDR/mediation has shaped practice in relation to resolving post-separation parenting disputes.

Although not legislatively mandated in relation to resolving post-separation property/financial matters, there is increasing availability of mediation in these matters (Carson, Qu et al., 2022; Carson, De Maio et al., 2022). In the 2023/24 budget, the Commonwealth Government announced the extension of property mediation in legal aid commissions and the continuation and expansion of the PPP500 program in the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, in which the majority of matters settle by agreement in a process facilitated by registrars (Dreyfus KC MP, press release, 9 May 2023).

Emergence of specialised models

Some research indicates that FDR/mediation users tend to have higher levels of education, be in paid employment and have separated from a marital rather than cohabiting relationships (Qu et al., 2014). However, as FDR/mediation has become more entrenched as the main dispute resolution pathway for parenting matters in the family law system, increasing attention has been paid to specialised models for particular groups, such as culturally and linguistically diverse families, First Nations families (VLA Family Dispute Resolution Service, 2020) and families affected by family violence (ALRC, 2019).

Although the presence of reasonable grounds to establish a risk of family violence or child abuse are grounds for exemption from the requirement to attempt FDR/mediation in parenting matters, such matters are dealt with regularly in FDR/mediation (Kaspiew et al., 2015). Legally assisted FDR/mediation is considered an important avenue for families with more complex needs to resolve post-separation disputes (ALRC, 2019; Carson, Qu et al., 2022). However, it is also recognised that particular care should be taken with the application of FDR/mediation models in this context, to ensure that physical and psychological safety are maintained and that power imbalances are ameliorated (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, 2017).

Advantages of FDR/mediation

As a low cost, non-adversarial dispute mechanism, FDR/mediation elicits positive satisfaction levels from those who use it, according to multiple studies (e.g. Fehlberg et al., 2013; Heard et al., 2024; Kaspiew et al., 2015; Qu et al., 2014; Qu, 2019). It is important to note that satisfaction with the process can be independent of actual outcomes from the mediation (Heard et al., 2024). Over time, a range of studies have highlighted the advantages of FDR/mediation, including legally assisted models, namely:

- The process can ameliorate power imbalances, through the involvement of a third-party practitioner, that may arise where there has been a history family violence, particularly where legally assisted models are applied (Carson, Qu et al., 2022; Fehlberg & Millward, 2013; Kaspiew et al., 2014; Moloney et al., 2011).
- Engagement with the process can support referrals and linkages with other services and supports (Carson, Qu et al., 2022; Fehlberg & Millward, 2013).
- The process can support increased focus on the needs and interests of the children involved, particularly where child focused or child inclusive models are applied (Kaspiew et al., 2012; MacIntosh et al., 2008, 2009).

The recent evaluation of the Legal Aid Commission (LAC) Trial in which legal aid commissions were funded to provide mediation for people with property pools valued at $500,000 or less, demonstrates the first 2 points outlined above in that it was found to:

- improve access to options for resolving post-separation property arrangements, particularly for vulnerable women, with strong uptake of the program
- provide parties with access to property settlements where they would otherwise not have been able to pursue a property settlement due to the prohibitive costs, delays and stress associated with engaging in litigation
- be easy to use and benefited from having shuttle and telephone methods available to manage situations where there had been family violence (Carson, Qu et al., 2022)
- facilitate access to other supports (including in relation to legal, housing, financial and therapeutic supports).

Social return on investment analysis

The Evaluation of the LAC Trial involved one of a few efforts to assess FDR/mediation using economic methods. The evaluation calculated a social return on investment (SROI) indicating that for every $1 invested in the LAC Trial, $4.69 of social value was generated for the LAC mediation stakeholders (Carson, Qu et al., 2022). Of particular relevance to the consideration of the effects of similar FRSP activities diverting parties from litigation, the quantitative and qualitative elements of the evaluation also identified significant benefits of the LAC Trial program that could not be monetised in the SROI analysis. These included parties' access to:

- a simple and cost-effective dispute resolution option where other dispute resolution options are not feasible and where resolution is unlikely in the absence of this formal intervention
- warm referrals to relevant legal, housing, financial and therapeutic supports for disadvantaged and vulnerable parties
- a case-managed process where parties are generally legally represented and which empowers vulnerable and disadvantaged parties by addressing the power imbalances, while also supporting them to resolve their matter out of court
- access to heads of agreement or consent orders to address outstanding property/financial arrangements and to formalise these arrangements to mitigate against future legal proceedings but to facilitate enforcement if required
- reduced stress and anxiety associated with legal proceedings and the exposure to ongoing family violence during this period (Carson, Qu et al., 2022).

An international example of the application of SROI methodology to different dispute resolution options also supports the value of mediation. Canadian research used social return on investment methodology (SROI) to compare 4 dispute resolution mechanisms used to address family law disputes in Canada (mediation, collaboration, litigation and arbitration; Paetsch et al., 2018b). It found that for low conflict disputes, mediation had the highest SROI ($2.78 for every dollar spent) and litigation the lowest ($0.39). For high conflict disputes, collaboration ($1.12) followed by mediation ($1.00) had the highest SROI results. Litigation came in at $0.04. The research also highlighted the view among lawyers (it is important to note that this analysis is based on data obtained through a survey of legal practitioners) that, compared to other dispute resolution processes, litigation is:

- lengthy (taking twice as long as other processes)
- costly (costing twice as much as other dispute resolution processes)
- less likely to produce outcomes in the interests of clients and their children
- less likely to produce results that clients are satisfied with.

Challenges

There are also challenges in the provision of FDR/mediation. One of the most significant of these is the fact that unless both parties agree to the process, FDR/mediation cannot be applied. Relatedly, attempts to instigate FDR/mediation may not always result in agreement being reached as the process may not produce an outcome that is acceptable to both parties. The available evidence indicates that the extent of FDR/mediation not being applied due to the non-engagement of one party is significant (Heard et al., 2024; Kaspiew et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2016; Smyth et al., 2017).

AIFS research shows that close to 1 in 4 parents attempt to instigate a mediation process, with agreement being reached in around 40% of matters (Kaspiew et al., 2015, Table 4.12). The research literature shows that lack of agreement can be associated with some complex dynamics. On the one hand, it may not necessarily be negative since the process of preparation may have supported parents to have improved communication, information and referrals and start on a pathway to self-management (e.g. Kaspiew et al., 2009). On the other hand, research also demonstrates that matters that involve the non-engagement of one party, and/or the cessation of the process without an outcome, involve difficult relationship dynamics including family violence or entrenched conflict (Heard et al., 2024; Kaspiew et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2016; Smyth et al., 2017). However, it is not always the case that agreement cannot be reached in such instances, with AIFS research showing that even where there has been a history of family violence, agreement was reached in close to 40% of matters where FDR/mediation was applied (compared with 53% of matters where no family violence was reported; Kaspiew et al., 2015, Table 4.13).

Successful engagement with and completion of FDR/mediation is an area where practice challenges have been identified in a number of studies (Heard et al., 2024; Kaspiew et al., 2012; Morris et al., 2016; Smyth et al., 2017). This is an area that is significant not only in the context of the needs of families and children but also in terms of costs to the system. Notably, the ALRC (2018) recognise that FDR/mediation and other FRC services may be leveraged as part of a pattern of systems abuse. Smyth and colleagues (2017, p 96) observe that cases ‘where clients appear to be stalling rather than directly refusing to participate in FDR/mediation … represent one of the greatest challenges to family law system professionals.’

Morris and colleagues (2016) note that detailed consideration is required as to how engagement in mediation can be improved in the way that services and parties communicate about the process. Consistent with the ALRC (2019) discussion about the need for tailored models for more complex cases, Morris and colleagues (2016, p 145) conclude that ‘given the range in the nature and severity of reported problems in this presenting for mediation, mediations services may benefit by developing a stepped care approach to mediation in which additional services are available based on assessed need.’

Significantly, research shows different dynamics in the context of the timing of FDR post-separation (Qu et al., 2014; Qu, 2019). Earlier application of FDR is more likely to result in agreement than later application. Additionally, families who use mediation 3 or more years after separation are characterised by poorer interparental relationships than earlier users, suggesting that these families need support to manage transition points such as children needing age-related changes to parenting arrangements (Qu et al., 2014; Qu, 2019).

Supporting post-separation parenting/relationships

In the past 20 years, significant emphasis has been placed on programs that support parents and children to adjust to separation, in light of evidence indicating poor inter-parental

relationships adversely affect child outcomes following separation (e.g. Choi et al., 2019; Lau, 2021). Three main formats are evident in such programs: parent focused programs, child and parent focused programs and child focused programs (Price-Robertson & Paterson, 2021).

Parenting education programs

The evidence for the effectiveness of child focused programs is positive (Price-Robertson & Paterson, 2021). The evidence for child and parent focused programs is less extensive but also suggests positive effects.

Price-Robertson and Paterson conducted a common elements analysis on 5 programs used internationally (USA and Spain) and one used in Australia (Family Transitions Triple P). The 6 programs were: Dads for Life, Egokitzen, Family Transitions Triple P, New Beginnings Program, New Beginnings Program – Dads and Parenting through Change. The analysis identified 15 common elements across the programs, in 2 broad categories. One category related to content, with coverage of the following topics: emotional management in separation, parenting in separation, co-parenting in separation and the impact of separation on children. The other category related to techniques applied in programs, including skills practice, personalising content, assigning and reviewing homework and normalising difficulties.

In terms of the mode of delivery of parent focused programs an analysis published in 2020 by Schramm and Becher indicated:

- Face-to-face programs have the following advantages: personal contact supports rapport, empathy and the monitoring and management of how the course is received, as well as the normalisation of experiences.
- Online programs have the advantage of accessibility and increased convenience, which may be significant for some groups, including those with disability and those in the military. Disadvantages include no or limited opportunity for meaningful engagement. Evidence is mixed on their efficacy (Schramm & Becher, 2020).
- The evidence for parent focused programs tends to be positive – however, many assessments are based on evaluative techniques that are less robust. Some recent evaluation findings based on methodologies considered more robust, such as longitudinal elements or comparison, provide more specific insights. The findings for these program-specific evaluations also found positive outcomes for many of the elements being targeted, such as reducing anger and reducing parental stress; however, no impact was found for other elements, in some cases. These evaluations are program specific and require individual analysis but generally support that there is value to be found in parenting education programs as a tool for improving post-separation parenting.

Specific parenting support for fathers

Despite the proliferation of educational programs focusing on responsible fathering and non-resident fathers' relationships with their children, there were limited rigorous evaluations available (Holmes et al., 2020; Nievar et al., 2020).

A recent US meta-analysis of evaluations of responsible fatherhood programs (Holmes et al., 2020) identified 3 broad categories of behaviour in scope:

- father involvement and parenting programs to teach parenting skills and encourage fathers to spend quality time with their children, with outcome measures including parent competence, quality parent–child relationships, parenting stress and self-esteem.

- enhancing co-parenting programs by teaching effective communication skills and control of aggressive behaviour to strengthen their relationship with the other parent, with outcome measures including the strength of this relationship, communication and social support and relationship satisfaction.
- economic wellbeing support programs focused on teaching skills that support financial responsibility and encourage child support compliance, with outcome measures including payment of formal and informal child support and increases in employment and income (Holmes et al., 2020).

The Holmes and colleagues' meta-analysis considered 34 studies and examined the outcome categories of co-parenting, father involvement, parenting, child support and the economic wellbeing of fathers. An overall common measure of program success indicated that participating fathers scored approximately 5% higher on the outcomes than the control group (Holmes et al., 2020). However, Holmes and colleagues were only able to identify a small but statistically significant effect size for parenting, father involvement and co-parenting outcomes, with the strongest effect size in co-parenting skills. This finding was identified as important by Holmes and colleagues who referenced research indicating that the co-parenting relationship was among the key predictors of fathers' relationship and time with their children (citing Carlson et al., 2008; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; McHale & Coates, 2014).

Findings from recent research examining the Families Offering Children Unfailing Support (FOCUS) Fatherhood program in the USA (Nievar et al., 2020) suggest that parenting programs can improve parent–child relationships and that improvements in parenting and co-parenting skills may lead to more active engagement by fathers in their children's lives and increases in the payment of child support (Nievar et al., 2020). Nievar and colleagues (2020) also identified substantial increases in payment of child support, although their findings suggested that income constraints may have contributed to non-compliance with child support payment obligations. The program was identified as supporting these fathers to progress with financial counselling and to have a better understanding of the co-parenting relationship, encouraging them to invest in their children and increasing their self-confidence (Nievar et al., 2020).

By contrast, Nievar and colleagues (2020) referenced findings from a randomised trial of 4 Responsible Fatherhood programs (citing Avellar et al., 2019) where there was no evidence of increases in child support paid, income or social and emotional wellbeing. Nievar and colleagues (2020) noted, however, that the Avellar and colleagues study indicated improvements in fathers' nurturing skills and developmentally appropriate engagement with children, together with greater employment compared to fathers not involved in these programs.

An earlier UK study of services delivered by the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission found the program could encourage separating or separated fathers (particularly younger and lower SES fathers) to engage in collaborative parenting and to access support services (Bourne & Ryan, 2012). Based on a literature review and focus groups, Bourne and Ryan identified a desire among fathers to have strong relationships with their children, and to be involved in their educational and emotional development, and an acceptance of their financial responsibility.

Nevertheless, Bourne and Ryan (2012) also described a distrust among fathers in relation to mothers' use of child support payments for the child's needs. Although participating fathers identified positive co-parenting relationships as their goal, the participating fathers were unable to translate these positive attitudes into positive relationships with the other parent, with 'a cycle of disengagement from fatherhood' (Bourne & Ryan, 2012).

Overall, the Bourne and Ryan (2012) study findings suggest:

- a need for targeting interventions to young fathers, particularly from disadvantaged communities, with these being identified as being more likely to succeed
- timely service provision prior to or as soon as possible after the child's birth (including early years services) to embed positive fathering and relationship behaviours
- greater visibility and awareness of services and greater inclusion of men in the delivery support services and early years services to improve perceptions of services
- delivery of these services by the community sector, with these services perceived more positively by fathers
- service delivery that was empathetic and non-judgemental
- involvement of fathers in the design of new and existing services to ensure that they meet the needs of fathers.

In an Australian review of research on improving fathers' engagement with interventions for child wellbeing, Lechowicz and colleagues (2019) found 6 key features were important for policy and practice efforts to enhance fathers' engagement with parenting programs. These included:

- engaging the parenting team (i.e. where possible have both parents or other caregivers engaged)
- avoiding a father deficit approach, which will reduce their engagement
- increasing fathers' awareness of parenting interventions
- father inclusive content and delivery
- building organisational support for father inclusive practice
- increasing professional training for workforce about engaging fathers (Lechowicz et al., 2019).

Counselling

There is extensive evidence supporting couples counselling as being efficacious in reducing relationship distress (Petch et al., 2014). This has been confirmed in a KPMG (2016) Family and Relationship Services Evaluation, which found that when people receive counselling, parenting or relationship education or adult mental health services, their level of distress is measurably lower than people who wanted services but did not receive them (KPMG, 2016).

Family and relationship services are estimated to have reduced the share of clients experiencing mental health distress from 82% to 43% by the final session, with several studies substantiating reduced relationship distress, and demonstrating clients' willingness to pay for counselling services (Centre for International Economics [CIE], 2023).

For instance, family counselling services aim to help clients:

- establish and maintain positive family relationships
- understand and better meet the care, welfare and development needs of children in their family context
- prevent relationship stress as appropriate
- manage transitions across the relationship life cycle
- increase resilience to relationship stress or breakdown
- identify and assist clients to resolve underlying and/or contributing issues (such as illness, inadequate housing or unemployment)

- work collaboratively with other community-based organisation and government services (AGD, 2022a).

The Evaluation of FRSA found that recipients of family and relationship services likely have positive willingness to pay (WTP) for these services, and the amount they are willing to pay would capture the outcomes they expect to attain from those services (CIE, 2023).

Children's Contact Services

The need for service provision that is safe and meets the needs of children and young people and that facilitates holistic post-separation support for families has also been identified in research literature specific to Children's Contact Services (CCSs). These post-separation supervision services are among the limited FRSP services that are directly accessed by children and young people so research in this context provides insight into service needs specific to them and the extent to which CCSs meet their needs.

A recent Australian evaluation of the Children's Contact Service Activity in FRSPshowed positive findings for CCS service delivery in the areas of physical and emotional safety, child focus and inclusion and service delivery to meet the post-separation needs of families (Carson et al., 2023). Qualitative data from parents and carers who use CCS services largely confirmed these positive findings.

The evaluation identified key benefits for children and young people accessing CCS services such as the opportunity to build a relationship with the visiting parent or carer and experience safe and enjoyable time with them. There were also mixed and less positive reviews from some professionals and parents and carers, including in relation to some children's experiences of these services. These included concerns raised by some participants about children not having sufficient voice in the process (Carson et al., 2023). The evaluation also noted that improving dissemination of information about CCS service provision and providing effective warm referrals to other services by CCS staff would support families' engagement with CCSs and their access other non-supervision services of benefit (Carson et al., 2023).

International research also provides insights directly from families, including young people with lived experience of using CCSs, about what they value when using CCSs. Consistent with the observations of adults in the AIFS evaluation, the young people in a Scottish study indicated that children valued friendly, approachable and diverse CCS staff that were trauma-informed and family violence-informed in their service delivery (Scottish Youth Parliament, 2021). The young people also described the need for relaxed, clean and friendly CCS environments, with clear and practical safety and security measures that enabled children to easily seek support should they require it. They also described the importance of activities, equipment and indoor and outdoor settings that suited the range of children and young people using them, and child inclusive and child friendly feedback and complaints processes (Scottish Youth Parliament, 2021).

Recent longitudinal research from the USA also provides insight into how children's post-separation adjustment correlated with their parents' psychological distress, the quality of the parent–child relationship, and conflict between the parents. Addressing these issues would increase children and young people's (and particularly boys') positive trajectories following engagement with services such as CCSs (Saint-Jacques et al., 2020).

Supporting the needs of children and young people

A critical element of the delivery of post-separation family services is the provision of child safe services that are child-centred in their approach by:

- supporting safe and effective options for children and young people to participate in decisions relevant to their care
- making arrangements that accommodate the needs of the individual child/young person.

Australian and international empirical research studies together with law reform and parliamentary inquiries have highlighted the need to listen to and support children and young people through their parents' separation and to enhance the way that their views and experiences inform the post-separation decision-making process (ALRC, 2019; Carson et al., 2018; Carson, Kaspiew et al., 2022; Carson et al., 2023; Joint Select Committee, 2021a and 2021b; Kaspiew et al., 2014; Parkinson & Cashmore, 2008).

Service provision that meets the requirements of child safe practice as articulated in the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2018) involves making post-separation parenting arrangements through the lens of the relevant child or young person, in a process that acknowledges their agency and capacity to participate in the decision-making process (Campo et al., 2012; Carson et al., 2018, 2023; Eekelaar, 1994, 2002, 2015, 2020; Fehlberg et al., 2018; Fernando, 2014; Fitzgerald & Graham, 2011; Kaspiew et al., 2014, 2022; Ross, 2013; Sheehan et al., 2005; Sheehan & Carson, 2006; Smart et al., 2001).

Supporting children and young people's participation in post-separation decision making

Australian and international research relating to post-separation experiences of children and young people in the context of family law system services, including in high-risk and complex family circumstances, emphasises the importance of enabling participatory approaches (Bell, 2016, 2017; Birnbaum & Bala, 2017; Carson et al., 2018, 2023; Fehlberg et al., 2022; Henry & Hamilton, 2012; Independent Panel, 2019; Kaspiew et al., 2014, 2017, 2022; MacDonald, 2017; Parkinson & Cashmore, 2008; Saini et al., 2016; Tisdall, 2016). Safe, genuine and effective options for children and young people to participate are identified as facilitating their protection through participation with the making of safer post-separation parenting arrangements from:

- a rights-based perspective, as they give effect to the participatory rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12)
- an evidentiary perspective by facilitating decision making that is informed by the views and experiences of the relevant children and young people in the which can be especially critical in cases characterised by risks such as family violence
- a child agency and self-efficacy perspective because they support the wellbeing of children and young people participating in the process (Carson et al., 2018).

In addition to supporting safe and appropriate parenting arrangements that accommodate the needs and best interests of the relevant children, decision making that is child inclusive also supports the development of more sustainable outcomes. Australian and international research identifies children and young people's satisfaction with their arrangements where they have had an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and where there is some flexibility

to adjust these arrangements as their needs change over time (e.g. Campo et al., 2012; Carson et al., 2018; Cashmore et al., 2010; Fortin et al., 2012; Kaspiew et al., 2014; Lodge & Alexander, 2010; Sheehan et al., 2005; Trinder, 2009).

Research investigating the compliance with and enforcement of family law parenting orders has identified that facilitating this engagement in the initial and any subsequent decision-making process supports the effective operation and durability of post-separation parenting arrangements (Carson, Kaspiew et al., 2022; Kaspiew et al., 2022). Specifically, an approach that involves the making of arrangements with input from the relevant children, and which keeps them informed of the decision-making process and its progress, that accounted for their articulated needs and concerns, and was then explained to them is more likely to encourage compliance (Carson, Kaspiew, et al., 2022; Kaspiew et al., 2022). Children and young people have, however, described their experiences of family law system services as challenging, confusing and arduous (e.g. Carson et al., 2018 for the Australian context; UK Ministry of Justice Limited, 2020 for an international example).

Of particular relevance to the delivery of FRSP activities, research in the Australian context has highlighted positive experiences of participatory approaches in the family counselling and child inclusive FDR/mediation services (Carson et al., 2018; Kaspiew et al., 2012). The FDR/mediation model for dispute resolution in cases involving family violence and safety concerns (described earlier in this chapter) incorporated a range of options for child inclusive practice (Kaspiew et al., 2012). These options included having child consultants provide advice and information without having met a child, informally meeting and observing a child, and formally interviewing a child and having those insights inform the decision-making process.

Four out of five FDR/mediation locations had a child consultant involved in the pilot for dispute resolution in cases involving family violence and safety concerns (Kaspiew et al., 2012). The evaluation of the FDR/mediation model suggested that for child inclusive FDR/mediation practice in the context of DFV and safety concerns, guidelines should consider the circumstances in which FDR/mediation should and should not be implemented. These guidelines should also be applied by experienced practitioners with a significant level of expertise working with families affected by past or current DFV and concerns for child safety.

Importantly, research in Australia and overseas has also identified the need for authoritative information to be given to children and young people as a key aspect of their participation, together with accessible post-separation support services (e.g. Carson et al., 2018; Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, 2022). International research examining programs directed at supporting children post-separation provide some insight into their effects. Child-oriented preventative post-separation/divorce interventions have been identified as having significant effects on children's adjustment post-separation and to their self-esteem (Herrero et al., 2023; Poli et al., 2017), reducing children's post-separation issues, including mental health issues (Wolchick et al., 2022) and emotional and behavioural problems (Klein Velderman et al., 2022; Mortimer et al., 2021; Pelleboer-Gunnink et al., 2015).

Hubs: integrating service delivery

The need for improved integration in the delivery of services has been increasingly recognised in the context of post-separation services (ALRC, 2018; FLC, 2016; Inside Policy, 2018) and DFV services where contact with people post-separation frequently occurs (Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). Reviews of post-separation services and DFV services have described the difficulties for service providers and services users to function across a siloed environment. Recommendations have also been made to improve service

integration, including hub models (ALRC, 2018; ALRC, 2019; Victorian Government, Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016).

The Australian Law Reform Inquiry into the family law system considered the need for service integration, challenges of service fragmentation and how best to support the diverse range of families' needs (ALRC, 2018; ALRC, 2019). In its final report, the ALRC observed that there had been 'little progress towards the creation of a nationally streamlined, coherent and integrated approach to meeting the needs of children and families across the family, law, child protection and family violence jurisdictions' (ALRC, 2019, p 37). Consistent with the AIFS and other research outlined earlier in this section, the ALRC 2018 discussion paper (the 'discussion paper') that helped to inform the review process articulated concerns drawn from submissions to the inquiry indicating the multiple, co-occurring and complex nature of family service needs. These included family violence issues, substance use, health and parenting and child support arrangements, all in various combinations (ALRC, 2018).

The elements described in the 2018 ALRC discussion paper also echo the earlier recommendations of a 2013 Canadian review of the Ontario family law system. The Canadian report found that family problems must be viewed holistically in a family law context to best understand which problems need to be resolved legally and which need other supports (Law Commission of Ontario, 2013). The Canadian report included a list of benchmarks that would support an effective 'hub' approach and notes that it should include a 'seamless process from early stages to final resolution' (Law Commission of Ontario, 2013, p 11).

A model of hubs to address service fragmentation and identifying barriers to hubs, formed part of the ALRC (2018) discussion paper recommendations. The ALRC proposed establishing a series of community families hubs where service delivery could be connected and include legal services (noting that the original model of FRCs excluded legal advice). The ALRC proposal described an augmented FRC model as a hub with a range of local services connected to it, such as health, legal, family violence and parent support. It noted that the original FRCs were not designed in this way (i.e. a 'one-stop shop') but instead as a point for referral to other services. The discussion paper identified multiple barriers that limited the value of multi-type service provision through the original FRC model. These included:

- funding changes leading to a focus on FDR/mediation at FRCs
- gaps in legal service connections
- challenges in supporting families with family violence
- a perceived inability from the relevant communities of providing First Nations and culturally diverse communities with appropriate cultural support (ALRC, 2018).

These barriers to multi-type service provision mean that families must identify their own service needs and often find services to support these needs themselves, regardless of whether they access an FRC (ALRC, 2018). The ALRC (2018) discussion paper proposed that hubs could ameliorate this problem by:

- identifying each family member's (including children) safety, support and advice needs
- assisting clients to develop plans to address these needs
- connecting clients with appropriate services
- coordinating families' engagement with services (ALRC, 2018).

The ALRC proposed hubs were envisaged as having on-site workers from a range of relevant services who could operate from within the hub and facilitate further service contact. This would represent the very broad needs of clients seen by service providers, such as those needing

gambling support, mental health and financial counselling (ALRC, 2018). Local community legal service involvement was also included. Furthermore, the development of the hubs should have input from local service providers, including those servicing First Nations and culturally diverse communities in the location, to enable culturally appropriate service provision.

Implementation of hub models in post-separation services would need to address federal and state government funding operations according to the ALRC (2018). A coordinated approach between federal and state governments would be required to mobilise the hubs most effectively because some services would be funded federally while some would be state funded (ALRC, 2018). As a solution, the discussion paper suggested a hub manager role be engaged to build strong relationships between the hub and various federal and state or community services (ALRC, 2018).

The Victorian Family Violence Safety Hubs provide an example of designing and implementing a hub service delivery model and the barriers that can occur in multi-agency administration, co-ordination and service access for clients. These hubs were part of the state government's response to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016). Family Violence Safety Hubs were established in a partnership between 3 agencies – the Department of Health and Human Services, Family Safety Victoria and local community service organisations (Victorian Auditor-General's Office [VAG], 2020). These hubs are now branded as The Orange Door to reflect the aim of having a single-entry point for engaging with multiple services.

The Victorian Auditor-General's (VAG, 2020) report indicated that service coordination was not yet fully effective 2 years later because of a rushed implementation schedule and challenges providing an appropriate workforce. The VAG (2020) report found that it was not possible to demonstrate that the hubs were delivering improved outcomes for families at the time of the review because there was insufficient data collection, and challenges with infrastructure, demand management and information sharing meant clients could receive different services depending on where they lived.

The barriers and challenges identified in the ALRC (2018, 2019) proposal and from the experience of the Victorian family violence hubs (VAG, 2020; Victorian Government, Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016) point to a need for a range of strategies to be employed when implementing any hub model in the context of family relationship services. Any movement towards a hub model should be well planned for the local community who need the service and access to these types of services, rather than rushed to fulfill a desired timeline. A hub plan must also include infrastructure considerations and address administration, monitoring, data and evaluation needs.

Moving towards hubs in the family relationship services sector has the advantage of building on existing FRC infrastructure rather than starting from scratch, as the Victorian model was required to do. The proposed hubs for families could incorporate the best elements of the FRCs, such as being community-based and providing a single-entry point for multiple services. This could be enhanced by providing a more active role in helping families to separate safely and providing services and advice in one place. The vision for family hubs described in the ALRC (2018) discussion paper was of a consistent, identifiable entry point for separating families where they could access joined up services for all their advice and support needs, including children and families where violence was an issue (ALRC, 2018).

Case management

Case management is a function of service delivery that would contribute to families experiencing a smoother pathway through separation. The ALRC (2018) discussion paper

identified case management as a means of improving coordination of services, particularly preventing families with complex needs missing out on services they need. The model proposed in the discussion paper indicated client support officers could fulfill this role, and could conduct risk assessments and identify the appropriate services to respond to families' needs (ALRC, 2018). Following up with clients throughout their service engagement, providing referrals as required along the way and post-service after they leave the hub were also case management functions. The final ALRC report from the review made the recommendation for FRCs to be expanded to provide case management to clients with complex needs engaged with the family law system (Recommendation 59, ALRC, 2019).

Benefits of case management in the context of relationship separation and financial decision making have been identified in recent research evaluating the trial of lawyer-assisted family law mediation in property matters (Carson, Qu et al., 2022). The benefits of case management approaches in this model of mediation aimed at settling property disputes under $500,000, were emphasised by professionals and participants involved in the trial (Carson, Qu et al., 2022).

Case management for clients participating in the LAC Trial enabled professionals to assist parties to navigate the process, and this helped with educating and informing parties, building knowledge and understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Case management also helped inform other non-legal staff and mediators, improving overall support and enabling parties to be in the best position to negotiate a property settlement (Carson, Qu et al., 2022). This finding was consistent with the previously discussed PPP500, which also demonstrated the value of case management by family court professionals (Carson, De Maio et al., 2022). In the court context for the PPP500, case management ensured parties were held to account in relation to their participation in this process, including their filing documents as required to support a timely and efficient process. This supported increased access for parties where there was an inequality in bargaining power and enabled fairer outcomes (Carson, De Maio et al., 2022).

A lack of access to case management has been identified as a barrier to efficient resolution in family law court contexts where problems with compliance with court orders has occurred. In a study examining compliance with and enforcement of family law parenting orders (Carson, Kaspiew et al., 2022; Kaspiew et al., 2022), professionals and parents and carers identified a need for more importance to be placed on case management from the outset of litigation. The forms of case management needed in that context included post-order support and simpler, more expeditious and less costly options to address non-compliance (see also ALRC, 2019; Joint Select Committee on Australia's Family Law System, 2021). Specifically, Carson, Kaspiew and colleagues (2022, p 20) concluded that:

> … case management should be offered to ensure that litigation proceeds in a way that is not adverse to child wellbeing, and where difficulties with the implementation of parenting orders are identified, there should be a dispute resolution conference involving a registrar, supported by an assessment from a child expert who is trained in the use of child-centred approaches. These conferences should be ordered where difficulties are identified and a party lodges a contravention application.

Participants made suggestions for post-order supervision – however, the available data do not allow conclusions on the preferred mechanisms. Any implementation of a monitoring mechanism should be evidence-based and DFV-informed and trauma-informed, and implemented by professionals with the requisite skills and experience in dealing with families

characterised by DFV and other complex risk and harm factors. It should also not be costly for families or open to misuse as an extension of a party's coercive and controlling behaviour (Carson, Kaspiew et al., 2022, p 20. See also Fitch & Easteal, 2017; Kaye et al., 2021).

Case management in FRCs involving matters where DFV or ongoing safety concerns were present during relationship separation has previously been trialled. The Coordinated Family Dispute Resolution trial (CFDR; Kaspiew et al., 2012) used an intensive form of case management during FDR/mediation where ongoing family violence was an issue. A FDR practitioner led the case management but with all professionals involved in the case sharing responsibility.

Case management included organising case management meetings, coordinating the multi-disciplinary team, risk assessment, assessing the readiness and capacity of the parties to engage in FDR/mediation, decisions about child participation (in consultation with a child practitioner), follow-up post-FDR/mediation at 1–3 and 9–10 months and referral of clients to support services outside of FDR/mediation. Professionals were provided training about case management as part of their wider involvement in the CFDR pilot program.

The evaluation of CFDR acknowledged advantages and challenges to case management in the context of complex family violence and safety concerns and multi-disciplinary practices (Kaspiew et al., 2012). Kaspiew and colleagues (2012) found professionals regarded case management positively while acknowledging the intensity of the practice involved. Case management meetings occurred frequently (often weekly), and lawyers did not to participate in that aspect due to confidentiality and ethical obligations. Effective communication and information sharing across all professionals in a case was a challenge given the number of professionals in each matter, differing professional roles and obligations, and complexity of clients. Overall, most professionals agreed that case management, particularly case management meetings, contributed to safer and more workable outcomes for parents and children and young people where family violence concerns were present.

Communities of practice for family relationship services professionals

Communities of practice aim to enhance knowledge sharing, skills, quality of work practices and service experiences of professionals and clients, relative to the context in which the group is operating (Pyrko et al., 2017; Teague & Anfara, 2012). They can operate in face-to-face, virtual formats or combinations of both in local communities and across geographic areas connected with a common purpose. This also enables communities of practice to reduce professional isolation within specialist or multi-disciplinary groups. Communities of practice have a long history applied across a wide range of specialised and multi-disciplinary professional areas including, for example, university education (McDonald et al., 2012), general practice medicine (Barnett et al., 2012) and social work (Adedoyin, 2016).

Lessons from other professional areas using communities of practice point to the importance of groups having:

- shared values and vision, including common goals
- an emphasis on collaboration, reflection and sharing knowledge based on lived experience (i.e. 'thinking together', Pyrko et al., 2017, p 394)
- supportive leadership and collegial relationships between members
- resources to respond to practice challenges, such as risks and crisis events (McCann et al., 2023)

- strategies and sufficient resources to address barriers to change and innovation, including cultural resistance, workloads and financial sustainability (Teague & Anfara, 2012).

A specialised form of communities of practice currently operates in the family law services area via the Family Law Pathways Network (FLPN, see Family Law Pathways Network | Helping Families Who Are Separating) (Collins & Nugent, 2021). The FLPN is comprised of 33 local networks across Australia funded by the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department on an annual basis since 2003. The 2 main aims of FLPNs are to:

- improve collaboration and coordination between organisations operating in the broader family law system via professional development events, provision of resources and networking opportunities
- facilitate referral mechanisms amongst services to help separating and separated families obtain the appropriate assistance as they navigate the family law system.

A recent evidence-based research project found strong positive feedback about the value of FLPNs to local professional family law service communities but also identified barriers in their operation (Collins & Nugent, 2021). Members of FLPNs reported positive experiences with relevance and value to their work, information sharing, improving collaborative practice and multidisciplinary service delivery, and professional development opportunities. However, the process of seeking annual funding detracts from implementing the aims of FLPNs and is a significant barrier to the continuity of FLPNs (Collins & Nugent, 2021). This barrier is consistent with the need for communities of practice to have financial sustainability to function effectively.

Technology

This section examines research relating to online modalities and other technologies for the delivery of various family law system services. These studies provide insight into the utility and challenges of online modalities as an ongoing means of service delivery.

Overcoming distance

A frequent theme in the Australian literature considering technology and remote service delivery is the focus on overcoming isolation and geographic barriers to service delivery (Productivity Commission, 2020; Wendt et. al., 2017). Australia's unique geographic service delivery challenges mean technology has been used in other service sectors, such as mental health and family violence, as a technological solution to distance.

A review of mental health services by the Productivity Commission (2020) found that geography and isolation may be ameliorated to some extent by online service delivery from other locations. The report outlined some of the benefits of providing mental health services via an online platform for clients living with access challenges. Sparse internet coverage can be a limiting factor but telephone delivery is also an alternative in areas with less internet coverage, and the COVID period demonstrated the applicability of this (Heard et al., 2022).

Online family dispute resolution for FDR/mediation

Online family dispute resolution (OFDR) involves the inclusion of technology to support the resolution of conflicts between parties, with Australia considered advanced in this field (Wilson-Evered & Zeleznikow, 2021), possibly driven by geography. The focus of this section is online dispute resolution in the context of FDR and mediation.

COVID-19 offered the opportunity to test out remote forms of family dispute resolution and mediation. This had to be implemented quickly in response to lockdowns, as outlined in a recent evaluation of online modes of FDR/mediation (Heard et al., 2022). This evaluation found similar benefits of remote access service delivery as described by the Productivity Commission – in this case, in an FDR/mediation context. These included improved convenience to clients, improved safety or feelings of safety for some participants and reduced anxiety around having to deal with the other party. Increased self-agency was also observed (Heard et al., 2022).

A recent study by the Department of Justice Canada (2022) reviewed Canadian and international research and evaluations of the use of technology in the family courts/family justice systems. This study explored how technology had been used (including during the COVID-19 pandemic) to increase access or enhance experience of the system (Department of Justice Canada, 2022). The study comprised an examination of 14 studies undertaken between 2010 and 2020 and a media scan. The Canadian study noted research indicating improved access to online mediation had found that it was administratively efficient and convenient, saved time, delays and money, and supported safety as parties were physically separate while still able to resolve disputes at the earliest opportunity for minimal cost (Department of Justice Canada, 2022, citing Tait 2013; Cashman & Ginnivan, 2019).

Wilson-Evered and Zeleznikow (2021) note that Artificial Intelligence (AI) developments have opened up opportunities to enhance OFDR. This includes, for example, by machine learning that encourages consistency and transparency in decision making as well as recording sufficient detail to support negotiations. Improved knowledge about likely outcomes generated by AI may enhance the appeal of using earlier dispute resolution and avoiding court determinations (Wilson-Evered & Zelznikow, 2021).

The Heard and colleagues (2022) evaluation, however, found there were challenges in online delivery mechanisms for FDR/mediation such as:

- finding private spaces in which to speak freely (especially for parents)
- lack of visual signals, particularly via telephone
- difficulty for practitioners in monitoring client wellbeing during sessions
- reduced client commitment to the session – for example, doing other things at the same time
- lack of ability to use visual aids such as whiteboards – often used for displaying information relevant to the negotiation
- anxiety around technology issues and the possibility of equipment malfunction (Heard et al., 2022).

In considering the appropriateness of specific cases for FDR/mediation the need for screening on a case-by-case basis is indicated (Wilson-Evered & Zeleznikow, 2021, citing Tait, 2013). This includes assessing issues such as DFV and power imbalances; comfort and proficiency with technology; whether technology was used to enable violence previously and the geographical proximity of the parties. It also notes the importance of assessing on an ongoing basis not just in initial screening (Wilson-Evered & Zeleznikow, 2021, citing Jani, 2012).

Advantages of online delivery of family services

Tomlinson and colleagues' (2023) recent study investigated barriers and facilitators more broadly in relation to online family service delivery in qualitative interviews with parents (n = 61) who were engaged in parenting proceedings and in online parenting programs (specifically the Two Families Now and Children in Between programs).

The Tomlinson and colleagues (2023) study shows that many parents viewed online parenting programs positively. Reasons included convenience, especially for parties with the greatest need, including those with economic instability, mental health issues and relationship instability (Tomlinson et al., 2023). Most participants who completed an online program also considered the program improved their communication, co-parenting skills and parenting ability or that it helped their child (66%). Most participants (60%) also indicated that they preferred the online modality compared to in-person programs, including because of the increased privacy. The Tomlinson and colleagues study (2023) also identified the preference for some participants to interact with others undertaking the program.

The Canadian Department of Justice (2022) study noted similar advantages in their review of online modalities:

- They were quick and easy to access, at reduced cost, at any time, with ease of access also facilitated by their compatibility with mobile phones (citing MacLennan, 2016).
- Service users were empowered by quick and easy access to online tools that helped to identify and address their legal issues and to be referred to relevant in-person services (citing Malatest, 2019).
- Online parenting programs were identified as less expensive to administer than in-person programs and provided greater flexibility, reduced travel and costs, and greater accessibility for people living in rural or remote areas (citing Tait, 2016).

The review refers to findings from the Canadian Department of Justice's 2021 National Justice Survey, in which more than three-quarters of participants (87%) reported that they were moderately or highly comfortable with looking for information and engaging with that material online. Most participants (80%) reported that they completed online forms and 71% used video-conferencing in place of in-person engagement (Department of Justice Canada, 2022).

Challenges and barriers with online service modes

The Canadian Department of Justice (2022) review also identified some barriers and limitations including:

- digital literacy and accessibility issues, particularly for disadvantaged individuals and communities (citing Toohey et al., 2019) with unreliable or limited internet services, including in rural and remote communities (Cashman & Ginnivan, 2019)
- the disproportionate effect of barriers for those with the highest need for better access to services, including First Nations people, CALD people, people with disability, older people, lower SES communities and rural and remote communities
- accessibility issues relating to navigability of online platform, font size and vocabulary (citing MacLennan, 2016)
- an absence of discretion in AI generated case outcomes, which are unable to nuance outcomes, including to specific circumstances of systemic biases, or to identify and accommodate circumstances of fear, coercion and control (citing Bell, 2019)
- the potential for privacy breaches and integrity of online platforms.

International approaches in family services

By international standards, Australia's family law system is considered advanced due to the extent of publicly funded support services (e.g. Schepard & Emery, 2013). Some international jurisdictions have introduced reforms intended to improve access to family justice through the expansion of parent education services and mediation to support the diversion of families away

from court (e.g. Supporting Families Experiencing Separation and Divorce Initiative, Canada; Parenting Through Separation Service, New Zealand; Agency of Family Law, Denmark).

Notably, support services for separating/separated families in many western jurisdictions including the UK, Canada, the USA and NZ nevertheless continue to be positioned in the context of court proceedings, with parenting education and mediation support often occurring in a court context. Some examples are described below.

United Kingdom

In the UK, alternatives to court for resolving family law disputes came into significant focus following cuts to legal aid in 2011 that removed funding for legal advice and assistance from lawyers for most cases but retained funding for mediation (Barlow, 2017).

Key findings from recent research demonstrated that all 3 forms of dispute resolution often failed to produce an outcome due to asymmetry in the parties' emotional and practical readiness to resolve the dispute (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, 2022). Additionally, the study highlighted a need to improve assessment processes so that matters not suitable for dispute resolution, for reasons such as coercive control being present, could be screened out.

In examining the way that parents, children and young people experience separation and the use of support services, based on interviews with 42 participants (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, 2022), this study found that access to resources – both material and social and emotional – influence the extent to which separation becomes a negative trajectory. Families with less access to both kinds of resources were less able to protect their children from stress and difficulty than families with access to such resources. Significant recommendations from the research include:

- Parents and children and young people seek support that is accessible, informative, realistic and emotionally aware – these criteria are critical to the development of new systems of support.
- Parents, children and young people need a 'safety net' of support with 'authoritative information, legal advice and emotional support, including housing support', which is especially important in the context of children's arrangements (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, 2022, p v).

Recent reports on the family law system in the UK have made recommendations aimed at improving the experiences of separating families in the family justice system (JUSTICE, 2022). The report acknowledges that the system needs to transform to be aimed at the needs of families. The recommendations outlined in this report align with efforts to resolve disputes prior to entering the court system and recommendations targeted at this end of the system include publicly funded early legal advice, coordination of services for separating families, funding for non-court dispute resolution and a presumption of child inclusion in and out of court and in all non-court processes (JUSTICE, 2022).

Canada

In 2009, Canada introduced an extensive package of reforms intended to improve access to the family justice system and compliance with financial support and parental access obligations. Many aspects of the Supporting Families Experiencing Separation and Divorce Initiative (SFI) were concerned with increasing access to justice and addressing the implications for families of Canada's fragmented jurisdictional system, including helping to mitigate the negative effects of

separation and divorce (Department of Justice Canada, Office of Strategic Planning and Performance Management, 2015).

An evaluation for the SFI (Department of Justice Canada, Office of Strategic Planning and Performance Management, 2015) made some key suggestions relevant to best practice:

- the use of parent education programs to support shifts in thinking about parental responsibilities and a focus on children as part of a strategy to 'front load' family justice system support to increase out of court agreement
- an increase in the availability of materials through technology and in languages other than English
- increased availability of mediation to support agreement and the development of jurisdiction specific service clusters that support agreement making.

New Zealand

In 2014, the New Zealsnd government introduced reforms intended to shift families into mediation-based pathways by limiting access to court and legal representation in parenting matters. These reforms introduced an independent mediation service, the Family Dispute Resolution (FDR/mediation) service. Following an independent review of the NZ family justice system in 2019 (the Te Korowai Ture a-Whanau report, Independent Panel, 2019), the government is implementing a series of reforms that include reinstating the right to legal representation in parenting matters (see further below).

The review also recommended a raft of changes to the way both public and private law children's matters are handled. In 2023, reforms responding to these recommendations came into force as embodied in the *Family Court (Supporting Children in Court Legislation) Act 2021* (NZ). In addition to reinstating the right to legal representation, the focus of these reforms is on strengthening child participation in matters relating to their care, including in court proceedings and, importantly, in mediation. An amendment to the *Family Dispute Resolution Act 2013* (NZ) provides that children who are the 'subject of the dispute are given any reasonable opportunities to participate in the decisions affecting them that the FDR/mediation provider considers appropriate' (s 11(2)(b)(ba)).

Denmark: Agency of Family Law

The Danish approach places an emphasis on conflict management and the provision of welfare expertise through counselling and mediation. A screening and assessment process is in place to assess applications and to allocate cases to one of three tracks:

- Green: simple cases where the parties have resolved their arrangements by consent and the Agency registers their agreement
- Yellow: less simple cases where the parties are supported with a 'conflict-resolving process provided by the Agency'
- Red: complex cases that are unable to be resolved by consent and a determination from the court is required (Jeppesen de Boer & Kronborg, 2023).

It is notable that legal representation is not permitted in the administrative track unless it is privately funded by the parties but free legal advice provided by legal aid is available to all parties without means testing. More extensive legal advice and representation through legal aid is means tested (Jeppesen de Boer & Kronborg, 2023).

Two evaluations of the Agency based on users' experiences have been undertaken since its inception. The strongest criticism relates to lengthy waiting periods, with the impact on children and family wellbeing highlighted in this context (Jeppesen de Boer & Kronborg, 2023).

Summary

This chapter has presented a review of international and Australian literature relevant to post-separation services, including literature drawn from over 400 peer-reviewed articles, research reports, evaluations and inquiries. Although there is a rich pool of literature, the evidence base for ongoing knowledge, evaluation and review of the service system would benefit from contemporary large-scale and longitudinal data on service user experiences. The need for this evidence base includes family law services outside the scope of this FRSP Review but which nevertheless impact the long-term wellbeing of separated families (e.g. child support).

The literature provides a complex picture in which separated families may experience varying degrees of contact with post-separation support services, and a spectrum of positive, neutral and negative outcomes in the short and long term. Multiple and complex issues for families, particularly family violence, child safety concerns, mental ill-health and substance dependence, are shown to be increasingly present with greater levels of post-separation service use. As a result, literature has called for post-separation services to be trauma-informed and responsive to family violence and safety needs.

Literature about access to services for rural, regional and remote families; First Nations Families; CALD families; families with disabilities and LGBTIQA+ families indicates further areas of improvement are required for accessibility and delivery of family relationship services to meet their needs safely and appropriately.

Evaluations and research on post-separation parenting, relationships and children's programs have mostly positive views of service provision, with some areas of improvement needed, including programs specifically aimed to support experiences of fathers and children. Supporting children and young people with options to participate, be heard and appropriately informed has also been encouraged in research and evaluation findings over time.

Integrating services into hubs, building case management approaches and implementing communities of practice are examples of promising opportunities. Technology continues to evolve with opportunities to improve cost-efficient and timely service delivery but is subject to challenges, including inequalities in access.
In relation to relevant international jurisdictions, access to publicly funded post-separation family support services, including legal advice are highlighted, and an emphasis on court-based systems remains a persistent challenge.

4. Family law system service mapping

A desktop review was conducted to assess the coverage of available services provided nationally to separating and separated families, including both FRSP activities and non-FRSP services. Drawing on DEX data to identify FRSP service providers and their corresponding activities, the service mapping involved the collation of data regarding a broad range of non-FRSP services in each jurisdiction and having regard to the complexity of service needs of families (see Appendix B).

Non-FRSP services were mapped following a desktop review implemented by internet search engines and informed by stakeholder consultation and expertise of relevant team members. The list of non-FRSP services below was developed through the application of relevant search terms to enter for each unique type of service along with each state and territory. For example, ‘community legal centres, Tasmania’. The websites of identified services and programs were then screened, and relevant information was extracted such as the name of program and service provider, the geographical location where program is delivered and outreach locations if applicable.

The Australian Lawyers Directory was used to search for accredited family law specialists. The AGD Family Dispute Resolution register was used to identify accredited FDR practitioners. The research team was also provided a list from the AGD with current FRSP grant recipients, which was used to identify non-FRSP programs within each grant recipient's organisation where they were relevant to separating and separated families.

Data collected from the service mapping was collated in Excel and organised by state and territory. The data could then be cleaned and formatted to load into Power BI, including the allocation of SA2 codes to service locations to enable Power BI to read the relevant geographical data. Each service, their program and location, was built into Power BI and presented through visualisations to illustrate the national coverage of both FRSP activities as identified in DEX and non-FRSP services by jurisdiction (state and territory location). It is noted that the FRSP funded Family Relationships Advice Line (FRAL) is a national telephone service available in each state and territory. The non-FRSP funded amica legal advice and dispute resolution program is also available nationally. FRAL, the Family Law Pathway Network (FLPN) and amica were not built into the Power BI dashboard though, as mapping national coverage is not a function within the current Power BI report.

Visualisations are presented in this chapter; however, the Power BI dashboard allows for an interactive assessment of the current family law system service infrastructure. This interactive dashboard will support consideration of current service availability and accessibility to clients in need.

The analysis of the data along with the feedback from stakeholders indicated that services sought access to location information for both FRSP and non-FRSP services to help them manage the high demand from clients and make suitable referrals. Allied services that provide supports to separating and separated families captured in the service map included DFV violence services, substance dependence and gambling support services and mental health services. However, disability support services, homelessness services and services for older people that also provide support to separating and separated families were outside the scope of this service mapping exercise.

Key messages

Number and location of organisations and outlets delivering FRSP activities

The DEX data show that there were 72 organisations delivering a range of FRSP activities in 2022/23. New South Wales has the highest number of outlets (140 in 2022/23, accounting for one-third of outlets), followed by Victoria and Queensland, with these 2 states having similar numbers of outlets across the reported data period (86 and 79, respectively, in 2022/23). Smaller numbers were in South Australia (56 in 2022/23), Western Australia (30 in 2022/23), and the Australian Capital Territory (3 in 2022/23), with 12 and 10 outlets in Tasmania and the Northern Territory in 2022/23, respectively. Approximately one-half of outlets are in major cities, with the number of outlets remaining stable (200 in 2022/23).

- There were 122 outlets in 'Inner Australia' (2022/23), with the number fluctuating but trending down.[4]
- There were 66 outlets in 2022/23 spread in 'Outer Australia', with the number trending down but rising in 2022/23.
- In 2022/23, there were 15 outlets in remote areas and 4 in very remote areas, with the numbers rising slightly in remote areas but declining slightly in very remote areas.[5]
- The number of outlets varies greatly with activities:
  - Family Law Counselling has the largest number of outlets across each of the reported financial years, with 204 outlets in 2022/23 providing this activity.
  - Family Relationship Centres had 140 outlets in 2022/23.
  - There are also relatively large numbers of outlets providing Children's Contact Services and Parenting Orders Program.
  - The Family Relationship Advice Line is provided by 3 outlets, which is not surprising given that this activity is provided via telephone.

Detailed data relating to organisations and outlets delivering FRSP activities are presented in this chapter and at Appendix B1.

The DEX data indicate that it is common for an outlet to provide services under different activities. In 2022/23, 54% of outlets provided 1, 22% provided 2, and 24% had 3 or more activities in 2022/23. The patterns in the number of activities that outlets provided were similar across the years.

Number and location of organisations delivering non-FRSP services

The desktop review identified non-FRSP family law system services supporting separating and separated families including family law court registries, legal aid commissions and women's legal services in each state and territory, together with community legal centres servicing locations across each state and territory. Aboriginal community controlled legal and non-legal

[4] In this report, Australian regions refer to the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure that defines 5 classes of remoteness (Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote, and Very Remote) based on the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA), which measures the physical distance of a location from the nearest urban centre and service access level.

[5] The 5 classes of remoteness (Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote, and Very Remote) are based on the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA), which measures the physical distance of a location from the nearest urban centre and service access level.

services were included in the non-FRSP service mapping, as were current FRSP service providers providing other services to separating and separated families. Services funded under DSS programs to provide family and relationship services and specialised family violence services, together with state and territory based DFV services were in scope, as were post separation support programs, including parenting support programs, men's behaviour change programs and services for children. Private practitioners, including accredited family law specialists, accredited mediators and FDR practitioners, were included together with allied services providing support to families for the identified risk issues characterising separating and separated families such as mental health services, including alcohol and other drugs services, and counselling services.

The mapped non-FRSP services identify broad coverage in Victoria, and also in New South Wales and Queensland, with good coverage in the remaining states and territories. The non-FRSP data have been built into the Power BI dashboard as an additional feature to support an assessment of the extent of coverage between non-FRSP and FRSP services for separating and separated families. Results from the Power BI dashboard showing mapped FRSP and non-FRSP service locations in each jurisdiction are presented below.

Service mapping: summary by jurisdiction

This section presents an overview of FRSP activities and non-FRSP services by jurisdiction to date. The classification of regions aligns with ABS census data classifications.

FRSP activities

Detailed data relating to the number and location of FRSP activities are presented in Table 4.1 below. Data relating to the classification of regions corresponding to FRSP activities in each state and territory are provided in Appendix B1.

The data in Table 4.1 show that the more populous Eastern states have nearly three-quarters of the FRSP outlets, with just over one-third situated in New South Wales, close to 21% in Victoria and 19% in Queensland. Fewer than 1 in 10 FRSP outlets are in Western Australia and 14% are situated in South Australia. Only 3 outlets were in the ACT in 2022/23. There were 12 and 10 outlets in Tasmania and the NT in 2022/23, respectively. It should be noted that this summary may not align with the data on the FRSP outlets receiving direct Commonwealth grants because activities may be provided by a service provider organisation across multiple locations additional to the outlet funded, including with the support of funding arrangements through their lead organisation.

Table 4.1: Number of FRSP outlets by state/territory, 2022/23 [a]

State/Territory	Number	Percentage
NSW	140	33.7
Vic	86	20.7
Qld	79	19.0
SA	56	13.5
WA	30	7.2
Tas	12	2.9
NT	10	2.4
ACT	3	0.7
Total	416	100.0

Notes: [a] The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations, and may not align with the outlet numbers receiving direct Commonwealth grants. First Nations FDR outlets are not in DEX and hence not included. A few outlets that may receive funding from more than one organisation were entered as such (i.e. counted more than once).
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Table 4.2 shows that in 2022/23, more than one-quarter of outlets provided Family Law Counselling, with nearly 20% of outlets comprising an FRC. Just over 1 in 10 outlets provided FDR or Regional FDR, with Table 4.3 presenting these data by state and territory. It should be noted that these outlets may offer FRSP activities with Commonwealth funding arrangements, including outlets using direct Commonwealth grants and outlets offering these activities with funding arrangements through their lead service provider organisations as FRSP service providers.

Table 4.2: Number of FRSP outlets by activity, 2022/23 [a]

	Number	Percentage
Family Relationship Centres	140	18.5
Family Relationship Advice Line	3	0.4
Family Dispute Resolution	81	10.7
Family Law Counselling	204	26.9
Children's Contact Services	101	13.3
Parenting Orders Program	111	14.6
Supporting Children after Separation Program	46	6.1
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	72	9.5
Total (activity-outlets) [b]	758	100.0

Notes: [a] Some outlets provide more than one activity. [b] This refers to the sum of outlets by activities, which exceeds the total number of outlets in Table 4.1. The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations and may not align with the outlets receiving Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Table 4.3: Location of FRSP activity by type and jurisdiction, 2022/23

Service type	ACT	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA	Total
FRC	1	55	6	24	20	3	19	8	136
FDR / First Nations FDR / Regional FDR	2	57	3	20	18	7	33	10	150
Family Law Counselling	2	81	2	38	19	9	31	20	202
CCS	1	30	2	19	14	3	20	10	104
POP	1	38	3	24	12	4	17	10	109
SCASP	1	8	1	15	6	1	9	4	45

Notes: The figures may differ slightly for the DEX program summary where a small number of outlets that received funding from multiple lead organisations were entered as such and so counted more than once. The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations and may not align with the outlets receiving Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Table 4.4 further outlines the distribution of outlets by remoteness area. About one-half of outlets are in major cities, with the number of outlets remaining stable (209 in 2022/23). There were 122 outlets in the inner regions (2022/23), with the number fluctuating but trending down. There were 66 outlets in 2022/23 spread across outer regions, with the number trending down but rising in 2022/23. In 2022/23, there were 15 outlets in remote areas and 4 in very remote areas, with the numbers rising slightly in remote areas but declining slightly in very remote areas.

Table 4.4: Number of FRSP outlets by remoteness areas, 2022/23

	Number	Percentage
Major cities	209	50.2
Inner regions	122	29.3
Outer regions	66	15.9
Remote areas	15	3.6
Very remote areas	4	1.0
Total	416	100.0

Note: The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations and may not align with the outlets receiving Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Table 4.5 shows that 54% of outlets provided 1, 22% provided 2 and 24% had 3 or more activities in 2022/23.

Table 4.5: Number of activities that outlets provided, 2022/23

2022/23	Percentage
One	54.3
Two	22.1
Three or more	23.6
Total	100.0
Number of outlets[a]	*416*

Notes: [a] Outlets that operated under more than one organisation were counted as such in DEX but were only counted once in this table. Thus, the numbers of outlets differ slightly from those in Table 4.1 because of the treatment of these outlets. The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations and may not align with the outlets receiving Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Non-FRSP services

Available data relating to the number and location of non-FRSP services are presented in Appendix B2 and cover the following range of services:

- legal aid commissions
- community legal centres including women's legal services
- private legal services comprising accredited family law specialists
- accredited family dispute resolution practitioners and mediation services
- Family Law Courts (registries of the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia – FCFCoA and the Family Court of Western Australia – FCoWA)
- current FRSP grant recipients where they deliver non-FRSP programs/services
- amica – online legal advice and dispute resolution tool
- domestic and family violence (DFV) services
- Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (providing Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making, men's group and women's group support services)
- parenting support programs
- men's behaviour change programs (MBCP)
- children's specialised services for separating families
- post-separation support programs
- family and relationship services
- youth services
- alcohol and other drugs services
- gambling services
- counselling services (child, youth, adult, family and financial)
- mental health services
- LBGTQI+ services
- migrant, refugee and CALD services.

Data relating to the classification of regions corresponding to non-FRSP services in each state and territory are presented in the Power BI model and Table 4.6 presents a summary of the locations of non-FRSP services.

Table 4.6: Non-FRSP service providers and services by jurisdiction

State/Territory	Number of non-FRSP organisations	Number of non-FRSP activities
ACT	36	77
NSW	87	652
NT	35	122
Qld	98	575
SA	35	308
Tas	35	308
Vic	130	936
WA	50	354

To input the service mapping into Power BI, a coding frame was created to categorise identified locations of current Children Contact Services, the core 65 Family Relationship Centres, remaining FRSP activity locations (other FRCs, POP, FLC, FDR, RFDR, FN-FDR, and SCASP[6]), non-FRSP (NFRSP) services that are equivalent to FRSP activities and Other non-FRSP services relevant to separating and separated families. The coding frame used for non-FRSP activities is further explained in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7: Non-FRSP service mapping coding framework for Power BI

NFRSP (FRSP equivalent services)	Other
Counselling (child family and individual)	DFV services
Family law related services	Mental health services
Family support services (aiding in family breakdown)	Substance and addiction support services
Mediation (family, property and child inclusive)	Gender related services (i.e. men's and women's groups)
Court support services	LBGTQIA+ services
FDR (including Court based FDR)	Support services for CALD families and individuals
Legal support services	Disability services
LGBQTIA+ family law	Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCP)
Separation support services	Child and youth support services
Parenting programs	Financial counselling
First Nations family support services	
First Nations legal support services	

The screenshots below show the application of the above coding frame (in the top right-hand corner of each image) with their corresponding colour. To present outputs from the Power BI dashboard, this chapter will show 2 visualisations of each state/territory with locations mapped for CCSs, the core 65 FRC, other FRSP activities mentioned above, NFRSP services and Other non-FRSP services. Tables below these visualisations draw on scenarios posed by the Lead Review, which included the top 10 locations for each jurisdiction based on scores derived from the following indicators:

- SEIFA score (Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage)
- the proportion of separated families with dependants as a percentage of the population

[6] FRAL and FLPN were not input into the Power BI dashboard.

- unmet need (please refer to Box 5.2: Composite score for likely unmet needs for a detailed definition of this indicator).

The top 10 locations for each jurisdiction were further investigated in this service mapping element by identifying what non-FRSP services were available in these areas, as shown in the tables below. We have used these images and data to show examples of the functionality of the Power BI dashboard. However, the dashboard has the capacity to support more detailed investigations to inform decision making related to future service delivery. For example, geographical areas can be compared based on different indicators, projection data can be added to geographical areas such as growth in population and projected FRSP clients, and First Nations and CALD census data can be viewed against existing FRSP outlets and non-FRSP services.

Australian Capital Territory (ACT)

FRSP activities

- There are 8 FRSP activities available in the ACT and these activities are provided by 3 organisations.
- All ACT FRSP activities are provided in a 'Major City'.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B1.

Non-FRSP services

There are 77 non-FRSP services offered in the ACT provided by 36 organisations and 51 accredited family law specialists in the ACT.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B2 and below is an image from the Power BI dashboard highlighting mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services.

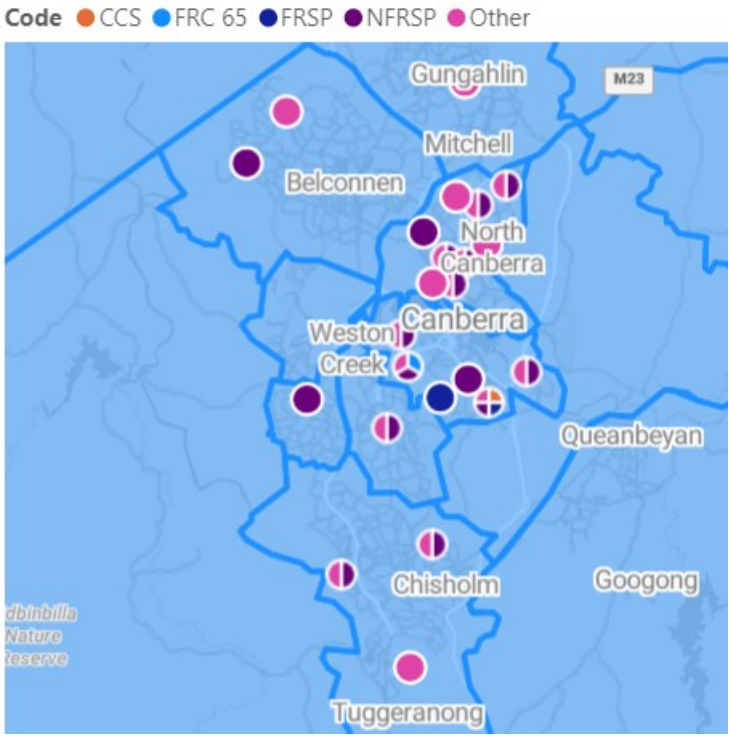


Table 4.8: Power BI mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)

Territory	SA3 Name	Remote Area	State Composite Scores rank (1 = highest need)	FRC	CCS	FRSP	NFRSP	Other
ACT	Canberra East	Major Cities	1					
ACT	Belconnen	Major Cities	2				•	•
ACT	Tuggeranong	Major Cities	3				•	•
ACT	Weston Creek	Major Cities	4				•	
ACT	Woden Valley	Major Cities	5				•	•
ACT	Gungahlin	Major Cities	6					•
ACT	Molonglo	Major Cities	7					
ACT	Uriarra - Namadgi	Inner	8					
ACT	North Canberra	Major Cities	9					
ACT	South Canberra	Major Cities	10	•	•	•	•	•

In addition to the analyses presented in Table 4.8, the Power BI dashboard enables the user to drill down to a selected SA3[7] location and assess the number and range of non-FRSP services available. For example, when selecting Belconnen (which does not currently have an FRC), the following non-FRSP equivalent services were identified in this area (Table 4.9):

Table 4.9: Potential unmet need identified locations with non-FRSP services

SA3 Name	Lead Organisation	Activity
Belconnen	MENSLINK	Counselling
Tuggeranong	Legal Aid ACT	Family Law
	Yeddung Mura Aboriginal Corporation	Court support services
		Family support services

New South Wales (NSW)

FRSP activities

- There are 269 FRSP activities available in NSW and these activities are provided by 24 organisations.
- 45% of FRSP activities in NSW are provided in a 'Major City'.
- 38% of FRSP activities in NSW are provided in 'Inner Regional' areas.
- 16% of FRSP activities in NSW are provided in 'Outer Regional' areas.
- None of the FRSP activities in NSW are in 'Remote' or 'Very Remote' Australia.
- There are no Supporting Children after Separation Programs available in regional areas.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B1.

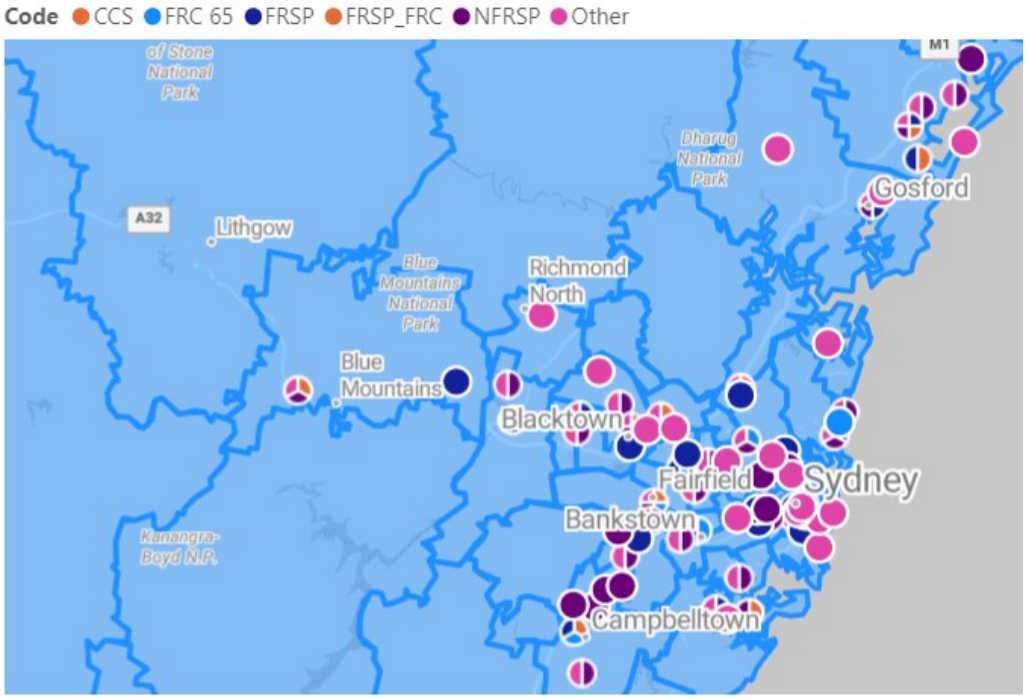
[7] Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Statistical Areas (SAs) are defined by geographical areas within each state and territory boundary lines across Australia: SA4s are the largest sub-state geographical area and cover broad regions (e.g. Inner/Outer regions capital cities). SA3s cover several defined areas within each SA4 and generally have populations of 30,000–130,000 residents. Some SA3s align loosely in size and population with Local Government Areas (LGAs).

Non-FRSP services

There are 652 non-FRSP programs offered in NSW provided by 87 organisations and 1,353 accredited family law specialists in New South Wales.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B2 and below are images from the Power BI dashboard highlighting mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Greater Sydney



Rest of New South Wales

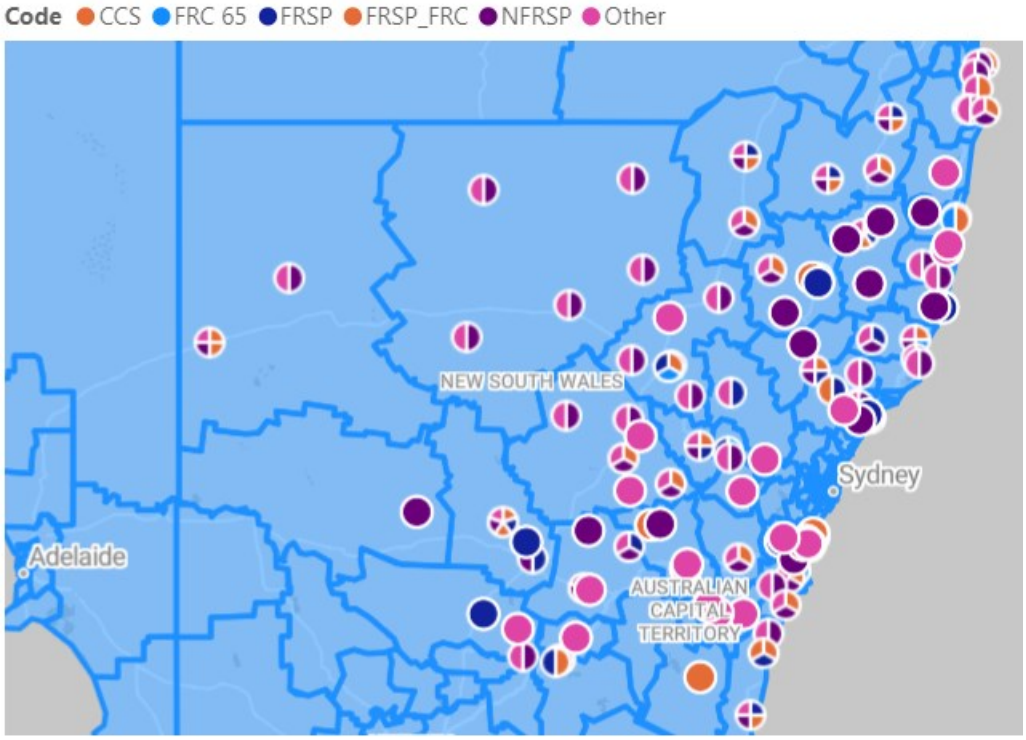


Table 4.10: Power BI mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services in New South Wales (NSW)

State	SA3 Name	Remote Area	State Composite Scores rank (1 = highest need)	FRC	CCS	FRSP	FRSP FRC	NFRSP	Other
NSW	Lower Hunter	Multiple	1			•	•	•	•
NSW	Mount Druitt	Major Cities	2			•		•	•
NSW	Merrylands - Guildford	Major Cities	3						
NSW	St Marys	Major Cities	4						
NSW	Campbelltown (NSW)	Major Cities	5	•	•	•		•	•
NSW	Maitland	Major Cities	6			•	•	•	•
NSW	Bringelly - Green Valley	Major Cities	7					•	
NSW	Canterbury	Major Cities	8						
NSW	Wyong	Major Cities	9				•	•	•
NSW	Liverpool	Major Cities	10			•		•	•

In addition to the analyses presented in Table 4.10, the Power BI dashboard enables the user to drill down to a selected SA3 location and assess the number and range of non-FRSP services available. For example, selecting Lower Hunter and Mount Druitt (which do not currently have FRCs), the following non-FRSP equivalent services were identified in these areas (Table 4.11):[8]

Table 4.11: Potential unmet need identified locations with non-FRSP services

SA3 Name	Lead Organisation	Activity
Lower Hunter	CatholicCare Social Services Hunter-Manning	Family Support Services
	Wesley Mission	Family Support Services
	Yoga on the Inside	Family Support Services
Mount Druitt	CatholicCare Western Sydney	Counselling
	WASH House	Counselling
	Women's Legal Service NSW	First Nations Women's Legal Program

Northern Territory (NT)

FRSP activities

- There are 17 FRSP activities available in the NT and these activities are provided by 3 organisations.
- There is an equal spread of FRSP activities provided in 'Outer Regional' and 'Remote Australia' locations (47% respectively).
- The remaining 6% of FRSP activities in the NT are in 'Very Remote Australia'.
- None of the activities in the NT are located in 'Major City' or 'Inner Regional' areas.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B1.

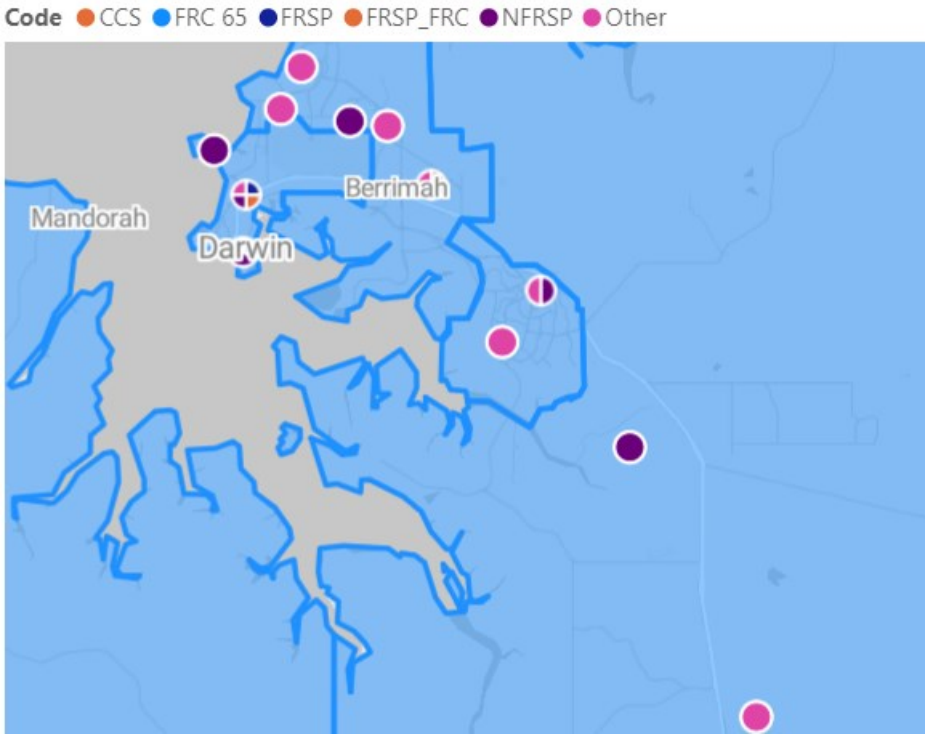
[8] This function also allows the user to filter based on 'other' specialist non-FRSP services that were not coded as equivalent to FRSP, as shown in coding frame above.

Non-FRSP services

There are 122 non-FRSP programs offered in the NT provided by 35 organisations and 20 accredited family law specialists in the NT.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B2 and below are images from the Power BI dashboard highlighting mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Greater Darwin



Rest of Northern Territory

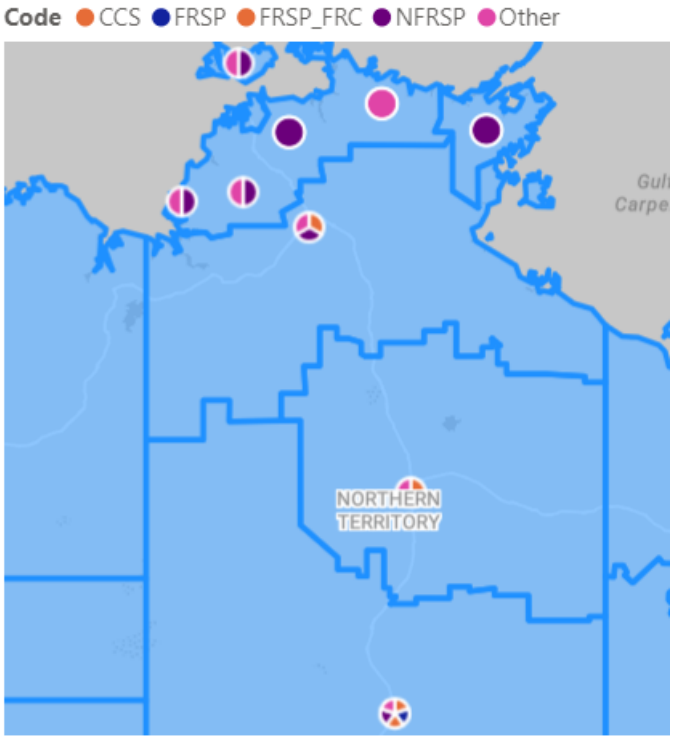


Table 4.12: Power BI mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services in Northern Territory (NT)

Territory	SA3 Name	Remote Area	State Composite Scores rank (1 = highest need)	FRC	CCS	FRSP	NFRSP	Other
NT	Barkly	Very Remote	1				•	•
NT	East Arnhem	Very Remote	2				•	
NT	Katherine	Multiple	3				•	•
NT	Palmerston	Outer	4				•	•
NT	Daly - Tiwi - West Arnhem	Remote	5				•	•
NT	Alice Springs	Remote	6		•	•	•	•
NT	Darwin Suburbs	Outer	7		•	•	•	•
NT	Darwin City	Outer	8	•		•	•	•
NT	Litchfield	Outer	9				•	•

In addition to the analyses presented in Table 4.12, the Power BI dashboard enables the user to drill down to a selected SA3 location and assess the number and range of non-FRSP services available. For example, selecting Barley and East Arnhem, (which do not currently have FRCs), the following non-FRSP equivalent services were identified in these areas (Table 4.13):

Table 4.13: Potential unmet need identified locations with non-FRSP services

SA3 Name	Lead Organisation	Activity
Barkly	CatholicCare NT	Counselling
	Central Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Unit	Family Law
	Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission	FDR
East Arnhem	Anglicare N.T. Ltd	Counselling
		Family Support Services
	North Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Service (NAAFLS)	Family Law
	Yalu Marnggithinyaraw Indigenous Corporation	Family Support Services

Queensland (Qld)

FRSP activities

- There are 143 FRSP activities available in Qld and they are provided by 14 organisations.
- Over half of the FRSP activities in Qld are provided in a 'Major City' (57.3%).
- Just over a quarter of FRSP activities in Qld are provided in 'Inner Regional' areas (26%).
- There are fewer activities in 'Outer Regional' Qld with only 14% of activities being provided in 'Outer Regional' areas.
- Only 2% of FRSP activities in Qld are located in 'Remote' areas and 0.7% in 'Very Remote' areas.
- The following activities are not available 'Remote' and/or 'Very Remote' areas in Qld:
  - Children's Contact Services
  - Family Dispute Resolution
  - Supporting Children After Separation Program
  - Post Order Program.
- Additionally, in Qld, there are no Regional FDR and Family Counselling in 'Very Remote' areas.

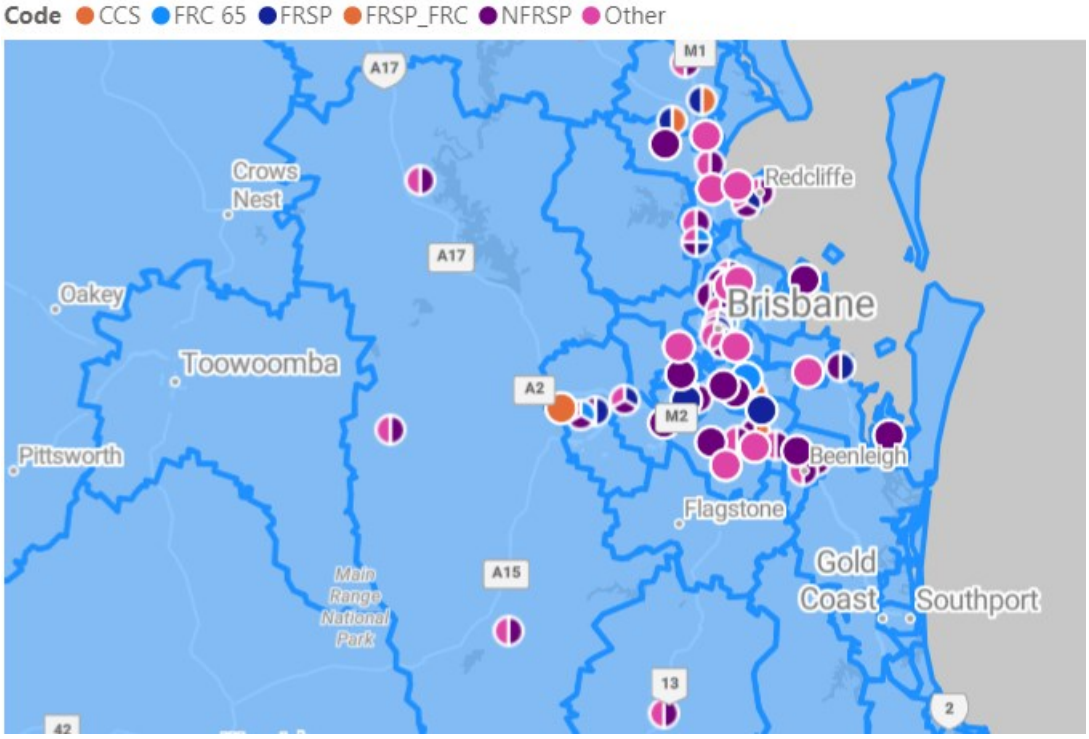
More detailed data are provided in Appendix B1.

Non-FRSP services

There are 575 non-FRSP programs offered in Qld provided by 98 organisations and 900 accredited family law specialists in Queensland.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B2 and below are images from the Power BI dashboard highlighting mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Greater Brisbane



Rest of Queensland

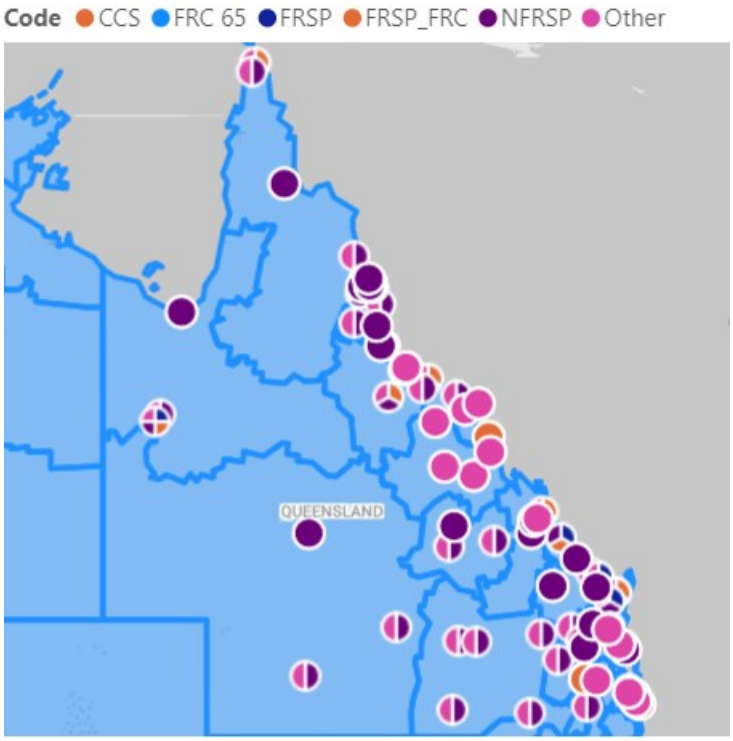


Table 4.14: Power BI mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services in Queensland (Qld)

State	SA3 Name	Remote Area	State Composite Scores rank (1 = highest need)	FRC	CCS	FRSP	NFRSP	Other
QLD	Caboolture	Major Cities	1		•	•	•	•
QLD	Springfield - Redbank	Major Cities	2				•	
QLD	Browns Plains	Major Cities	3				•	•
QLD	Ipswich Inner	Major Cities	4	•	•	•	•	•
QLD	Far North	Very Remote	5				•	•
QLD	Forest Lake - Oxley	Major Cities	6			•	•	•
QLD	Beaudesert	Inner	7				•	•
QLD	Beenleigh	Major Cities	8				•	•
QLD	Ipswich Hinterland	Inner	9				•	•
QLD	Strathpine	Major Cities	10	•		•	•	•

In addition to the analyses presented in Table 4.14, the Power BI dashboard enables the user to drill down to a selected SA3 location and assess the number and range of non-FRSP services available. For example, when selecting Caboolture and Springfield-Redbank (which do not currently have FRCs), the following non-FRSP equivalent services were identified in these areas (Table 4.15):

Table 4.15: Potential unmet need identified locations with non-FRSP services

SA3 Name	Lead Organisation	Activity
Caboolture	Anglicare SQ	Child and Family Counselling
	CatholicCare Social Services Southern Queensland	Counselling
	Centacare NQ	Family Support Services
Springfield - Redbank	Goodna Neighbourhood House	Family Support Services

South Australia (SA)

FRSP activities

- There are 89 FRSP activities available in SA and they are provided by 8 organisations.
- Over half of the FRSP activities in SA are provided in a 'Major City' (82%).
- 7% of FRSP activities in SA are in 'Outer Regional' areas.
- 7% of FRSP activities in SA are in 'Inner Regional' areas.
- 6% of FRSP activities in SA are in 'Remote' and 1% in 'Very Remote' areas.
- The following FRSP activities are not available in 'Remote' or 'Very Remote' areas in SA.
  - Children's Contact Services
  - Regional FDR
  - Supporting Children After Separation Program.

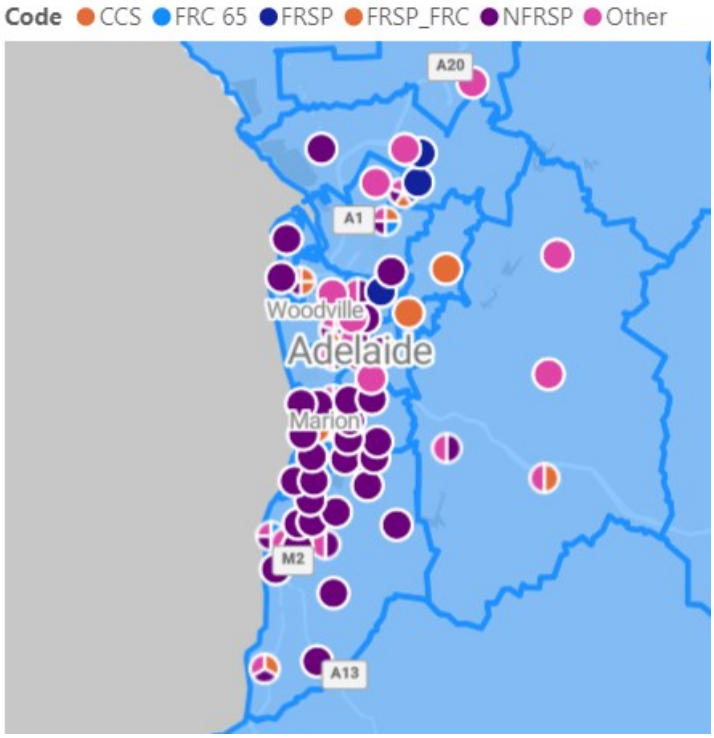
More detailed data are provided in Appendix B1.

Non-FRSP services

There are 308 non-FRSP programs offered in SA provided by 35 organisations and 250 accredited family law specialists in SA.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B2 and below are images from the Power BI dashboard highlighting mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Greater Adelaide



Rest of South Australia

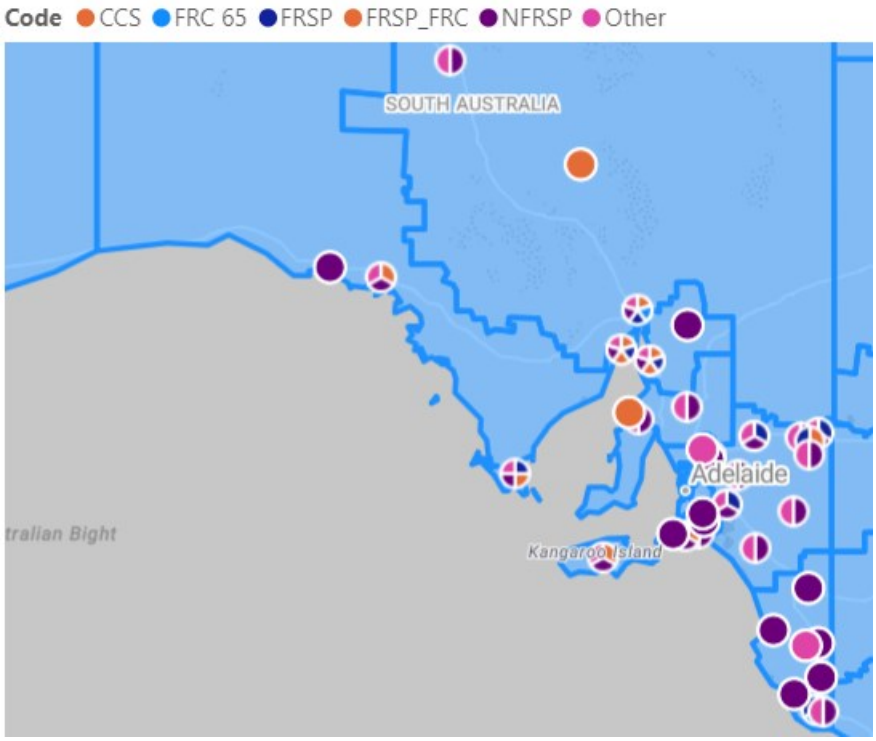


Table 4.16: Power BI mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services in South Australia (SA)

State	SA3 Name	Remote Area	State Composite Scores rank (1 = highest need)	FRC	CCS	FRSP	NFRSP	Other
SA	Playford	Major Cities	1	•	•	•	•	
SA	Salisbury	Major Cities	2	•	•		•	•
SA	Port Adelaide - West	Major Cities	3		•		•	•
SA	Yorke Peninsula	Outer	4				•	•
SA	Outback - North and East	Multiple	5	•	•	•	•	•
SA	Gawler - Two Wells	Major Cities	6					•
SA	Port Adelaide - East	Major Cities	7			•	•	•
SA	Onkaparinga	Major Cities	8	•	•	•	•	•
SA	Murray and Mallee	Multiple	9		•	•	•	•
SA	Mid North	Outer	10		•	•	•	•

In addition to the analyses presented in Table 4.16, the Power BI dashboard enables the user to drill down to a selected SA3 location and assess the number and range of non-FRSP services available. For example, when selecting Port Adelaide - West and York Peninsula (which do not currently have FRCs), the following non-FRSP equivalent services were identified in these areas (Table 4.17):

Table 4.17: Potential unmet need identified locations with non-FRSP services

SA3 Name	Lead Organisation	Activity
Port Adelaide - West	Legal Services Commission South Australia	Family Advocacy and Support Service (FASS)
		FDR
	Relationships Australia South Australia	Counselling
		Family Support Services
	Westside Lawyers	Family Law
Yorke Peninsula	Uniting Country SA	Family Support Services

Tasmania (Tas)

FRSP activities

- 27 FRSP activities are available in Tasmania provided by 4 organisations.
- These FRSP activities are provided in Hobart, Launceston and Devonport only.

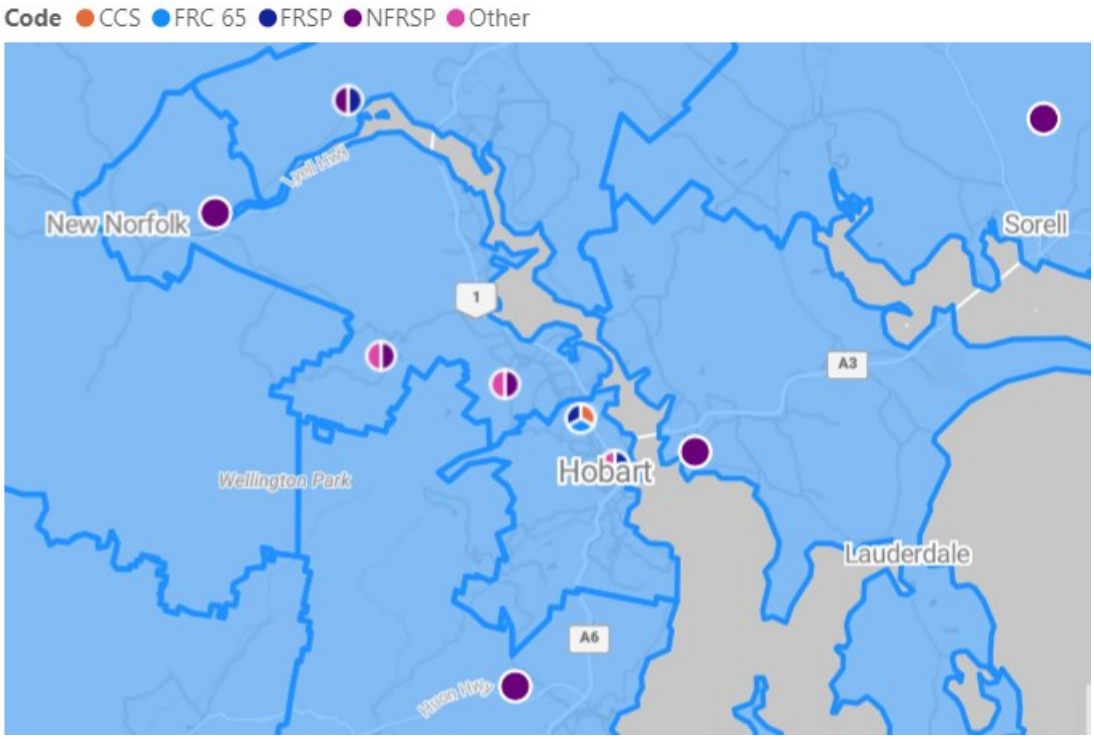
More detailed data are provided in Appendix B1.

Non-FRSP services

There are 202 non-FRSP programs offered in Tasmania provided by 56 organisations and 84 accredited family law specialists in Tasmania.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B2 and below are images from the Power BI dashboard highlighting mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Greater Hobart



Rest of Tasmania

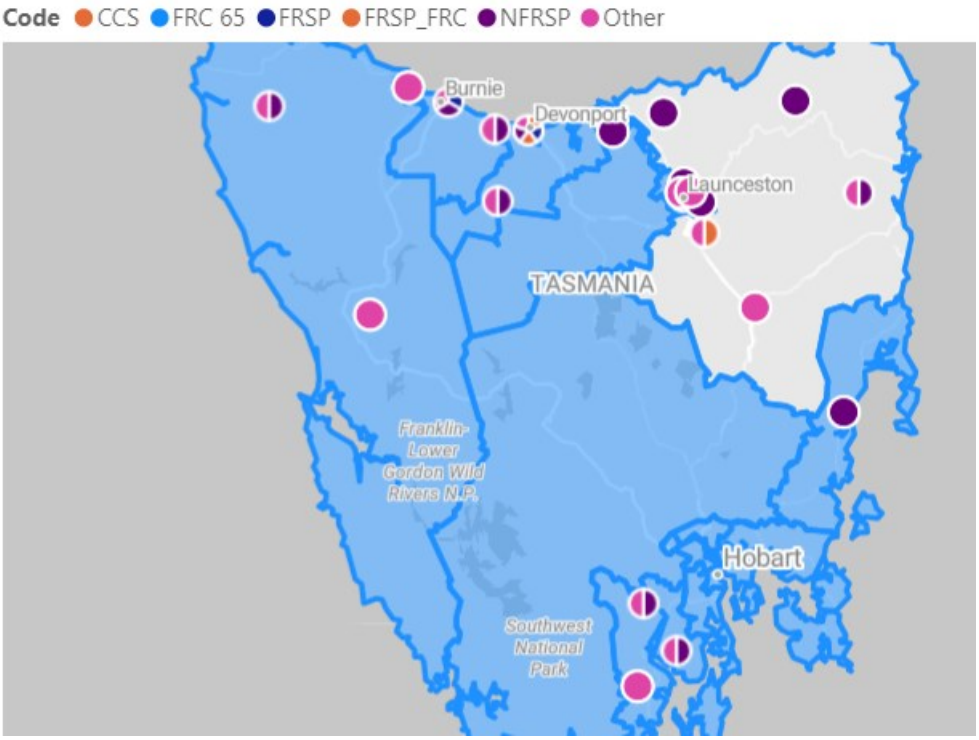


Table 4.18: Power BI mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services in Tasmania (Tas)

State	SA3 Name	Remote Area	State Composite Scores rank (1 = highest need)	FRC	CCS	FRSP	NFRSP	Other
TAS	Brighton	Inner	1			•	•	
TAS	Hobart - North West	Inner	2				•	•
TAS	Launceston	Inner	3	•	•	•	•	•
TAS	Devonport	Outer	4		•	•	•	•
TAS	Burnie - Ulverstone	Outer	5			•	•	•
TAS	Sorell - Dodges Ferry	Inner	6				•	
TAS	West Coast	Outer	7				•	•
TAS	Hobart - North East	Inner	8				•	
TAS	Central Highlands (Tas)	Outer	9					
TAS	South East Coast	Outer	10				•	

In addition to the analyses presented in Table 4.18, the Power BI dashboard enables the user to drill down to a selected SA3 location and assess the number and range of non-FRSP services available. For example, when selecting Brighton and Hobart - North West, (which do not currently have FRCs), the following non-FRSP equivalent services were identified in these areas (Table 4.19):

Table 4.19: Potential unmet need identified locations with non-FRSP services

SA3 NAME	Lead Organisation	Activity
Brighton	Crawley Clinic	Counselling
	Uniting Care Vic Tas	Family Support Services
Hobart - North West	Care2Serve	Counselling
	Crawley Clinic	Counselling
	Karadi Aboriginal Corporation	Counselling
		Family Support Services
	Mission Australia	Family Support Services
	Recovery College	Counselling

Victoria (Vic)

FRSP activities

- There are 143 FRSP activities available in Vic and these activities are provided by 19 organisations.
- Just over half (52%) of FRSP activities in Vic are provided in a ‘Major City’.
- 38% of FRSP activities in Vic are provided in ‘Inner Regional’ areas.
- There are no Supporting Children after Separation programs available in ‘Regional’ areas in Vic.

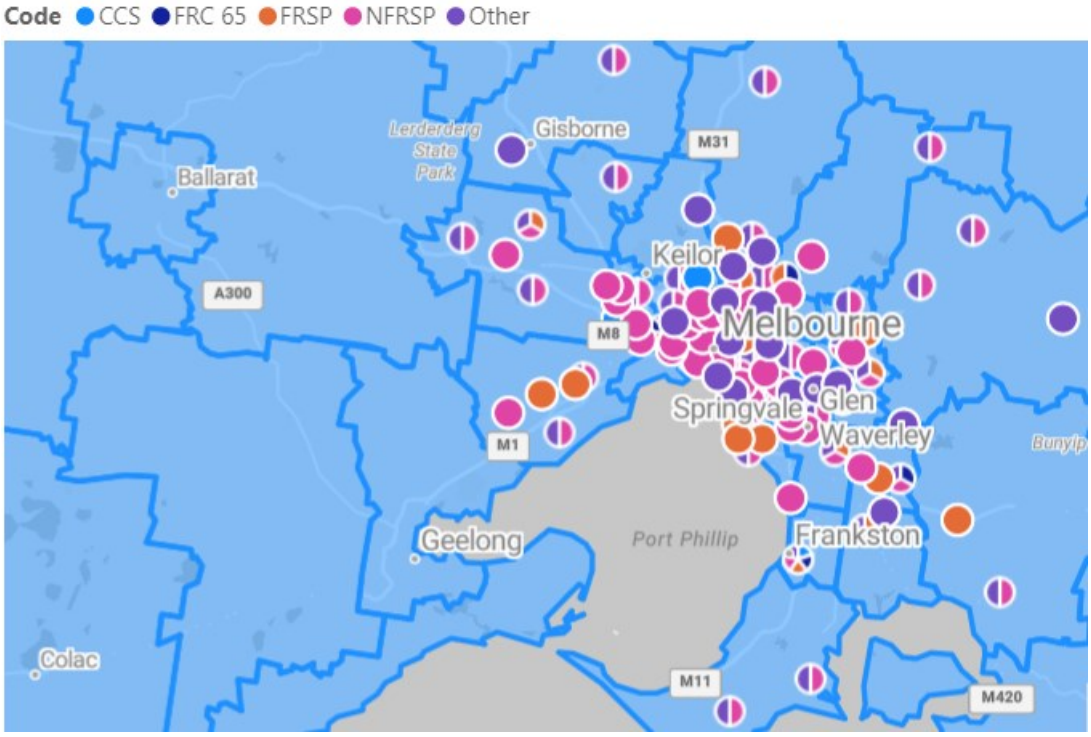
More detailed data are provided in Appendix B1.

Non-FRSP services

There are 936 non-FRSP programs offered in Victoria provided by 130 organisations and 1,178 accredited family law specialists in Victoria.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B2 and below are images from the Power BI dashboard highlighting mapped FSRP and non-FRSP services.

Greater Melbourne



Rest of Victoria

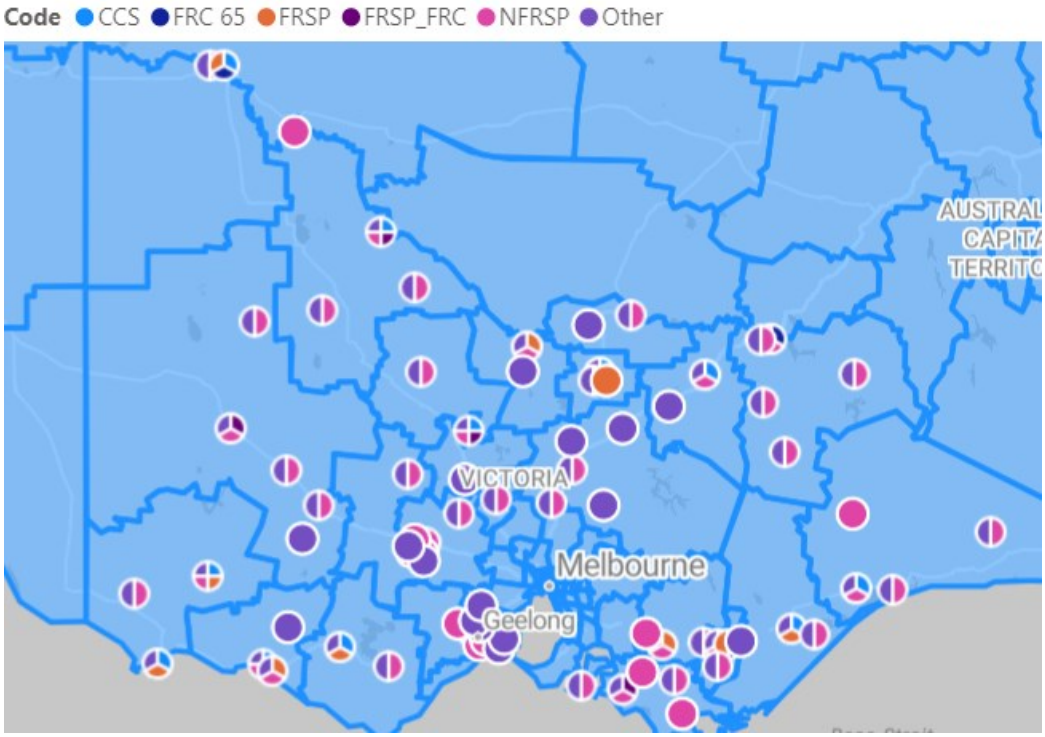


Table 4.20: Power BI mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services in Victoria (Vic)

State	SA3 Name	Remote Area	State Composite Scores rank (1 = highest need)	FRC	CCS	FRSP	NFRSP	Other
VIC	Dandenong	Major Cities	1			•	•	•
VIC	Brimbank	Major Cities	2	•	•	•	•	•
VIC	Tullamarine - Broadmeadows	Major Cities	3	•		•	•	•
VIC	Whittlesea - Wallan	Major Cities	4			•	•	•
VIC	Melton - Bacchus Marsh	Major Cities	5			•	•	•
VIC	Casey - South	Major Cities	6			•	•	•
VIC	Latrobe Valley	Inner	7	•	•	•	•	•
VIC	Bendigo	Inner	8		•		•	•
VIC	Sunbury	Major Cities	9				•	•
VIC	Cardinia	Major Cities	10			•	•	•

In addition to the analyses presented in Table 4.20, the Power BI dashboard enables the user to drill down to a selected SA3 location and assess the number and range of non-FRSP services available. For example, when selecting Dandenong and Whittlesea - Wallen, (which do not currently have FRCs), the following non-FRSP equivalent services were identified in these areas (Table 4.21):

Table 4.21: Potential unmet need identified locations with non-FRSP services

SA3 Name	Lead Organisation	Activity
Dandenong	CatholicCare Victoria	Counselling
		Family Support Services
		Property Mediation
	Dandenong and District Aborigines Co-operative (DDACL)	Family Support Services
	Family Life	Family Support Services
	Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia	Court Based FDR
	Peninsula Community Legal Centre	Family Law
	Relationships Australia (Victoria)	Family Support Services
	South-East Monash Legal Service	Family Law
	The Cairnmillar Institute	Counselling
	Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)	Family Support Services
Whittlesea – Wallan	Anglicare VIC	Family Support Services
	CatholicCare Victoria	Counselling
		Property Mediation
	DPV Health	Counselling
	Family Care	Counselling
	Nexus Primary health	Counselling
	Whittlesea Community Connections	Family Law

Western Australia (WA)

FRSP activities

- There are 62 FRSP activities in WA provided by 4 organisations.
- 61% of FRSP activities available in WA are in a ‘Major City’.
- 21% of FRSP activities available in WA are in an ‘Outer Regional’ area.
- 10% of FRSP activities available in WA are in ‘Remote’ areas.
- 7% of FRSP activities in WA are in an ‘Inner Regional’ area.
- 2% of activities are in WA are in ‘Very Remote Australia’.
- There are no Supporting Children after Separation programs in ‘Regional’ areas in WA.
- There are no CCSs in ‘Remote’ or ‘Very Remote’ areas in WA.

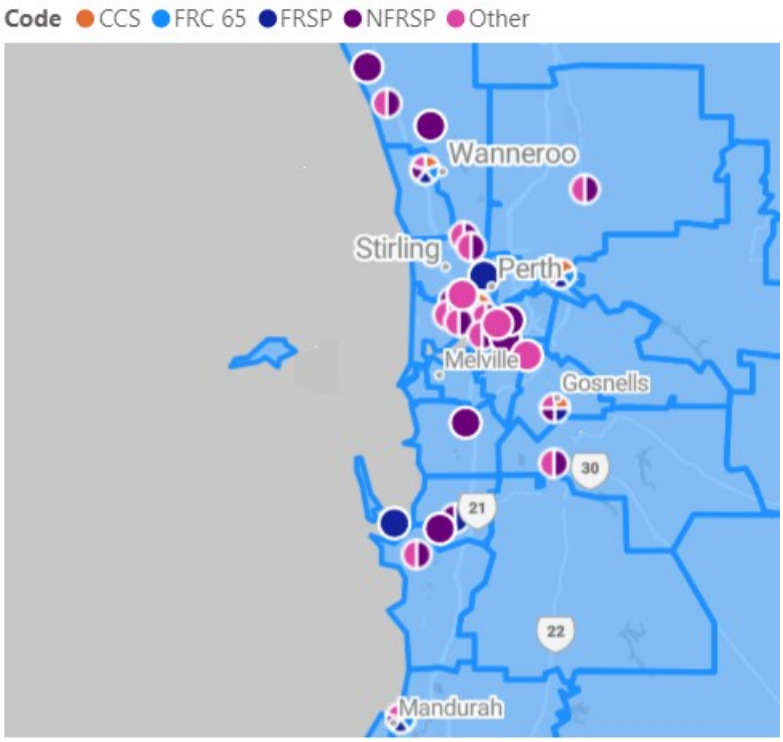
More detailed data are provided in Appendix B1.

Non-FRSP services

There were 354 non-FRSP programs offered in Western Australia provided by 50 organisations and 228 accredited family law specialists.

More detailed data are provided in Appendix B2 and below are images from the Power BI dashboard highlighting mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Greater Perth



Rest of Western Australia

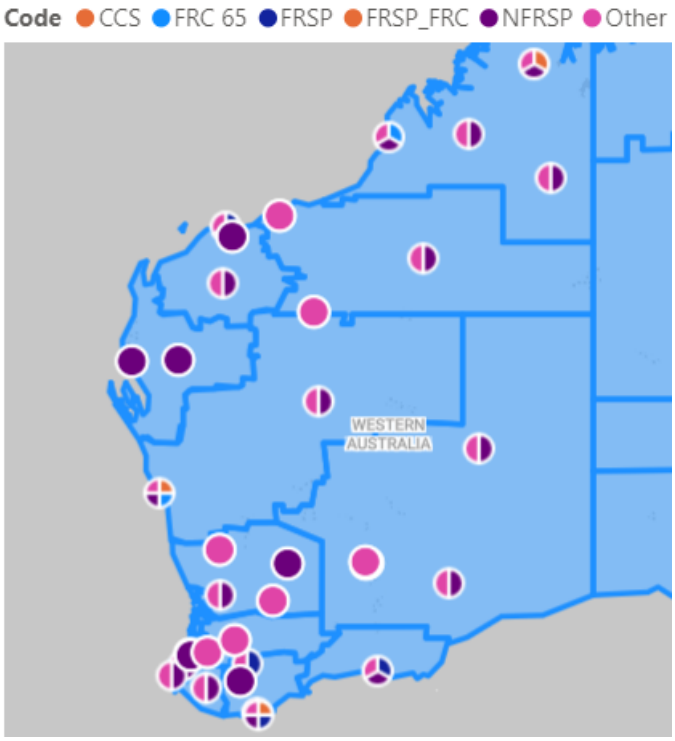


Table 4.22: Power BI mapped FRSP and non-FRSP services in Western Australia (WA)

State	SA3 Name	Remote Area	State Composite Scores rank (1 = highest need)	FRC	CCS	FRSP	NFRSP	Other
WA	Kwinana	Major Cities	1			•	•	
WA	Kimberley	Multiple	2	•			•	•
WA	Rockingham	Major Cities	3			•	•	•
WA	Swan	Major Cities	4	•	•	•	•	•
WA	Mandurah	Major Cities	5	•	•	•	•	•
WA	Armadale	Major Cities	6				•	•
WA	Wanneroo	Major Cities	7				•	•
WA	Serpentine - Jarrahdale	Major Cities	8					
WA	Gosnells	Major Cities	9		•	•	•	•
WA	Bunbury	Inner	10	•	•	•	•	•

In addition to the analyses presented in Table 4.22, the Power BI dashboard enables the user to drill down to a selected SA3 location and assess the number and range of non-FRSP services available. For example, when selecting Kwinana and Rockingham (which do not currently have FRCs), the following non-FRSP equivalent services were identified in these areas (Table 4.23):

Table 4.23: Potential unmet need identified locations with non-FRSP services

SA3 Name	Lead Organisation	Activity
Kwinana	Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)	Family Law
		Family Mediation
	Relationships Australia (Western Australia) Incorporated	Family Support Services
Rockingham	Anglicare WA	Counselling
	Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)	Family Law
		Family Mediation
	Ngala Raising Happiness	Family Support Services
	Relationships Australia (Western Australia) Incorporated	Family Support Services
	The Southern Communities Advocacy Legal and Education Service Inc (SCALES),	Family Law

Summary

The DEX data indicate that 72 organisations were delivering a range of FRSP activities in 2022/23. New South Wales has the highest number of outlets, followed by Victoria and Queensland, with these 2 states having similar numbers of outlets across the reported data period. Smaller numbers were in South Australia, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory.

Approximately one-half of outlets are in major cities, with the number of outlets remaining stable. In relation to the geographical spread of FRSP outlets, the data show that there were 66 outlets spread in 'Outer Australia', with the number trending down since the 2015/16 period but rising in 2022/23. There were 15 outlets in remote areas and 4 in very remote areas, with the numbers rising slightly in remote areas but declining slightly in very remote areas.

The data also show that the number of outlets varies greatly with activity. Family law counselling has the largest number of outlets across each of the reported financial years, with 204 outlets in 2022/23 providing this activity, followed by FRCs (140 outlets in 2022/23). There are also relatively large numbers of outlets providing Children's Contact Services and Parenting Orders Program.

The DEX data show that it is common for outlets to provide services under different activities although just over half provide only one activity. The service mapping also illustrates the broad range of legal and non-legal family law system services providing services to separating and separated families. The mapped non-FRSP services identify broad coverage in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, with good coverage in the remaining states and territories. The non-FRSP data have been built into the Power BI dashboard as an additional feature to support an assessment of the extent of coverage between non-FRSP and FRSP services for separating and separated families and, as evidenced above, the dashboard can be used comprehensively to support service delivery decisions.

5. Findings: insights from the administrative and program data from the DEX and request for information (RFI)

In consultation with organisations and clients, the Data Exchange (DEX) is developed by the Department of Social Services (DSS) as the program performance reporting solution. Commenced in July 2014, DEX has become an administrative data hub that collects standardised data across government grant-funded services/programs, as reported by service providers (see DEX for further details). As outlined in the DEX framework, DEX collects a limited number of 'mandatory priority requirements' that all organisations are required to report, together with data items that 'organisations share with funding agencies in exchange for relevant and meaningful reports'. Another key data category is the Standard Client/Community Outcome Reporting (SCORE) information that organisations are encouraged to collect and provide of 'as many clients as practical' (see Appendix C1 for Definitions of DEX data).

This chapter examines the use of the FRSP based on DEX data. It provides an overview of the FRSP program, including the number of organisations and outlets, trends in clients and sessions, what services are provided and FRSP funding sources. It is noted that the outlets may offer FRSP activities with Commonwealth funding arrangements, including outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations. In addition, First Nations Family Dispute Resolution services were new, and these services were not yet in DEX, hence they are not covered in this chapter.

The chapter also analyses the demographic profiles of FRSP clients. It discusses the use of FRSP by geographical areas and identifies areas with potentially 'unmet' needs for the FRSP program. Note the 2014/15 DEX data were excluded because only a limited number of FRSP organisations provided data to DEX in 2014/15. The discussion in this chapter also presents administrative data relating to client pathways and client outcomes drawn from DEX.

In addition to administrative data, there are data drawn from a request for information (RFI) process for the 2022/23 financial year. The RFI data relate to risk screening, assessment and triage processes, client risk profiles and information sharing protocols, together with staff employment and training requirements. The RFI was completed by a small, purposive sample of service providers who predominantly provided 2 or more of a range of FRSP and non-FRSP family support services. Services were sampled from each Australian state and territory and from large, medium and small service provider organisations (*n* = 10).

Key messages

Patterns in number and location of organisations and outlets delivering FRSP activities

The DEX data show that 72 organisations delivered a range of FRSP activities in 2022/23, a higher number than in the previous years since 2015/16 (*n* = 68).

- This higher number mainly reflects the expansion of the FRSP activities with the establishment of additional Children's Contact Services (CCSs) in the 2022/23 period.

- The number of lead organisations stood at 70, a higher number than in the previous year (*n* = 67).
- The number of service outlets remained relatively the same in 2022/23 (*n* = 416) and 2015/16 (*n* = 415).

Number of clients

In 2022/23, the FRSP supported 127,357 individual clients, 4,981 group clients and 1,577 supporting persons who joined at least one session.

The number of individual clients declined in the recent period.

- After peaking at approximately 160,900 in 2018/19 and 2019/20, the number of individual clients fell when the COVID-19 pandemic started. Despite the easing and removal of COVID restrictions, the downward trend continued in 2022/23 with 127,357 individual clients.
- The number of group clients decreased steeply in the pre-COVID years, from 31,987 in 2015/16 to 11,937 in 2018/19, and the number further fell to 4,981 in 2022/23. This may reflect changes in service provision models; that is, increasing emphasis on meeting the needs of individual clients.

Over recent years, there has been an evident decline in the number of individual clients across the states and territories and in some remoteness areas.

- The number of individual clients was lower in 2022/23 than in 2015/16 across all states and territories except Victoria. The decline from 2019/20 onwards was notable in most states, except for Tasmania, and the 2 territories, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. There was also a notable decline for major cities and inner regions.

Data relating to the number of clients by FRSP activity show:

- Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) represent the largest FRSP activity (41% of FRSP individual clients in 2022/23).
- Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL) is the second largest FRSP activity (22% of FRSP individual clients in 2022/23).
- Proportions of FRSP clients who used other FRSP activities ranged from 4% to 11% in 2022/23.[9]
- The number of individual clients for FRCs and FRAL peaked in 2019/20 and then declined. There was a slight increase in the proportion of individual clients who used FRCs between 2015/16 and 2021/22, from 40% to 44%, then a drop to 41% in 2022/23.
- There was a slight decline in the proportion using FDR, from 11% in 2015/16 to 8% in 2022/23.
- The number of Family Law Counselling (FLC), CCSs, FDR and Parenting Order Program clients has fallen since 2017/18, though the declining trend has been reversed for CCSs from 2020/2021. This likely reflects the effect of the additional funding provided to CCSs, which supported them to undertake measures including the expansion of operating hours and reduction of waiting lists (Carson et al., 2023).

[9] Some clients may use more than one FRSP activity in a financial year and they were accounted for in each activity but were counted once in all FRSP individual clients.

The decline in FRSP clients is consistent with other observed declines in engagement with child support programs and court applications.[10]

For sessions and attendance, over 510,991 sessions with 713,123 attendances were provided in 2022/23.

- The trends in the numbers of sessions and attendances are largely similar to those of individual clients – rising since 2015/16 but showing downward trends in recent years.
- Despite the recent decline, sessions and attendances in 2022/23 still outnumbered those recorded in 2015/16.

Different patterns emerged in relation to the average number of sessions per client/support person and the average number of attendances per session.

- The average number of sessions per client/support person has steadily increased from 4.1 in 2015/16 to 5.5 in 2022/23.
- On the other hand, the number of attendances per session has shown a downward trend, from 1.6 in 2015/16 to 1.4 in 2022/23.

The patterns suggest that clients may be presenting with more complex issues to the FRSP and therefore require more sessions. It may also suggest that the services provided may be becoming more tailored to the needs of individual clients.

At the outlet level, there are significant variations in the numbers of individual clients, from less than 10 to more than 200 individual clients. The data in 2022/23 show:

- just over one-quarter of outlets (28%) had 20 or fewer individual clients, and just under a quarter of outlets (24%) had between 21 and 100 individual clients
- just under one-half of outlets had more than 100 individual clients in the year, with 34% having over 200 and 14% between 100 and 200.

The patterns in the distribution of individual clients by outlets were stable between 2015/16 and 2022/23 (see Table 5.7).

Service type

The provision of information, advice and referrals were the most common services provided by FRCs, the FDR and RFDR (32%–35%), together with processes such as intake/assessments (32%–41%). Dispute resolution and advocacy/support were the other main services provided (6%–15%).

Most sessions for FRAL were to provide information/advice/referral (84%), with another 10% giving legal advice.

Counselling represented the most common service type provided by FLC and Supporting Children after Separation (SCASP) (65% and 55%, respectively).

For CCSs, supervised changeover/contact accounted for 47% of sessions, followed by Information/advice/referral (27%).

Services provided by Parenting Order Programs were more evenly spread compared to other activities, with nearly a quarter of sessions (24%) relating to information/advice/referral, and

[10] The annual reports from the Federal Circuit and Family Courts indicate that the number of applications for final orders in family matters fell by 6,063 from 20,540 applications for final orders in 2015/16 to 14,477 in 2022/23. The number of child support cases has fallen from 692,043 cases at June 2018 to 651,465 cases at June 2023 (Retrieved from Child Support Program Information | Datasets | data.gov.au - beta).

approximately 20% of sessions relating to intake/assessment processes, education and skills training and counselling, with 15% for advocacy/support.

Operation of FRSP activities

Most service providers participating in the RFI described the intake process as being a 'gateway' that facilitates clients to access the required 'holistic support' for their diverse needs. They also described the intake process as a way to 'triage appropriately to other programs' within and external to the service.

The intake processes described by service providers involved the collection and assessment of comprehensive information about clients' demographic and family characteristics. Additionally, they involved the implementation of risk screening processes to support the assessment of clients' needs and their triage through the service (or referral to external service) activities.

Service providers nominated a broad range of tools to support the screening, assessment and triaging of clients accessing the FRSP services.

Most service providers participating in the RFI also reported their site specifications, including consulting rooms, security cameras and duress alarms within the building, public transport accessibility, age-appropriate facilities for children and young people, withdrawal spaces and separate entrances and exits. Most participating services indicated that their service sites were standalone premises.

RFI data relating to staff pre-employment checks, qualifications and training referenced police checks, working with children checks, qualification verification and compliance with professional codes of conduct.

Training for staff was also nominated as being provided in the areas of domestic and family violence, trauma-informed practice, child inclusive practice, child safe practices, cultural awareness and cultural competency training and service provision for adults and children with disability.

FRSP funding

In 2015/16, the Commonwealth Government invested $177.96 million in FRSP services and increased funding to $244.81 million in 2022/23 (see Table 5.9). The FRCs received the largest share of funding, almost half of the total funding allocated to all 8 FRSP service activities between 2015/16 and 2022/23.

- Average funding per individual client (in 2022/23 dollars) significantly fluctuates over the financial year. It increased by 28% between 2015/16 and 2022/23. It is consistent with the increase in the average number of sessions per client. .
- Average funding per session or outlet (in 2022/23 dollars) also varies over the financial year, suggesting that variations in sessions or the number of outlets over the years have affected the allocation of Commonwealth Government funding.
- Organisations with their main outlet locations in major cities had lower average funding per individual client (in 2022/23 dollars) than organisations with their outlet locations in other remoteness areas.

Note the funding data presented here are of a general nature, and do not reflect the data on services as direct grant recipients.

FRSP client demographics

Consistent with the previous evaluation (KPMG, 2016), the demographic characteristics of FRSP clients drawn from the DEX data suggest that FRSP individual clients differed from the general population in age and household composition but were similar to the general population in other demographic characteristics (presented in Table 5.11).

Consistent with the functions and target population for the FRSP, people aged 25–49 are over-represented among FRSP clients (74%) compared to the average Australian population (34%; 2021 Australian Census) across all activities.

- This pattern is evident across all the activities – however, the representation of clients aged 25–49 years is more pronounced for FRCs, FRAL, FDR (and regional FDR) and Parenting Order Programs (78%–83%) compared to other activities.
- The patterns in clients' age profiles across activities have changed little since 2015/16.

One-parent families with dependents are more common among FRSP clients (43%) than in the general Australian population (8%), as would be expected.

- The proportion of individual clients living in one-parent families with dependants was highest for SCASP (60%) and lowest for FLC (33%).

First Nations people using FRSP services represent a higher proportion than in the general population (5% of clients, compared to 3% of the population according the 2021 Census).

These data also provide insights into differences in usage for FRSP clients from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and people with disability. CALD client representation is well below population representation (3% cf. 17%), and the proportion of clients with disability is slightly lower than the proportion with disability in the general population (5% cf. 6%)

Data from the RFI identified the most common risk issues nominated by participating organisations regarding their clients.

- These were family violence, child safety concerns (including child maltreatment, child abuse and neglect), mental health issues, addictive behaviours, including in relation to substances and gambling, and suicide.
- Family violence, child safety and mental health issues were most likely to be identified across the FRSP activities and were also common factors emerging in the non-FRSP activities provided by these service providers.

FRSP usage indicators

Four indicators of FRSP usage were applied nationally and across states and territories with:

- 4.9 clients per 1,000 residents in the population
- 14.2 clients per 1,000 people aged 25–49 years
- 66.9 clients per 1,000 people living in one-parent families with dependent children
- 25.4 per 1,000 people affected by separation (i.e. those who were divorced or separated from a registered marriage, those living in one-parent families with dependent children, those living in step or blended families with dependent children).

FRSP usage (or client) rates fluctuate based on the number of clients in the general population and the core age population, as well as the number of one-parent families with dependents.

- Tasmania had the highest client rates based on the 3 usage indicators (8.1 individual clients per 1,000 residents; 25.7 individual clients per 1,000 residents aged 25–49 years;

99.5 individual clients per 1,000 people living in one-parent families with dependent children).

- NSW had the lowest client rates with 3.6 registered clients per 1,000 residents in 2022/23 (10.5 registered clients per 1,000 residents in the core age 25–49 years).
- Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory had client rates above the national levels, while Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory had client rates lower than the national levels.
- There were similar patterns based on the ratio of clients per 1,000 people living in one-parent families with dependent children, and the ratio of clients per 1,000 people affected by divorce and separation (as defined above), with a higher ratio in Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory than in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory.

The availability and accessibility of outlets across states could account for this wide variation in client rates, among other factors (e.g. demographics).

In 2022/23, regional areas had higher client rates based on resident population and resident population aged 25–49 than major cities. However, the inner region had higher client rates based on residents living in one-parent families with dependents than elsewhere, placing additional complications on service provision in regional areas.

The individual client rates overall and by activities vary across years, peaking in 2018/19 and reducing afterwards.

- FRCs have higher client rates for all jurisdictions over time than other FRSP activities, with 2.4 clients per 1,000 residents in 2018/19 (6.9 clients in core age 25–49 years).
- Client rates of some FRSP activities have little variation over time (e.g. Parenting Orders Program (POP), SCASP) and Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR).

Client pathways

There were nearly 237,000 first-time FRSP clients across different activities between January 2022 and June 2023, with FRCs receiving the largest share of the new clients (38%), followed by FRAL (28%). The smallest share of new clients used the POP, Regional FDR and Support Children After Separation (3%–4% for each).

Of these new clients, 13% had subsequently used other FRSP activities within 12 months. The proportion of new FRSP clients who then subsequently used other FRSP activities was highest for the POP (21%), followed by FRAL (17%) and Regional FDR (15%), it was lowest for CCSs and SCASP.

The common client pathways were the FRAL followed by FRCs, and FRCs followed by POP.

Identification of areas of potential unmet needs

The analyses of DEX and population data suggest likely unmet needs for FRSP target groups within populations in the core age 25–49 years and one-parent families with dependents.

- Some SA3s have a higher concentration of populations in the core age 25–49 years and one-parent families with dependents but low client rates of FRSP use. This suggests under-utilisation of FRSP activities and, consequently, unmet need.

- Ten of the 20 listed SA3s were in the first decile (i.e. in the most disadvantaged areas) of the SEIFA Index of Socio-Economic Disadvantage, and either in major cities or remote/very remote areas.
- These findings suggest an increased need for service provision across SA3s, especially in the most disadvantaged and remote/very remote areas to meet unmet needs.

Detailed analyses of DEX data relating to potential unmet needs are presented later in the chapter.

Client SCORE outcomes

For each activity, there were positive outcomes for assessed clients across the 3 areas of circumstances, goals and satisfaction (Figures 5.14 and 5.15).

Across all activities, the latest mean ratings were higher than the earliest mean ratings:

- The mean ratings increased by 0.2–1.0 rating points for circumstances and 0.8–1.3 rating points for achieving goals on a scale of 1–5.
- Across all activities, the mean ratings of client satisfaction were very high, ranging from 4.3 to 4.8 on a scale of 1–5.

Circumstances:

- FLC and the SCASP achieved the highest improved circumstances.
- Clients assessed for other activities saw an improvement in their circumstances of 0.6–0.8 rating points and FRAL had 0.2 rating point improvement.

Goals:

- Similar patterns also emerged with the outcome of achieving goals with an increase of 1.3 rating points from the earliest to latest points for FLC and the SCASP, compared to other activities (increase of 0.8–1.1 rating points).

Satisfaction:

- The mean ratings of client satisfaction with the receipt of service delivery were higher for FRAL (4.85) and Legally Assisted and Culturally Appropriate FDR (4.75).
- The mean ratings ranged from 4.4 to 4.6 for other activities, while the mean rating was 4.3 for CCSs.

For each activity across all years presented, the most recent mean ratings were consistently higher than the mean ratings at the earliest point of service delivery, indicating improvements in the outcomes of client circumstances and achieving client goals.

- The improvements in client circumstances have subsided somewhat in recent years for some activities (e.g. FDR, Regional FDR and SCASP), which may reflect more complex cases in these activities.
- Across activities, the mean ratings of client satisfaction with service delivery were consistently high across all years presented, above the rating of 4 on a 1–5 rating scale.

FRSP program overview

Organisations and outlets

According to DEX, 72 organisations delivered a range of FRSP programs in 2022/23, a higher number than previous years since 2015/16 (Table 5.1). The number of delivery organisations

remained the same, at 68, between 2015/16 and 2018/19, followed by a decline to 66 in the following 3 financial years and an ensuing rise in 2022/23. Similar patterns emerged in the number of lead organisations, often also delivery organisations.

The number of service outlets increased from 415 in 2015/16 to 420 in 2017/18 and then decreased until the number rose again to 416 in 2022/23. Notably, the number of outlets in 2022/23 is almost the same as in 2015/16.

Table 5.1: FRSP: Number of organisations and outlets, 2015/16–2022/23

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Lead organisations	67	67	67	67	66	65	65	70
Delivery organisations	68	68	68	68	66	66	66	72
Outlets [a]	415	433	435	420	420	410	398	416

Notes: [a] Small numbers of outlets across the years may be reported more than once because they were operated under different delivery/lead organisations and were counted as such. The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations and may not align with the numbers of outlets receiving direct Commonwealth grants across the years.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

The number of outlets between 2015/16 and 2022/23 in each state and territory are presented in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Number of FRSP outlets by state/territory, 2015/16–2022/23

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
				Number (*n*)				
NSW	145	150	142	137	138	133	123	140
VIC	80	84	83	85	86	81	77	86
QLD	72	80	82	84	79	81	86	79
SA	61	60	71	58	60	59	59	56
WA	28	30	29	30	29	30	29	30
TAS	14	13	13	13	15	13	13	12
NT	9	8	8	8	8	8	8	10
ACT	6	8	7	5	5	5	3	3
Total	415	433	435	420	420	410	398	416
				Percentage (%)				
NSW	34.9	34.6	32.6	32.6	32.9	32.4	30.9	33.7
VIC	19.3	19.4	19.1	20.2	20.5	19.8	19.3	20.7
QLD	17.3	18.5	18.9	20.0	18.8	19.8	21.6	19.0
SA	14.7	13.9	16.3	13.8	14.3	14.4	14.8	13.5
WA	6.7	6.9	6.7	7.1	6.9	7.3	7.3	7.2
TAS	3.4	3.0	3.0	3.1	3.6	3.2	3.3	2.9
NT	2.2	1.8	1.8	1.9	1.9	2.0	2.0	2.4
ACT	1.4	1.8	1.6	1.2	1.2	1.2	0.8	0.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Notes: Small numbers of outlets across the years may be reported more than once because they were operated under different delivery/lead organisations and were counted as such. The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations and may not align with the outlet numbers receiving direct Commonwealth grants.

Source: DEX data (DSS)

Table 5.3 further outlines the distribution of outlets by remoteness areas between 2015/16 and 2022/23. Just over one-half of outlets are in major cities, with the number of outlets remaining stable across the reference period. There were 122 outlets in inner regions in 2022/23, with the number fluctuating but trending down. There were 66 outlets in 2022/23 spread in Outer Australia, with the number trending down but rising in 2022/23. In 2022/23, there were 15 outlets in remote areas and 4 in very remote areas, with the numbers rising slightly in remote areas but declining slightly in very remote areas.

Table 5.3: Number of FRSP outlets by remoteness areas, 2015/16–2022/23

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
				Number (*n*)				
Major cities	197	209	204	208	216	200	209	209
Inner region	128	134	130	127	128	130	116	122
Outer region	72	73	79	69	60	62	56	66
Remote areas	12	12	16	12	11	14	14	15
Very remote areas	6	5	6	4	5	4	3	4
Total	415	433	435	420	420	410	398	416
				Percentage (%)				
Major cities	47.5	48.3	46.9	49.5	51.4	48.8	52.5	50.2
Inner region	30.8	30.9	29.9	30.2	30.5	31.7	29.1	29.3
Outer region	17.3	16.9	18.2	16.4	14.3	15.1	14.1	15.9
Remote areas	2.9	2.8	3.7	2.9	2.6	3.4	3.5	3.6
Very remote areas	1.4	1.2	1.4	1.0	1.2	1.0	0.8	1.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Notes: The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations and may not align with the outlet numbers that receive Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

The number of outlets varies greatly with activities, as shown in Table 5.4. The activity of FLC has the largest number of outlets across all the years, with 204 outlets in 2022/23 providing this activity, followed by FRCs, with 140 outlets in 2022/23. There are also relatively large numbers of outlets providing CCS services and the POP. In contrast, only 3 outlets provide FRAL, which is not surprising given that this activity is a national activity provided via telephone.

Table 5.4: Number of FRSP outlets by activity, 2015/16–2022/23 [a]

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
				Number (*n*)				
Family Relationship Centres	152	150	159	148	143	136	137	140
Family Relationship Advice Line	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Family Dispute Resolution	92	91	89	92	86	81	86	81
Family Law Counselling	181	208	210	214	217	217	208	204
Children's Contact Services	73	77	78	77	74	74	75	101
Parenting Orders Program	106	105	100	104	110	108	110	111
Supporting Children after Separation Program	40	43	43	42	45	44	49	46
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	77	77	76	78	75	79	74	72
Legally Assisted and Culturally Appropriate FDR			11	13	16			
Total (activity-outlets) [b]	722	754	769	771	769	742	742	758
				Percentage (%)				
Family Relationship Centres	21.1	19.9	20.7	19.2	18.6	18.3	18.5	18.5
Family Relationship Advice Line	0.1	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
Family Dispute Resolution	12.7	12.1	11.6	11.9	11.2	10.9	11.6	10.7
Family Law Counselling	25.1	27.6	27.3	27.8	28.2	29.2	28	26.9
Children's Contact Services	10.1	10.2	10.1	10	9.6	10	10.1	13.3
Parenting Orders Program	14.7	13.9	13	13.5	14.3	14.6	14.8	14.6
Supporting Children after Separation Program	5.5	5.7	5.6	5.4	5.9	5.9	6.6	6.1
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	10.7	10.2	9.9	10.1	9.8	10.6	10	9.5
Legally Assisted and Culturally Appropriate FDR			1.4	1.7	2.1			

Notes: [a] Some outlets provide more than one activity. [b] This refers to the sum of outlets by activities, which exceeds the total number of outlets in Table 5.1. The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations and may not align with the outlet numbers receiving Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

As noted in chapter 4, 54% of outlets provided one, 22% provided 2, and 24% had 3 or more activities in 2022/23. Table 5.5 shows that the patterns in the number of activities outlets provided were similar across the years.

Table 5.5: Number of activities that outlets provided, 2015/16–2022/23

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Number of activities provided				%				
One	54.9	56.1	56.3	53.8	53.3	52.2	50.8	54.3
Two	25.3	23.8	22.5	22.9	23.6	25.9	25.1	22.1
Three or more	19.8	20.1	21.2	23.3	23.1	22.0	24.1	23.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of outlets[a]	415	433	435	420	420	410	398	416

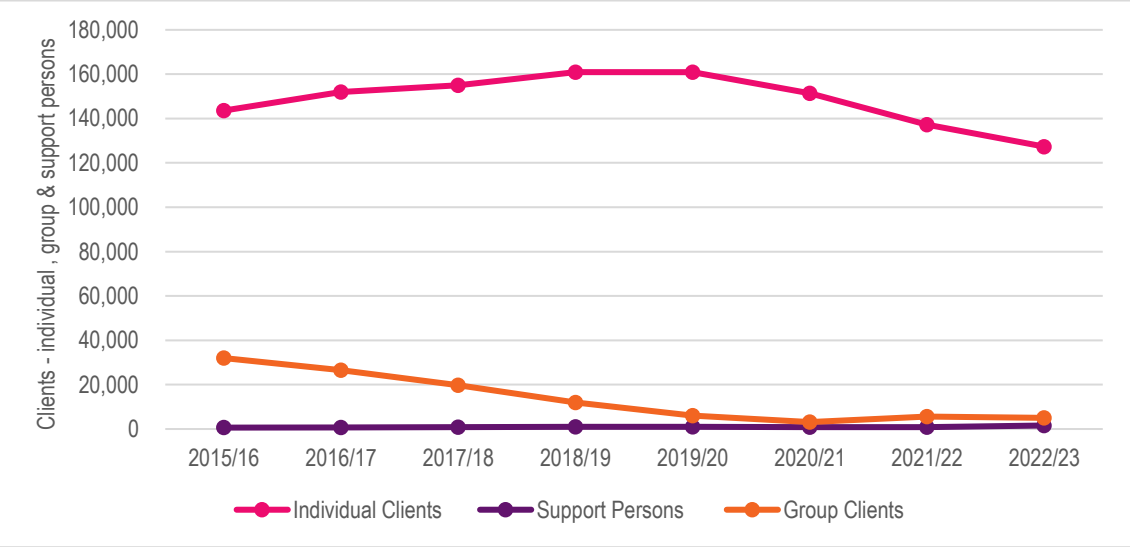
Notes: [a] Outlets that operated under more than one organisation were counted as such in DEX but were only counted once in this table. Thus, the numbers of outlets differ slightly from those in Table 5.1 because of the treatment of these outlets. The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations and may not align with the outlet numbers receiving Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Number of clients

In 2022/23, FRSP supported 127,357 individual clients, 4,981 group clients and another 1,577 supporting persons who joined at least one session. Figure 5.1 shows the numbers of these 3 groups since 2015/16. The trends in the number of individual clients were similar to the patterns in the number of outlets. After peaking at approximately 160,900 in 2018/19 and 2019/20, the number of individual clients fell when the COVID-19 pandemic started. Despite the easing and removal of COVID restrictions, the downward trend continued through to 2022/23.

The number of group clients decreased steeply in the pre-COVID years, from 31,987 in 2015/16 to 11,937 in 2018/19, and the number further fell to 4,981 in 2022/23. This may reflect changes in the service provision models – that is, moving towards meeting the needs of individual clients. It is also worth noting that group client numbers were much smaller than individual client numbers. In 2015/16, group clients accounted for 18% of a combined number of individual and group clients; this percentage fell to 4% in 2022/23.

Figure 5.1: DEX reports: Numbers of individual clients, support persons, group clients, and number of sessions, 2015/16–2022/23



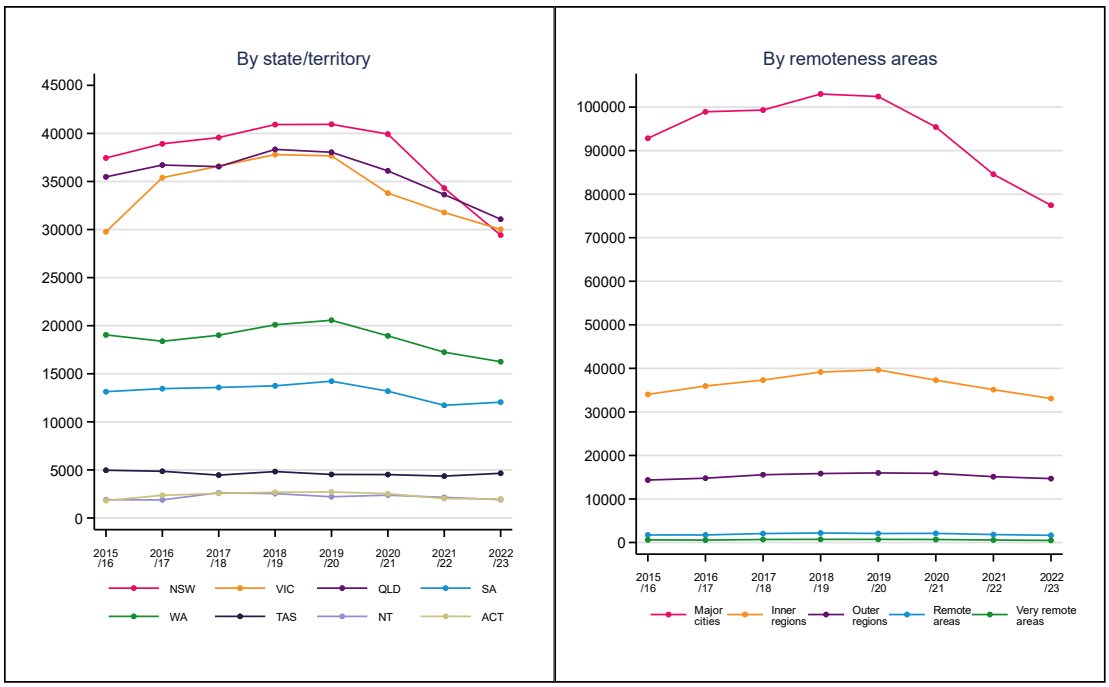
Notes: Support persons (e.g. family members, children) were present at a service but not expected to achieve a direct outcome, and they were not counted as clients. Support people may

not be counted, and figures likely represent undercounts. The number of clients differs from the sum across the financial years because clients may use services in multiple financial years. See Table C1 in Appendices.

Source: DEX data (DSS)

Over recent years, the decline in the number of individual clients has also been evident across the states and territories and by remoteness areas (Figure 5.2). The number of individual clients was lower in 2022/23 than in 2015/16 across all states and territories except Victoria. The decline from 2019/20 onwards was particularly notable in the states, except for Tasmania, the NT and ACT. The decline in the number of individual clients over the last 4 years or so was noteworthy for major cities and inner Australia.

Figure 5.2: DEX reports: Number of individual clients by state/territory and by remoteness areas, 2015/16–2022/23



Note: Excludes clients who did not provide state/territory.

Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.3 shows the numbers of individual clients by activities across financial years. FRCs represent the largest FRSP activity, providing service to 41% of FRSP individual clients in 2022/23. FRAL is the second largest FRSP activity, with 22% of FRSP individual clients using this activity in 2022/23. Regional FDR and SCASP represent relatively small FRSP activities in terms of individual client numbers, and the proportions of FRSP individual clients in 2022/23 who used the activities were 4% for each. Proportions of FRSP clients who used other FRSP activities ranged from 7% to 11% in 2022/23.

It is worth noting that some clients may use more than one FRSP activity in a financial year. They were accounted for in each but counted once in all FRSP individual clients.

- The trends in the number of clients who used different activities were similar to the trends of all activities described above, though some differences also emerged. The number of individual clients for FRC and FRAL peaked in 2019/20 and then declined. The number of

FLC, CCS, FDR and POP clients fell from 2017/18, though the declining trend has been reversed for CCS from 2020/2021.

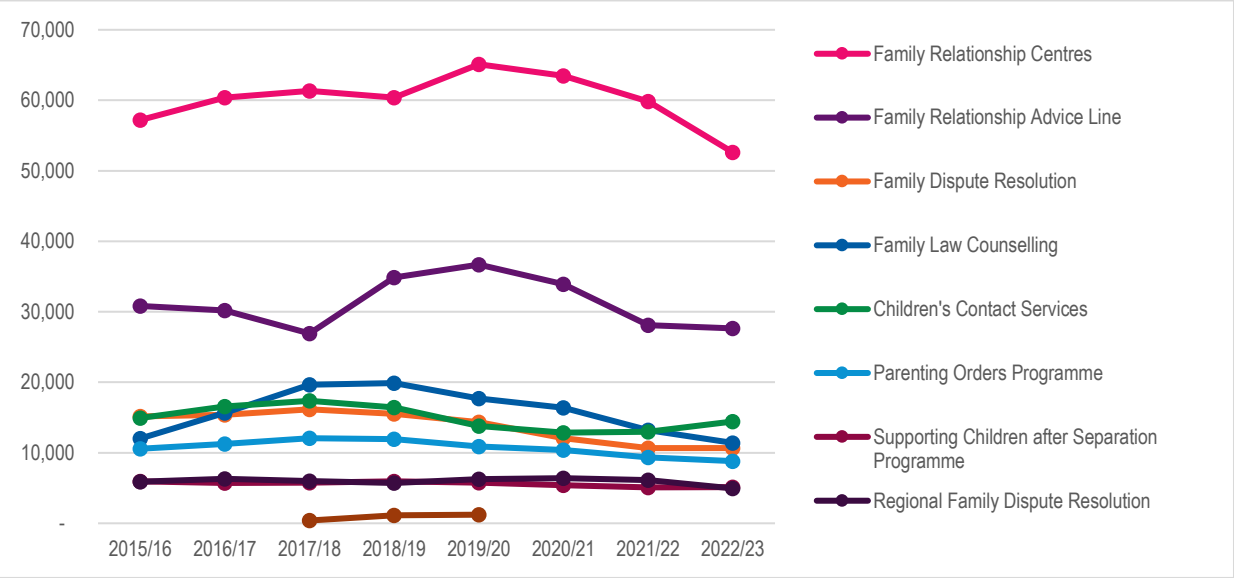
- The proportion of individual clients who used FRC increased slightly between 2015/16 and 2021/22, from 40% to 44%, then dropped to 41% in 2022/23. The proportion using FDR declined slightly, from 11% in 2015/16 to 8% in 2022/23.

Table 5.6: Number of individual clients by activity, 2015/16–2022/23

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Number (*n*)								
Family Relationship Centres	57,211	60,389	61,356	60,375	65,108	63,470	59,824	52,629
Family Relationship Advice Line	30,816	30,172	26,927	34,846	36,694	33,901	28,094	27,670
Family Dispute Resolution	15,144	15,393	16,169	15,546	14,354	12,070	10,689	10,674
Family Law Counselling	12,032	15,682	19,674	19,889	17,702	16,408	13,199	11,406
Children's Contact Services	14,949	16,566	17,374	16,423	13,813	12,864	12,998	14,429
Parenting Orders Program	10,577	11,249	12,069	11,939	10,911	10,382	9,344	8,822
Supporting Children after Separation Program	5,950	5,713	5,750	5,955	5,788	5,423	5,099	5,126
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	5,917	6,314	5,987	5,713	6,250	6,402	6,135	4,952
Legally Assisted and Culturally Appropriate FDR			399	1,145	1,223			
All individual clients [a]	143,556	151,965	154,950	160,946	160,891	151,390	137,228	127,357
Percentage (%)								
Family Relationship Centres	39.9	39.7	39.6	37.5	40.5	41.9	43.6	41.3
Family Relationship Advice Line	21.5	19.9	17.4	21.7	22.8	22.4	20.5	21.7
Family Dispute Resolution	10.5	10.1	10.4	9.7	8.9	8.0	7.8	8.4
Family Law Counselling	8.4	10.3	12.7	12.4	11.0	10.8	9.6	9.0
Children's Contact Services	10.4	10.9	11.2	10.2	8.6	8.5	9.5	11.3
Parenting Orders Program	7.4	7.4	7.8	7.4	6.8	6.9	6.8	6.9
Supporting Children after Separation Program	4.1	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.7	4.0
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	4.1	4.2	3.9	3.5	3.9	4.2	4.5	3.9
Legally Assisted and Culturally Appropriate FDR	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.7	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0

Note: A client may attend more than one activity and be counted in each; so, the sum of clients across all activities may exceed the number of all clients.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.3: DEX reports: Number of individual clients by activity, 2015/16–2022/23



Source: DEX data (DSS)

Table 5.7 shows significant variation in the proportion of outlets by number of individual clients over the 2015/16–2022/23 period. The mean number of individual clients increased from 224 in 2015/16 to 246 in 2019/20 but declined to 196 in 2022/23. In 2022/23, just over one-quarter of outlets (28%) had 20 or fewer individual clients, and just under a quarter of outlets (24%) had between 21 and 100 individual clients. Just under one-half of outlets had more than 100 individual clients in the year, with 34% having over 200 and 14% between 100 and 200. The patterns in the distribution of individual clients by outlets were stable between 2015/16 and 2022/23.

Table 5.7: Distribution of outlets by size of individual clients, 2015/16–2022/23

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Outlet size (number of clients)	Percentage (%)							
10 or less clients	16.9	17.8	17.5	16.0	17.4	20.0	16.3	17.6
11–20 clients	9.4	5.8	6.9	9.1	5.7	6.6	7.8	10.3
21–50 clients	13.5	14.1	12.2	9.3	12.6	11.7	11.6	14.7
51–100 clients	13.3	13.9	12.4	13.3	13.8	12.0	12.1	9.4
101–200 clients	9.9	10.2	11.7	12.1	11.7	10.0	14.1	14.4
>200 clients	37.1	38.3	39.3	40.2	38.8	39.8	38.2	33.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mean number of clients	*224*	*231*	*214*	*243*	*246*	*246*	*235*	*196*
Median number of clients	*46*	*58*	*63*	*62*	*58*	*52*	*55*	*44*

Number of outlets	*415*	*433*	*435*	*420*	*420*	*410*	*398*	*416*

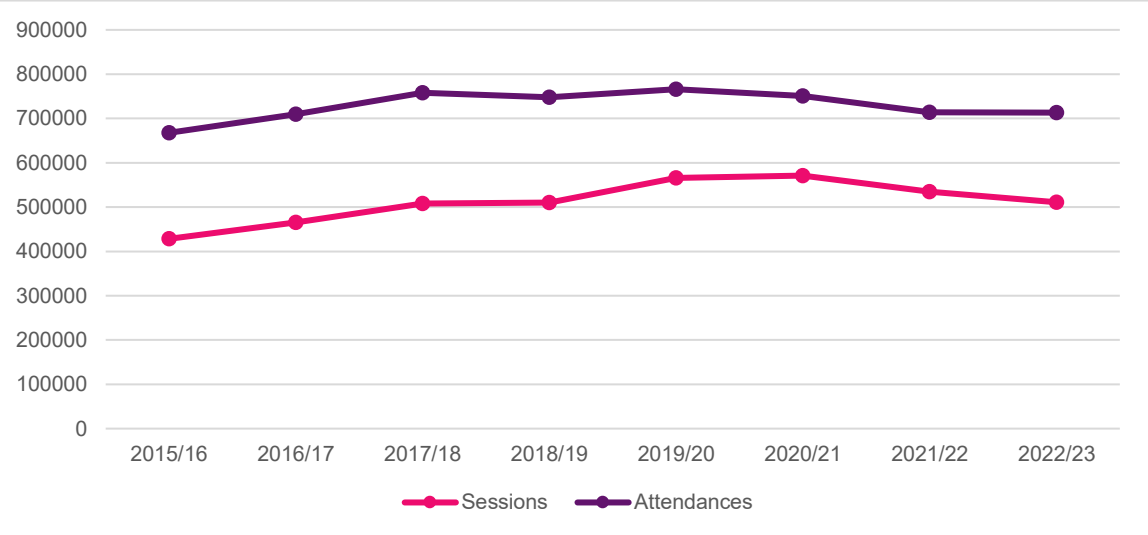
Notes: Clients may use more than one activity with an outlet, and they were counted as such. The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations and may not align with the outlet numbers receiving Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Sessions and attendance

Over 510,991 sessions with 713,123 attendances were provided in 2022/23 (Figure 5.4). The trends in the numbers of sessions and attendance are largely similar to those of individual clients described above – that is, rising since 2015/16 but showing downward trends in recent years. The number of sessions peaked in 2020/21 at 571,077, while the number of attendances peaked a year earlier at 766,0001 in 2019/20. Despite the recent decline, sessions and attendance in 2022/23 still outnumbered those recorded in 2015/16.

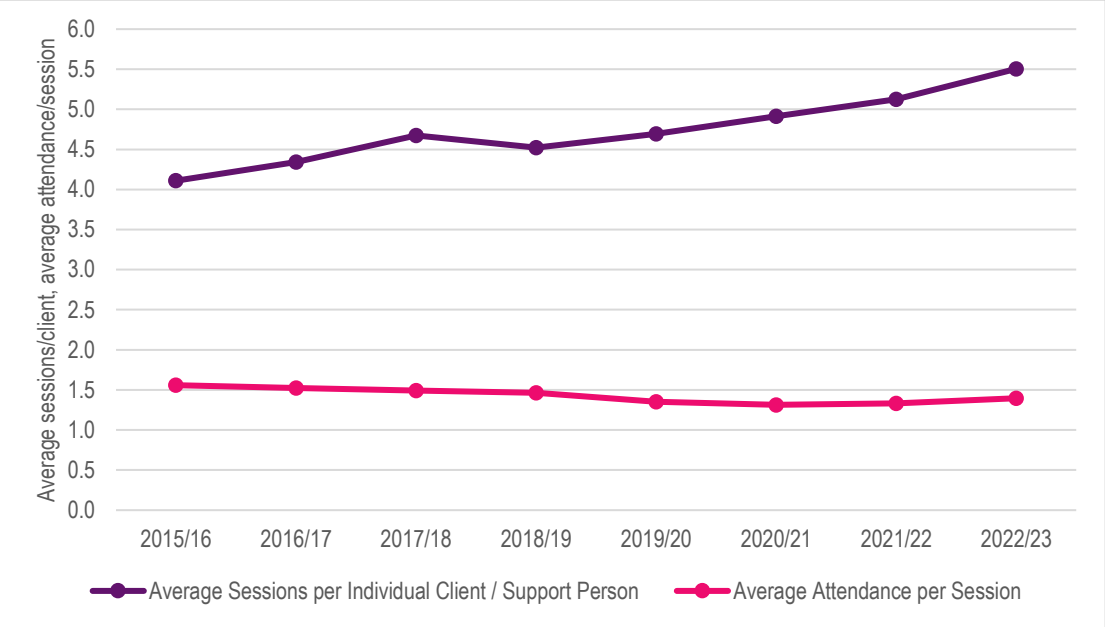
However, different patterns emerged in relation to the average number of sessions per client/support person and the average number of attendances per session, as shown in Figure 5.5. The average number of sessions per client/support person has steadily increased from 4.1 in 2015/16 to 5.5 in 2022/23. The pattern suggests that clients may bring more complex issues to the program and therefore require more sessions. On the other hand, the number of attendances per session has shown a downward trend, from 1.6 in 2015/16 to 1.4 in 2022/23. This trend may indicate that services may now be more tailored to the needs of individual clients.

Figure 5.4: DEX reports: Numbers of sessions and attendances, 2015/16–2022/23



Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.5: DEX reports: average number of sessions per client/support person, average number of attendance per session, 2015/16–2022/23



Source: DEX data (DSS)

Service type

Table 5.8 shows the type of services that FRSP activities provided in 2022/23. For FRC, FDR and RFDR, the most common services were the provision of information/advice/referral (32%–35%) and processes such as intake/assessments (32%–41%). Dispute resolution and advocacy/support were other main common services (FRC: 15% and 12% of sessions, respectively; FDR: 14% and 6%; RFDR: 12% and 12%). Counselling accounted for 9% of sessions for RFDR.

Most sessions for FRAL were to provide information/advice/referral (84%), with another 10% giving legal advice. For FLC and SCASP, counselling represented the most common service (65% and 55%, respectively). For CCS, supervised changeover/contact accounted for 47% of sessions, followed by information/advice/referral (27%).

Services provided by POP were relatively more spread compared to other activities, with nearly a quarter of sessions (24%) relating to information/advice/referral, similar proportions of sessions on intake/assessment processes, education and skills training, and counselling (about 20% for each), and to lesser extent on advocacy/support (15%).

Table 5.8: Number of sessions by service type by activity, 2022–23

	Family Relationship Centres	Family Relationship Advice Line	Family Dispute Resolution	Family Law Counselling	Children's Contact Services	Parenting Orders Program	Supporting Children after Separation Program	Regional Family Dispute Resolution
Number (*n*)								
Advocacy/support	25,354	245	1,918	2,215	15,603	5,492	2,870	2,138
Child/Youth focused groups	503		215	64		179	315	27
Community capacity building	144							
Counselling		3		25,063		7,398	12,291	1,503
Dispute resolution	31,548	769	4,383	131		106		2,079
Education and skills training	6,824		862	566	800	7,365	468	384
Information/advice/referral	74,968	48,050	10,601	3,373	25,607	9,015	2,621	5,478
Intake/assessment	69,966	2,175	12,889	7,234	8,735	7,812	3,795	5,597
Legal advice		5,935						
Property mediation	2,065	13	462	6		2		185
Supervised changeover/contact					44,582			
Total sessions	211,372	57,190	31,330	38,652	95,327	37,369	22,360	17,391
Percentage (%)								
Advocacy/support	12.0	0.4	6.1	5.7	16.4	14.7	12.8	12.3
Child/Youth focused groups	0.2	0.0	0.7	0.2	0.0	0.5	1.4	0.2
Community capacity building	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Counselling	0.0	0.0	0.0	64.8	0.0	19.8	55.0	8.6
Dispute resolution	14.9	1.3	14.0	0.3	0.0	0.3	0.0	12.0
Education and skills training	3.2	0.0	2.8	1.5	0.8	19.7	2.1	2.2
Information/advice/referral	35.5	84.0	33.8	8.7	26.9	24.1	11.7	31.5
Intake/assessment	33.1	3.8	41.1	18.7	9.2	20.9	17.0	32.2
Legal advice	0.0	10.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Property mediation	1.0	0.0	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1
Supervised changeover/contact	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	46.8	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: DEX data (DSS)

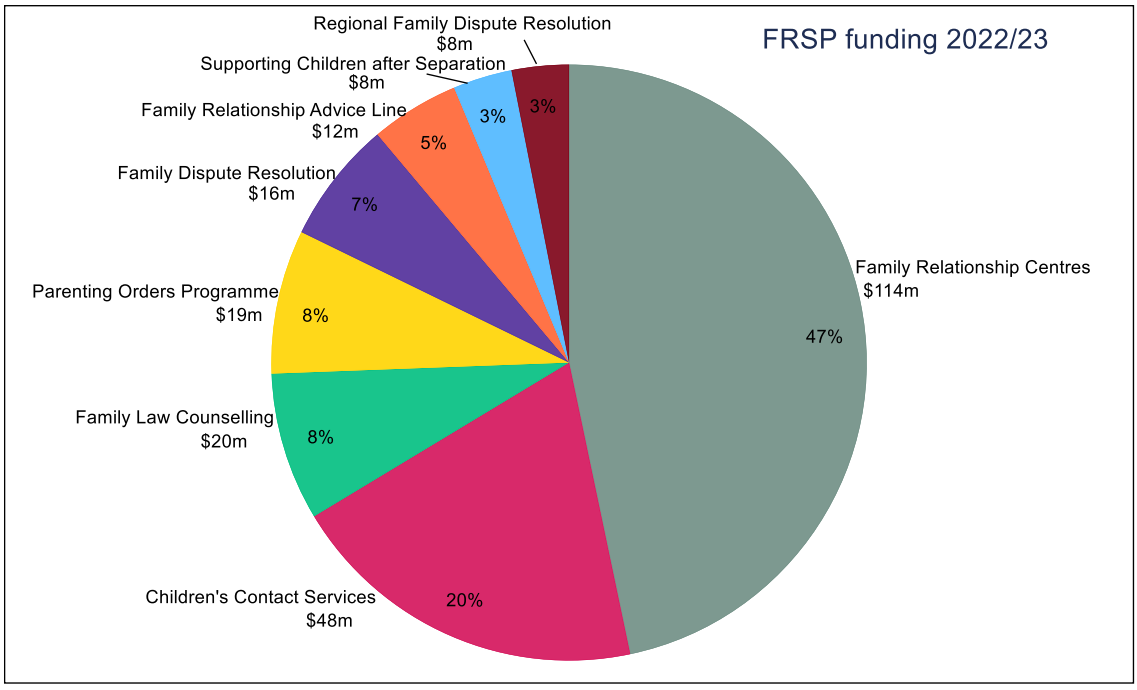
FRSP funding

In 2022/23, the Commonwealth Government invested $244.81 million (excluding GST) in FRSP services, about a 38% increase since 2015/16 (177.89 million, or 215.89 in 2022/23 dollars) , including the Social and Community Supplement, which was a source of separate funding until 30 June 2021 (Table 5.9). The FRCs received the largest share of funding, almost half of the total funding allocated to all 8 FRSP service activities in 2022/23. After FRCs, there was a substantial increase in funding for the CCS; funding for CCSs more than doubled between

2020/21 and 2021/22. Funding for other service activities has increased gradually between 2015/16 and 2022/23. The total allocation of funding by FRSP service activity for the financial year 2022/23 is also presented graphically in Figure 5.6.

The lower panel of Table 5.9 shows the real value of FRSP funding in 2022/23 dollars, using the Consumer Price Index for Australia. Accordingly, the funding values for each service activity and overall funding differ from the nominal values (shown in the top panel of the table) due to escalation.[11] The trend in FRSP funding in nominal and real values is also presented in Figures 5.7 and 5.8.

Figure 5.6: DEX reports: Total FRSP funding for 2022/23, by activity



Source: DEX data (DSS)

Table 5.9: Commonwealth Government funding by activity, nominal and real values [a]

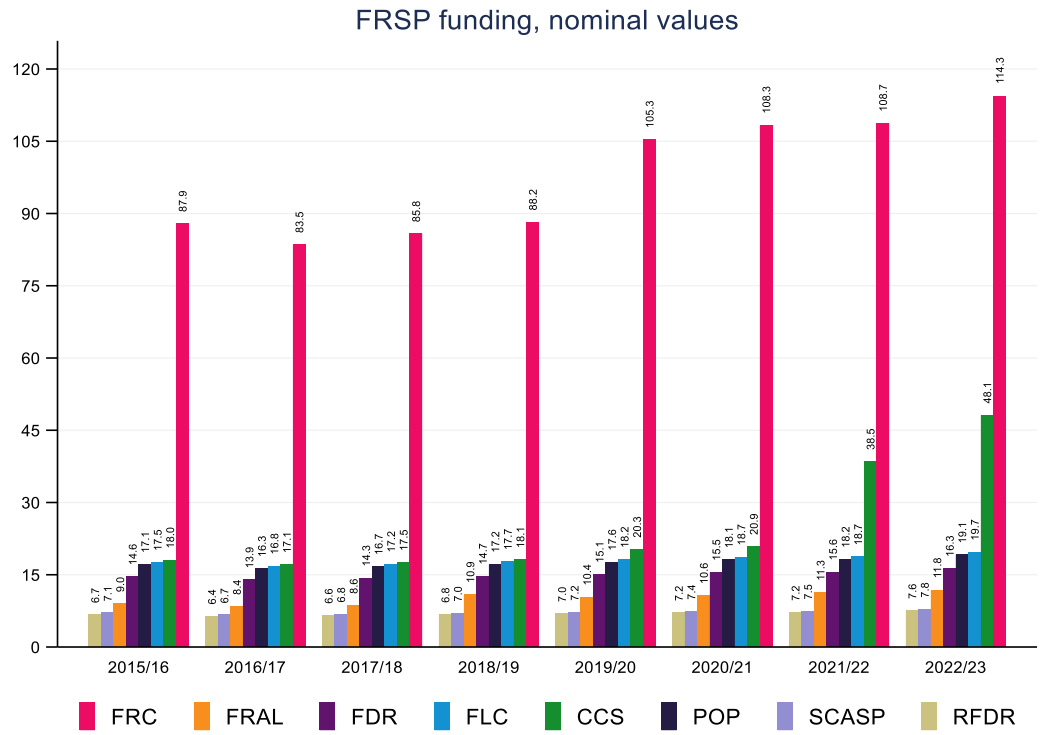
	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Nominal	($m)	($m)	($m)	($m)	($m)	($m)	($m)	($m)
Family Relationship Centres	87.90	83.54	85.78	88.21	105.28	108.26	108.67	114.34
Family Relationship Advice Line	8.99	8.42	8.64	10.89	10.35	10.64	11.26	11.79
Family Dispute Resolution	14.56	13.93	14.30	14.70	15.07	15.49	15.56	16.30
Family Law Counselling	17.54	16.78	17.23	17.71	18.16	18.68	18.70	19.68
Children's Contact Services	18.04	17.07	17.53	18.13	20.27	20.86	38.50	48.14
Parenting Orders Program	17.11	16.25	16.69	17.16	17.60	18.09	18.18	19.11
Supporting Children after Separation Program	7.08	6.67	6.84	7.04	7.22	7.42	7.47	7.85
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	6.73	6.43	6.60	6.79	6.95	7.16	7.20	7.59
Total ($m)	**177.96**	**169.08**	**173.61**	**180.63**	**200.93**	**206.59**	**225.52**	**244.81**
2022/23 dollar	($m)	($m)	($m)	($m)	($m)	($m)	($m)	($m)

[11] We compare the average CPI (i.e. average of 4 quarters of CPI, September, December, March and June) of each financial year to the average CPI (i.e. average of 4 quarters of CPI, September, December, March and June) in 20222/23.

Family Relationship Centres	106.62	99.64	100.37	101.55	119.60	121.01	116.30	114.34
Family Relationship Advice Line	10.91	10.04	10.12	12.53	11.76	11.90	12.05	11.79
Family Dispute Resolution	17.67	16.60	16.73	16.92	17.13	17.32	16.65	16.30
Family Law Counselling	21.28	20.01	20.16	20.39	20.64	20.87	20.01	19.68
Children's Contact Services	21.89	20.36	20.51	20.86	23.03	23.31	41.20	48.14
Parenting Orders Program	20.76	19.39	19.53	19.76	19.99	20.22	19.46	19.11
Supporting Children after Separation Program	8.60	7.95	8.01	8.10	8.20	8.29	8.00	7.85
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	8.16	7.67	7.72	7.81	7.90	8.00	7.70	7.59
Total ($m) [b]	**215.89**	**201.66**	**203.14**	**207.93**	**228.24**	**230.93**	**241.37**	**244.81**

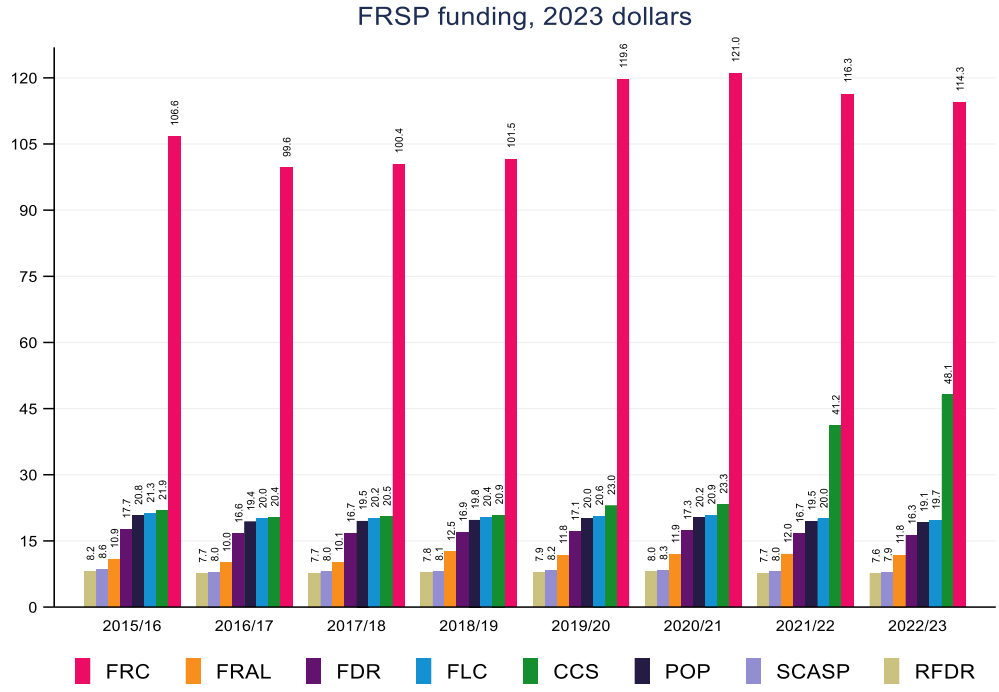
Notes: Real values of funding are based on the CPI 2022/23 (average of 4 quarters Sep-22, Dec-22, March-23 and June-23). Nominal and real values do not include GST.
[a] Social and Community Supplement (SACS) was a separate source of funding until 30 June 2021. This is included for 2015/16–2020/21 based on the analyses of SACS provided by AGD.
[b] The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth grants and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations; hence, the data may not align with the figures based on outlet numbers receiving direct Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.7: DEX reports: Total FRSP funding (nominal values) by activity, 2015/16–2022/23



Note: Includes Social and Community Supplement, which was a source of separate funding until 30 June 2024.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.8: Total FRSP funding (real values) by activity, 2015/16–2022/23



Note: Includes Social and Community Supplement, which was a source of separate funding until 30 June 2024.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Table 5.10 shows average real funding per client (individual and group clients), individual client and session for each service activity, as well as real funding per outlet for all activities combined (see Appendix C3 for funding per individual client by activity or all clients, session and outlet in nominal values). Year-to-year fluctuations in funding per individual client or all clients are likely to reflect changes in client volume. Similarly, year-to-year fluctuations in funding per session likely reflect variations in sessions over the years. At the same time, fluctuation in funding per outlet per activity has been affected by the variations in the number of outlets over the years, which dropped by 4% in 2020/21, remained stable in the following financial year and increased up to 2% in 2022/23.

The funding data presented here are of a general nature, and do not reflect the data based on Commonwealth grant recipients, which include outlets receiving direct Commonwealth grants and funding arrangements through their lead organisations. The average annual growth rate of average funding per individual client shown in Figure 5.9 does not reflect the average annual growth of overall government funding.

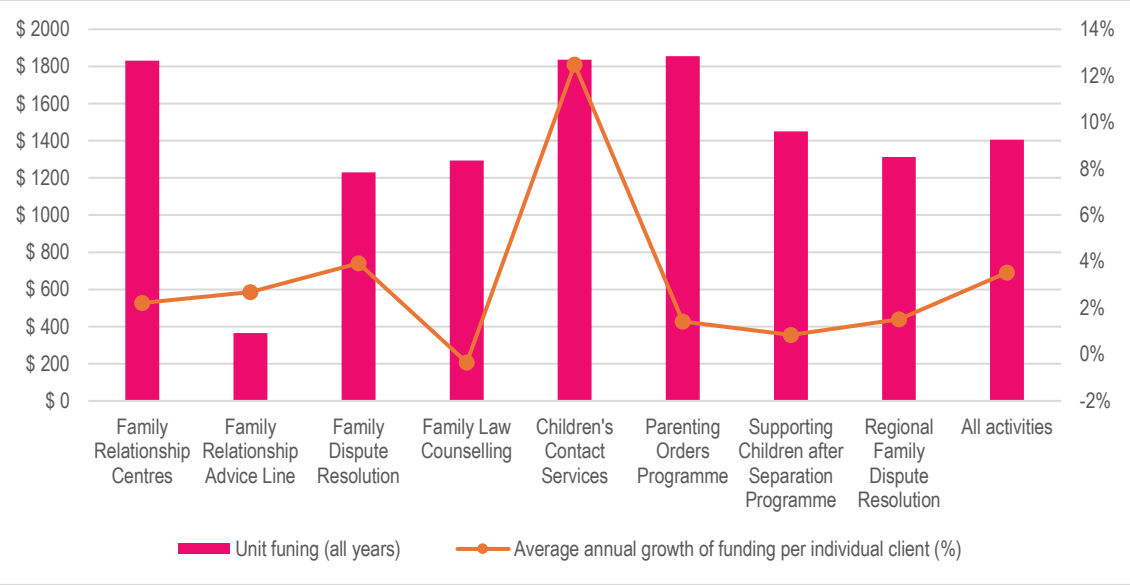
Table 5.10: Average Commonwealth Government funding per individual client or all clients, session and outlet, real values (2022/23 dollars) [a]

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Average **funding per individual client**	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)
Family Relationship Centres	1,863.7	1,649.9	1,635.9	1,682.0	1,836.9	1,906.6	1,944.1	2,172.5
Family Relationship Advice Line	354.0	332.8	375.7	359.7	320.5	351.0	428.9	426.3
Family Dispute Resolution	1,166.5	1,078.7	1,034.5	1,088.5	1,193.1	1,435.3	1,557.9	1,527.2
Family Law Counselling	1,768.3	1,276.0	1,024.6	1,025.4	1,165.7	1,272.2	1,516.0	1,725.4
Children's Contact Services	1,464.1	1,229.2	1,180.6	1,270.4	1,667.1	1,812.0	3,169.9	3,336.4
Parenting Orders Program	1,963.0	1,723.3	1,618.0	1,654.8	1,832.2	1,947.9	2,082.1	2,166.5
Supporting Children after Separation Program	1,445.4	1,391.6	1,392.8	1,360.6	1,416.5	1,529.4	1,568.5	1,531.8
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	1,379.3	1,214.0	1,289.8	1,367.5	1,264.8	1,249.1	1,255.8	1,532.5
All activities combined	1,414.8	1,248.8	1,228.9	1,218.2	1,337.7	1,435.1	1,660.9	1,803.9
Average **funding per client (group and individual)**	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)	($/client)
Family Relationship Centres	1,503.2	1,368.9	1,400.3	1,520.5	1,754.5	1,845.6	1,793.4	2,022.4
Family Relationship Advice Line	326.5	304.7	355.1	359.0	320.4	350.9	428.7	426.0
Family Dispute Resolution	943.9	942.7	1,001.5	1,047.4	1,187.4	1,435.1	1,557.6	1,517.4
Family Law Counselling	1,602.0	1,173.9	985.7	1,014.9	1,146.5	1,265.6	1,510.6	1,709.5
Children's Contact Services	1,195.7	1,084.0	1,117.2	1,257.8	1,650.4	1,786.7	3,141.7	3,286.5
Parenting Orders Program	1,403.0	1,344.8	1,343.0	1,553.3	1,738.4	1,842.8	2,018.8	2,071.6
Supporting Children after Separation Program	1,091.6	1,134.5	1,142.3	1,167.5	1,413.3	1,520.9	1,561.8	1,482.3
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	1,122.9	1,029.7	1,146.2	1,321.6	1,241.4	1,223.5	1,240.0	1,505.4
All activities combined	1,169.6	1,072.3	1,104.2	1,154.5	1,304.9	1,407.7	1,598.7	1,740.1
Average **funding per session**	($/session)	($/session)	($/session)	($/session)	($/session)	($/session)	($/session)	($/session)
Family Relationship Centres	632.5	547.5	495.0	519.9	510.5	484.2	487.7	540.9
Family Relationship Advice Line	256.7	214.5	228.3	219.6	151.8	168.4	210.4	206.2
Family Dispute Resolution	546.2	437.9	424.1	468.2	463.5	477.5	482.5	520.3
Family Law Counselling	675.5	497.7	371.7	373.7	400.7	395.6	448.9	509.2
Children's Contact Services	243.4	218.6	221.9	242.7	296.2	309.9	534.2	505.0

Parenting Orders Program	688.8	599.8	525.5	509.3	494.5	472.2	476.1	511.5
Supporting Children after Separation Program	491.1	461.2	383.9	368.2	362.1	376.3	363.3	351.2
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	513.5	485.1	501.9	484.1	408.7	374.5	384.0	436.4
All activities combined	503.9	433.3	401.0	410.9	407.3	404.4	451.3	479.1
Average funding per outlet per activity [b]	**($/activity-outlet)**	**($/activity-outlet)**	**($/activity-outlet)**	**($/activity-outlet)**	**($/activity-outlet)**	**($/activity-outlet)**	**($/activity-outlet)**	**($/activity-outlet)**
All activities combined (000's)	299.01	267.45	264.17	269.69	296.80	311.23	325.30	322.96

Notes: The real values of funding are based on the CPI 2022/23 (the average of 4 quarters: Sep-22, Dec-22, March-23 and June-23). Real values do not include GST.
All clients refer to the total of individual and group clients. See Tables 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6 for the number of outlets, individual clients and sessions by activity. SACS is rolled into mainstream funding after 30 June 2021.
[a] Includes Social and Community Supplement (SACS), which was a source of separate funding until 30 June 2021.
[b] The activity-outlet numbers (as shown in Table 5.4) include outlets with direct Commonwealth funding and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations, and do not reflect average grant per outlet based on outlets receiving direct Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

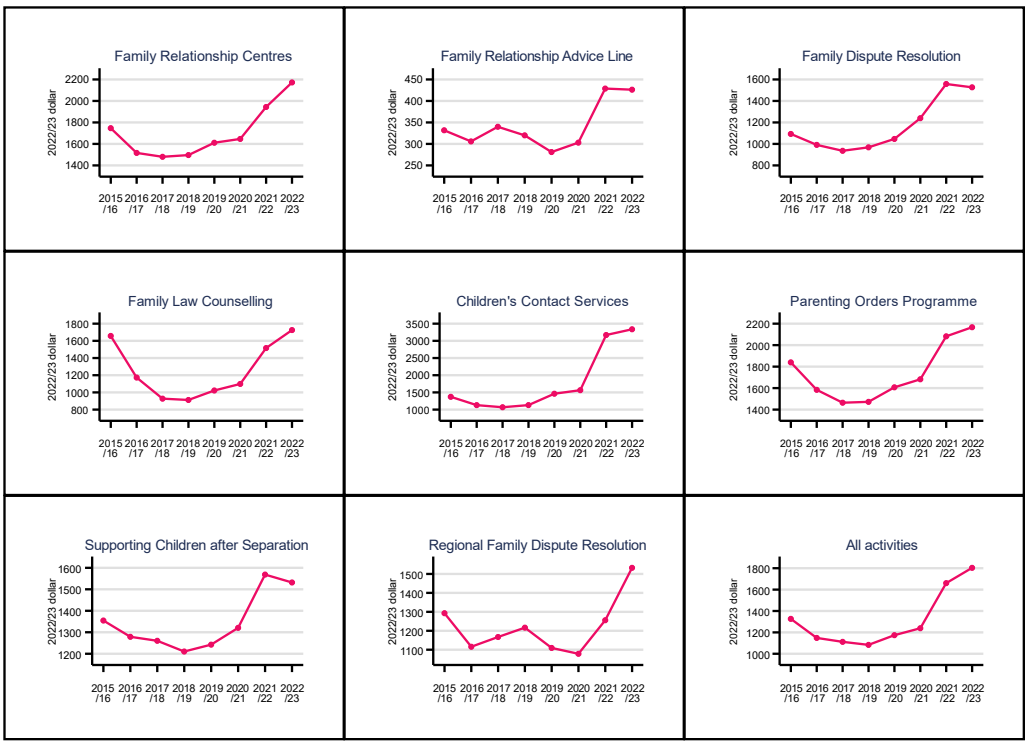
Figure 5.9: Average unit funding (per individual client in 2022/23 dollars) by activity and average annual growth between 2015/16 and 2022/23 in real value [a]



Notes: [a] Includes Social and Community Supplement (SACS), which was a source of separate funding until 30 June 2021, and was rolled into mainstream funding after 30 June 2021. The outlet numbers include outlets with direct Commonwealth funding and with funding arrangements through their lead organisations, and do not reflect average grant per outlet based on outlets receiving direct Commonwealth grants.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.10 shows the trends in funding per individual client in real value by activity. Across most activities, the unit funding has increased since 2018/19. Notably, unit funding for the CCS increased sharply between 2020/21 and 2021/22, which is a reflection of new CCS services coming into operation and associated start-up costs.

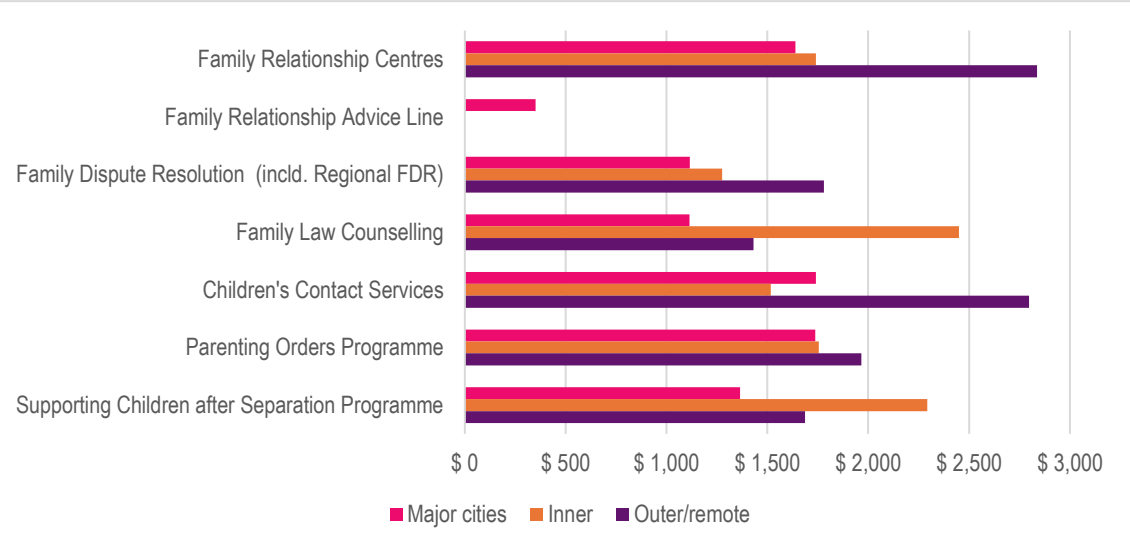
Figure 5.10: Average annual unit funding (per individual client in 2022/23 dollars) by activity,[a] 2015/16–2022/23



Notes: Based on the data in Table 5.10. [a] Includes Social and Community Supplement (SACS), which was a source of separate funding until 30 June 2021.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.11 shows funding per individual client for different activities by organisation remoteness, based on the combined funding of 8 financial years from 2015/16 to 2022/23. All fundings are CPI adjusted to the 2022/23 real value. The figure shows that organisations with their main outlet locations in major cities had lower funding per individual client than organisations with their outlet locations in other remoteness areas. Organisations with their main outlet locations in outer or remote areas received higher funding per individual client except with the activities FLC and the SCASP.

Figure 5.11: Average funding per individual client (in 2022/23 dollars) by activity by organisation remoteness (determined by the main remoteness of its outlets),[a] all financial years from 2015/16 to 2022/23[b]



Notes: [a] An organisation's remoteness is determined by the main remoteness of its outlets (see Box 5.1). [b] Includes Social and Community Supplement (SACS), which was a source of separate funding until 30 June 2021, and was rolled into mainstream funding from 1 July 2021.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Box 5.1: Determining an organisation's remoteness area

An organisation often has multiple outlets for an activity. The funding data are provided at the level of lead organisations, instead of the outlet level. For this reason, an organisation's remoteness is determined by the main remoteness of its outlets (the highest percentage of combined clients by outlet remoteness).

The outlet remoteness is determined by its outlet SA2, and all outlet individual clients are assigned to this outlet remoteness. If the SA2 where an outlet is located is split across remoteness areas, the outlet clients are also proportionally split accordingly. For an organisation, its outlet clients are then combined according to outlet remoteness, which creates organisation-level data. Therefore, an organisation may have outlet clients across multiple remoteness areas, which applies to 44%–48% of organisations across financial years.

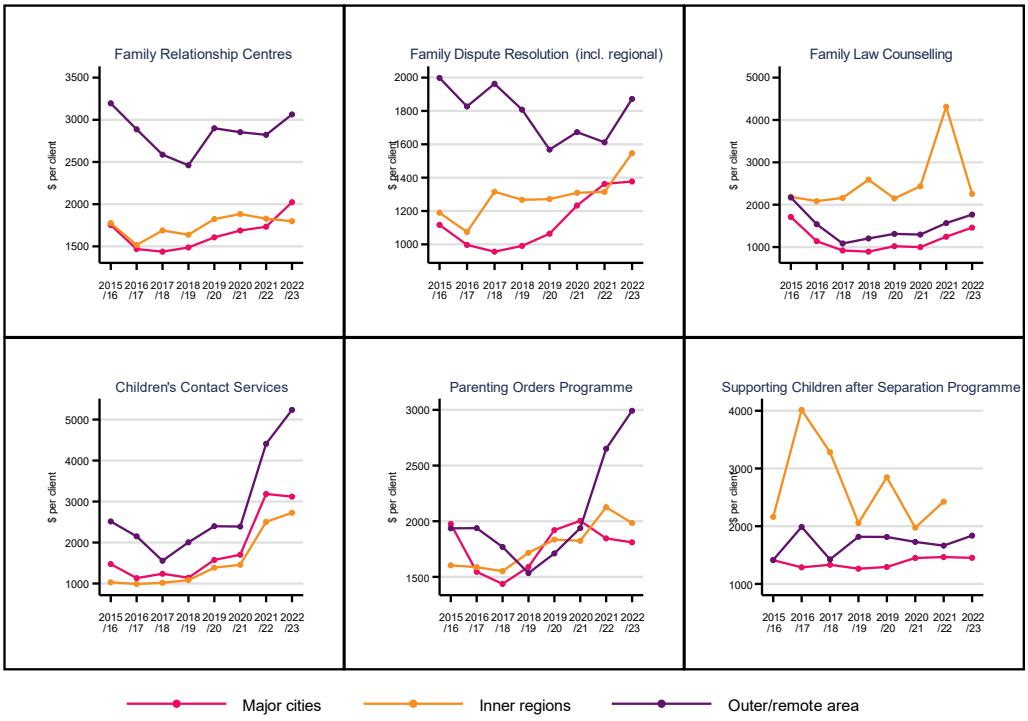
In this analysis, the classification of organisation remoteness is based on the largest share of clients by outlet remoteness, 60% or more. Organisations with clients similarly split across outlet remoteness areas, with the largest share of clients by outlet remoteness less than 60%, are excluded from the analyses, which account for 4%–7% of organisations across financial years. For example, an organisation has 3 outlets, with 2 outlets in the inner region serving 65% of clients and 1 in the outer region serving 35% of clients. This organisation is classified as inner region.

Figure 5.12 shows the trends in funding per individual client (also referred to as unit funding) by organisation remoteness across 8 financial years. Note the FRAL delivers its services via telephone and online, and therefore is not presented in this figure. Consistent with the general trends described above, outer regions and remote areas received higher unit funding than inner regions and major cities, except for FLC and the SCASP for all 8 financial years.

For FLC and the SCASP, inner regions had the highest unit funding compared to major cities and outer and remote areas. Major cities had either the lowest or were similar to the lower bounds of the other 2 area groups in terms of unit funding.

For all activities presented, unit funding increased in real value over the last 4 or 5 financial years regardless of remoteness areas, with the trend being more pronounced for CCSs and POPs Orders Programs in outer and remote areas. The increase in unit funding in real value over 4 or 5 financial years is notable for FRCs, FDR (including Regional FDR), CCSs and POPs.

Figure 5.12: Funding per individual client (in 2022/23 dollars) by organisation remoteness (determined by the main remoteness of its outlets)[a] by activity, 2015/16 to 2022/23[b]



Notes: [a] An organisation's remoteness is determined by the main remoteness of its outlets (see Box 5.1).
[b] Includes Social and Community Supplement (SACS), which was a source of separate funding until 30 June 2021.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Service provision: operational insights from the RFI

FRSP intake, screening and risk assessment

Qualitative responses providing insight into the intake, screening and risk assessment process were submitted by 8 out of 10 of the service providers participating in the RFI.

Most of the participating service providers described the intake process as being a 'gateway' (Service 3) that facilitates clients to access the 'holistic support' they require for their diverse needs (Service 2), and enables services to 'triage appropriately to other programs within and external to (our service)' (Service 3). The intake processes described by service providers involved the collection and assessment of comprehensive information about clients' demographic and family characteristics and the implementation of risk screening processes to support the assessment of clients' needs and their triage through the service (or referral to external service) activities.

One service provider described a First Point of Contact (FPOC) triage-based service delivered by FPOC staff and with oversight from a Family Relationship Advisor. The FPOC establishes the client's presenting needs and offers suitable information, advice and referrals to meet this need, 'supporting access to the right information at the right time and to help navigate clients regarding next steps' (Service 8).

> [Our organisation] is committed to ensuring clients receive holistic support for the diverse challenges they face. We recognise that no single organisation or service can meet all the needs of a client, so we want to complete a comprehensive assessment at the beginning of our service delivery to ensure we understand **clients' needs** and their unique circumstances. That way we can understand what part we can play in assisting them, and can help identify and access other strategies and supports in the community for the things that we are not able to do.
>
> When a client first contacts [us] we need to collect demographic information and ensure a client knows what rights they have and what they are consenting to as participants of the service. This information is recorded on the [client intake form, and information and consent form] … completed before or at the first appointment. ... To avoid clients having to retell their story multiple times we use a single assessment document and all staff who see that client add to it over time ... It is not envisaged that practitioners would necessarily take the tool into sessions and run through it like a Q&A session. The preferred practice is to become closely acquainted with this document, have its contents in mind and then use it to document your assessment after the client session. (Service 2)

Service providers nominated the following tools used by services to support the screening, assessment and triaging of clients accessing the FRSP services:

- intake and assessment tools based on the DOORS Tool
- CRAMF for FDV assessment
- Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT)
- checklist of Suitability Involving FDV
- Dangerous Assessment Scale (DASS)

- Risk assessment and Safety Planning form for suicide risk
- Personal Safety Plan for FDV victims/survivors
- internal client risk assessment and management frameworks/forms
- Detection of Overall Risk Screen (DOORS) and assessment tool
- Family Law DOORS
- Young Person DOORS
- MARAM and suicide risk assessment
- Suicide Assessment Toolkit (SAK)
- Ask Suicide Screening Questions (ASQ) from National Institute of Mental Health
- Indigenous Risk Impact Screen.

Some service providers participating in the RFI described steps taken in implementing the intake, screening, assessment and triage process. For example:

> Many of our clients have complex circumstances impacting on their lives, e.g. the co-existence of post-separation or relationship difficulties, domestic and family violence, mental health, alcohol or other drug dependency and other issues that show the importance of integrated service delivery. The Assessment Tool is designed to support such an approach. In addition to the questions in the Assessment Tool or Post Separation Assessment form, the CCS Coordinator should ask additional questions directly related to the use of the CCS. ... To help manage the multi-faceted risk issues that come with complex situations we also utilise the Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT) and the Suicide Assessment Kit (SAK – a suicide risk screener). [Our service] encourages all practitioners to be confident and competent in the area of identifying and responding to domestic and family violence, and risk of suicide. As such, all practitioners have access to core training in DV-AVERT and ASSIST as part of induction and refresher training at regular intervals. (Service 2)

> FDR, RFDR, FRC and FLC clients undertake thorough assessment to determine safety, and (for FDR clients) capacity and willingness to participate in FDR. This includes child safety/abuse risk, family violence, mental health and suicide risk. A comprehensive assessment is undertaken individually for Party 1 and Party 2 to ensure that risk is thoroughly assessed before proceeding to FDR or RFDR (at all centres including FRCs) or couples [for] joint Family Law Counselling. Party 1 will be invited to an assessment and after this has been completed, the Client Services Officer will send an invitation to Party 2 to attend an assessment. The assessment determines client suitability for FDR, RFDR, individual and joint family law counselling if requested. In general, family law counselling will be undertaken individually, with joint sessions provided if required and safe to undertake. For FDR and RFDR, a separate form is filled out providing the rationale for proceeding or not proceeding. If it is determined that family violence is occurring, referrals are made to the Men's Behaviour Change Program for men using violence and the FV counselling program for adults and children experiencing violence. (Service 1)

Additionally, this service provider explained that further risk assessment and triage is undertaken as directed including:

> 1. FDR/ RFDR: practitioner will undertake intermediate MARAM and suicide risk assessment if required and will refer to family violence support services where client may benefit from additional family violence support.
>
> 2. All FDRPs receive training in ASIST (Suicide intervention) and MARAM intermediate and collaborative practice training, funded by DFFH and available on a regular basis.
>
> 3. Child Inclusive Practice (CIP) and Child Focused Practice (CFP) is provided at [redacted] utilising an opt-in approach. Separating families are assessed by a specialist CIP practitioner for suitability for CIP (see Child Inclusive FDR form attached separately) and, if suitable, the CIP practitioner will undertake a session with the child and then ensure the child's preferences are taken into consideration during the service. CFP does not involve direct work with the child; however, takes into consideration their needs as relayed by P1 and P2. (Service 1)

Information sharing protocols

A small number of participating service providers submitted details of their information sharing protocols. Those service providers described approaches that were sensitive to clients' privacy and confidentiality, while also facilitating appropriate information sharing:

> Our Request for Client Information Policy details our information sharing protocols. [Our organisation] is committed to honouring its duty of care in relation to safeguarding client communications and disclosures, and ensuring procedures are in place and followed to protect personal and/or sensitive client information in managing requests for client information by ensuring compliance with relevant policies, procedures and legislation. For example: Client information requests may include but are not limited to:
> – Subpoenas served to produce Children's Contact Services notes and non-privileged notes (e.g. Family and Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS) and Royal Commission Community Based Support Services (RCBSS)
> – Subpoenas served to produce privileged notes (e.g. Post Separation Cooperative Parenting and family counselling)
> – Request for a professional written report or attendance summary
> – Request to provide a support letter advocating for a client and
> – Client requests to view own case notes or have a copy of their file.
> There is a detailed process in relation to each of the above scenarios. (Service 2)

Another service provider described the careful consideration given to the information sharing protocols and practices, acknowledging that 'providing family law services requires efficient information sharing systems and cooperation between government and non-government bodies' (Service 3). This service provider, together with another service provider submitting a response to this question (Service 1), emphasised the importance of their privacy and confidentiality obligations were 'not just a legal requirement but a fundamental aspect of providing compassionate and responsible service' (Service 3).

In practical terms, this required staff to provide clients with information regarding consent, privacy, confidentiality and how service data are used when they commence engagement with the service, and emphasised the importance of 'transparency with clients about the issues revealed during screening and risk assessment and the intended use of their data' (Service 3).

Critical incident protocols and responses

Fundamentally, there was alignment in services' definitions of a 'critical incident'. These included definitions that conceptualised an incident that demanded an immediate or emergency response and the potential for serious harm or trauma arising from it, whether the harm was threatened or real. One service further delineated incidents into those that impacted or focused on children, clients or the organisation.

All services had protocols in place to respond to critical incidents and provided some details on this process. These protocols included measures such as completing internal reports, informing AGD of the incident, considering mandatory reporting obligations, reporting criminal incidents to police and using checklists to confirm these protocols were followed.

Site specifications

Data on site specifications were available for 6 services (Service 2, Service 3, Service 4, Service 5, Service 6 and Service 7). Each of these services reported the availability of:

- separate entrances and exits
- consulting/meeting rooms
- security cameras within building
- duress alarm/s
- disability access
- public transport accessibility
- age-appropriate facilities for children and young people.

Five services (Service 2, Service 3, Service 4, Service 5 and Service 7) indicated the availability of:

- supervision rooms (CCS)
- withdrawal spaces
- security camera/s – entry/exit points.

Carparking was also reported to be available for 5 services (Service 2, Service 3, Service 4, Service 5 and Service 6).

In addition, soundproofing was available at 4 services (Service 2, Service 3, Service 5 and Service 6), as was an outdoor play area (Service 2, Service 4, Service 5 and Service 7).

Seven services provided data on physical site characteristics, with 6 indicating the service site was a standalone building (Service 2, Service 3, Service 4, Service 5, Service 6 and Service 7), and 3 of these services (Service 4, Service 5, Service 6) also identifying an outreach service.

Data on hours of operation were available for 8 services, with all being open from Monday to Friday (inclusive). Half of these 8 services were also open on both Saturday and Sunday.

FRSP staff pre-employment checks, qualifications and training

Pre-employment checks

Data submitted in response to the AIFS RFI from the sampled organisations indicate combinations of the following pre-employment checks:

- national police check
- international police check (where applicable)
- current Working with Children Check (WWC) or Working with Children Blue Card
- reference checks
- visa entitlement verification for applicants in Australia on a visa
- qualification verification (where required)
- personal disclosure statement
- compliance with professional code of conduct
- signing of a Policy acknowledgement
- confirmation that staff have received a COVID-19 vaccine and booster vaccine.

Qualifications and training

Organisations participating in the request for information submitted details of the range of qualifications required for employment in the FRSP ranging from certificate, diploma, tertiary qualifications through to FDR practitioner accreditation.

Participants in the request for information also outlined training requirements for FRSP professionals that included compulsory training in the following areas:

- DFV
- trauma-informed practice
- child inclusive practice
- child safe practices
- culturally and linguistically diverse – cultural awareness training
- First Nations – cultural awareness training
- service provision for adults and/or children with disability.

Data regarding professional development were available for 6 of the 10 organisations but with varying degrees of information provided. Three of the six organisations reported that staff had completed each of the compulsory training areas listed above in the past 18 months.

Five organisations reported that their staff had completed compulsory DFV training, trauma-informed practice, child safe practice, culturally and linguistically diverse – cultural awareness training and First Nations – cultural awareness training. In addition, 2 organisations reported that their staff had not completed training in service provision for adults and/or children with disability.

Service-specific qualifications and training programs nominated include:

- legally assisted mediation training
- property mediation training
- conflict coaching
- DFV training
- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) and person-centred de-escalation training
- Diploma of Counselling and Graduate Diploma of Family Dispute Resolution.

One service provider (Service 6) elaborated on what the training in their organisation involves, highlighting the importance of staff being equipped to work with complex families in a trauma-informed way:

> We provide Family and Couples Counselling professional development for msot [sic] counsellors as often they do not come with the specific education and experience needed to assist couples and complex families … DFV training includes mandatory DV reporting and mandatory child abuse reporting … Trauma-informed practice training includes ASIST course … (Service 6)

Cultural safety and inclusion

Participants in the RFI were asked to reflect on any current cultural safety and inclusive practices, and recent significant changes to these in relation to First Nations clients, with 6 participants answering this question. Participants were also asked if they had any further comments about cultural safety, inclusion or accessibility and how diverse families are supported.

Three participants reiterated that staff undertake regular cultural awareness training as captured in the following example:

> All staff undertake cultural fitness training opportunities over the year. This is an essential part of working at [Service]. (Service 6)

The same 3 participants detailed the employment of First Nations staff in key service delivery roles, including counsellors, family dispute resolution practitioners (FDRPs) and Aboriginal Liaison Officers. For example:

> We also have a number of First Nations FDRPs, counsellors and Contact Workers who provide these services directly to clients. Our flagship parenting program for separated parents [Name of Parenting Program] has a specific First Nations version and all First Nations workers have been trained in its delivery. (Service 2)

> Recent appointment of Aboriginal Cultural Liaison Officer to inform practices. (Service 9)

Some services noted the importance of ensuring that ‘mainstream’ services are accessible to First Nations families by employing First Nations staff, and by including culturally specific content within mainstream services. For example:

> We are developing mainstream programs that use First Nations cultural content to support the therapeutic interventions we provide. (Service 2)

Additionally, 3 services reported the establishment of First Nations reference groups to provide feedback on staffing and training and to support culturally appropriate service provision for First Nations families:

> A First Nations staff reference group who provide advice and consultation to the organisation on service delivery, staffing matters and training. (Service 2)

> All services have access to a First Nations Practice Lead and First Nations Leadership Group to provide advice, information and support on culturally appropriate service delivery. (Service 6)

Adapting and tailoring services to the specific needs of First Nations clients was also highlighted in the RFI responses, with 7 participants providing examples of how they facilitate inclusive service delivery. For example, 2 services noted the importance of facilitating the involvement of Elders and kin in various services for First Nations clients, as the following example illustrates:

> We adapt our service delivery to meet the needs of First Nations clients, particularly in recognising the cultural importance of kin when supporting First Nations clients with separation and parenting. (Service 2)

Flexibility and adaptability were important features of ensuring that services met the needs of First Nations families in the examples provided. One service noted that First Nations clients have the option of seeking further tailored support from First Nations staff, while another highlighted the importance of consistently monitoring and adapting culturally safe approaches:

> … culturally safe and responsive practices are evidence informed, monitored and adapted as required … (Service 3)

Participants in the RFI were also asked to comment on any current cultural safety and inclusive practices, and recent significant changes to these in relation to CALD clients, with 4 participants answering this question.

In relation to supporting CALD families, 3 services specifically noted staff training (Service 2, Service 3 and Service 6). Nominated aspects of staff training included:

- cultural competency
- understanding diversity of clients
- relevant legislation
- how culture shapes clients' interactions with services.

Furthermore, one service (Service 2) described formalised guidance from CALD stakeholders to support culturally safe service delivery and staff training, with another (Service 3) reporting the employment of a CALD Liaison Officer to support CALD clients.

Data on availability of interpreting services were available for 7 services, with only one service indicating that fees are charged for interpreting services. All 7 services (Service 2, Service 3, Service 4, Service 5, Service 6, Service 7 and Service 9) reported that interpreting services were available for intake and assessment, during in-person service provision, and during online or virtual service provision. Six of the services (Service 2, Service 3, Service 5, Service 6, Service 7 and Service 9) reported that interpreting services were also available during outreach/community/offsite service provision.

Child focused policies and practices

Orientation/familiarisation/inclusion

Five services provided information on their orientation and familiarisation practices. This ranged from formal assessment with a Child Inclusive Practitioner for family suitability to this type of practice to a more casual drop-in to meet staff at the service and familiarise the child with the

surroundings. However, the variation depended on the nature of the service and the level of formality appropriate in the orientation process. For services such as counselling and mediation, the opt-in nature of the child being included was also prioritised. One service with a specific Child Inclusive Practitioner held a session with the child to obtain child preferences but the subsequent work was held only with the parents.

Child refusal to participate

Protocols for child refusal were most relevant to CCS services; however, for all 3 services that provided information on child refusal, their policies mean the service will not take place if the child does not want to participate.

> Services are strictly voluntary, therefore if a child is unwilling to attend, then the service is not provided … (Service 8)

Additional child focused policies

Two services provided policy information about their frameworks for child safety and child centred practice – describing detailed approaches that reference legislative obligations as well as the benefits of supporting safe and healthy children within communities. Both policies put safety and the wellbeing of the children and young people as the central priorities.

Client demographic characteristics

Table 5.11 presents the demographic characteristics of individual clients overall as well as by activity in 2022/23 (see trends of each demographic characteristic for all activities combined from 2015/16 to 2022/23 in Appendix C4). It also shows the characteristics of the general population based on the 2021 Census for comparison. Consistent with the previous evaluation (KPMG, 2016), FRSP individual clients differed from the general population in age and household composition but were similar to the general population in other demographic characteristics presented in the table.

Representation of First Nations clients

It is noteworthy that recent analyses of DEX FRSP program data, including for this FRSP Review and the Evaluation of Children's Contact Service Activity (ALRC, 2019; Carson et al., 2023; KPMG, 2016), indicate that the representation of First Nations clients in these services exceeds their representation in the population (5.4% across FRSP cf. 3.2% according to the 2021 Census). This does not mean, however, that there is not unmet need among First Nations families. This is because the First Nations population includes a substantially greater proportion of the family types that the FRSP Program is oriented toward compared to the general population. First Nations families have disproportionately higher levels of one-parent households with dependent children in Australia (21% compared to 6% of other households) and are more than 3 times as likely to be composed of multiple families (5.5% compared to 1.5%) (AIHW, 2015, p 16).

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) clients

The representation of CALD populations in FRSP clients is well below their representation in the Australian population. Only 3% of FRSP clients were from CALD background, compared to 17% of the population. Here CALD background considers those who were born overseas and their main spoken language is not English. People from CALD backgrounds may face additional

barriers to the FRSP – for example, lack of awareness of FRSP services, language barriers and so on.

Table 5.11: DEX report: Client demographics by service type by activity, 2022/23

	FRC	FRAL	FDR	FLC	CCS	POP	SCASP	RFDR	All	2021 Census
					Percentage (%)					
Age										
0–4	0.2	0.6	0.1	0.3	10.9	0.3	0.7	0.3	1.6	5.8
5–9	0.5	0.0	0.3	3.5	16.9	2.5	26.5	0.7	3.7	6.2
10–14	0.7	0.0	0.5	4.8	8.8	2.0	21.3	0.9	2.8	6.2
15–19	0.6	0.4	0.2	2.1	1.3	0.7	2.9	1.0	0.9	5.7
20–24	4.0	3.1	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.9	0.3	5.9	3.4	6.2
25–29	11.1	9.0	8.4	7.1	8.2	10.3	1.9	12.5	9.5	7.0
30–34	18.8	16.3	16.5	13.2	12.7	18.0	6.5	19.0	16.5	7.3
35–39	21.7	18.3	20.7	17.1	13.7	21.2	12.5	19.8	19.1	7.2
40–44	18.7	17.7	20.2	16.6	11.0	19.7	13.5	16.1	17.4	6.5
45–49	12.4	11.9	14.9	12.3	6.6	12.1	8.8	10.9	11.6	6.4
50–54	6.2	8.4	8.4	8.9	3.3	5.6	3.7	5.9	6.7	6.3
55–59	2.2	4.3	3.2	4.2	1.4	1.9	0.7	3.4	2.8	6.1
60–64	1.2	3.1	1.6	2.7	1.0	0.7	0.2	1.6	1.7	5.8
65+	1.6	6.9	2.0	4.3	1.3	1.0	0.6	2.1	2.2	17.2
Gender										
Male	46.7	40.4	47.0	37.9	47.8	46.4	41.8	46.0	44.7	49.3
Female	53.2	59.6	52.9	62.0	52.1	53.5	58.2	54.0	55.2	50.7
Other	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	..
Indigenous status										
Indigenous	5.8	3.6	3.9	4.5	8.8	5.8	3.7	7.9	5.4	3.2
Non-Indigenous	91.2	93.1	93.6	91.0	88.7	91.4	94.7	88.7	91.5	91.9
Not stated	2.9	3.3	2.6	4.5	2.5	2.8	1.6	3.4	3.2	4.9
CALD (born overseas and speaking a language other than English at home)										
CALD	3.8	1.5	4.2	4.7	3.4	3.2	2.4	0.9	3.2	16.8
Non-CALD	96.2	98.5	95.8	95.3	96.6	96.8	97.6	99.1	96.8	83.2
Household composition										
Couple	4.7	7.7	5.2	11.0	4.5	3.9	0.8	8.2	5.5	29.9
Couple with dependant(s)	19.0	21.8	20.3	32.8	15.2	18.8	24.4	21.3	20.7	41.5
Sole parent with dependant(s)	43.4	39.1	45.0	32.5	45.5	46.4	60.0	41.0	43.4	8.0
Living alone	16.0	16.6	17.7	11.8	17.8	16.8	6.2	15.9	15.6	11.0
Group	16.9	14.9	11.8	11.9	17.0	14.2	8.6	13.6	15.0	9.6
Disability										
Yes	5.0	3.0	4.4	7.1	10.4	7.2	6.5	4.8	5.4	6.1
No	95.0	97.0	95.6	92.9	89.6	92.8	93.5	95.2	94.6	93.9
Education										

Degree or higher	19.2	22.6	25.4	25.6	12.8	20.4	18.7	15.9	20.2	28.8
Other post-school qualification	41.4	40.5	41.1	44.2	37.1	39.0	23.2	41.8	40.3	27.8
Secondary education	38.0	34.7	32.5	26.3	36.4	37.6	28.0	40.4	35.1	43.4
Primary/pre-primary	1.3	2.2	1.0	3.9	13.7	3.0	30.0	1.9	4.4	-
Employment										
Full-time	49.9	45.2	53.2	41.6	31.3	44.3	33.9	49.8	46.7	36.8
Part-time	22.9	22.1	23.2	21.7	18.3	22.8	8.7	22.5	21.5	20.4
Not employed	27.2	32.7	23.6	36.7	50.5	32.9	57.4	27.7	31.9	42.8

Notes: For each characteristic, clients with missing data were excluded. The proportion of clients with missing data regarding age and gender was negligible (less than 0.5%), small for household composition and disability (about 5%), and significant for education and employment (62% and 61%, respectively). 'Not Stated' data were excluded from the 2021 Census for these variables: CALD, disability, education and employment.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Age profile

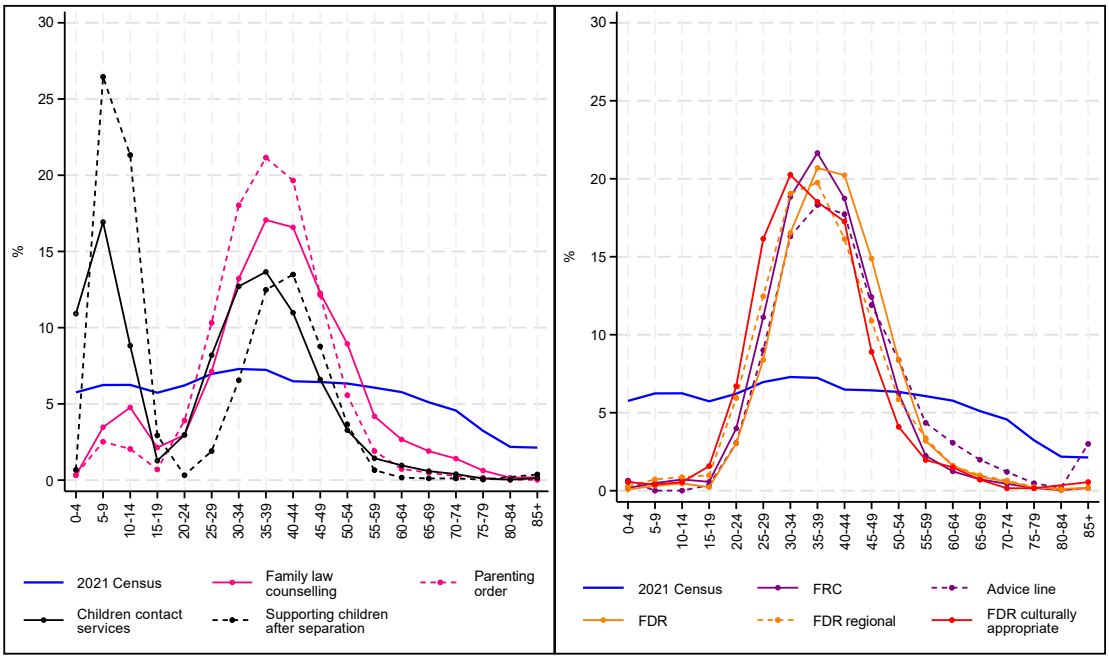
Across all the activities, the individual clients were typically 25–49 years old. As shown in Figure 5.13, these age groups were over-represented compared to the population age profile (the 2021 Census). Nearly three-quarters of individual clients (74%) were aged 25–49 years, compared to just over one-third (34%) of the general population. While this pattern is evident across all the activities, the representation of clients aged 25–49 years is more pronounced for FRS, FRAL, FDR (general and regional), and the POP (78%–83%), compared to other activities.

Children under 15 were also over-represented among individual clients of CCS and SCASP activities, with 37% and 49%, respectively, in this age range, compared to 1%–9% of clients in other activities and 18% of the general population. The patterns in clients' age profiles across activities have changed little since 2015/16 (see Figure C1 in Appendix C4).

Household composition

The family compositions among FRSP individual clients are very different when compared to the general population. More than 4 in 10 clients (43%) lived in one-parent families with dependants, compared with less than 1 in 10 (8%) for the general population, as would be expected. By contrast, the proportion of individual clients living with a partner, with or without dependants, was much lower than for the general population (couples with dependants: 21% vs 42%; couples without dependants: 6% vs 30%). The proportion of individual clients living in one-parent families with dependants was highest for SCASP (60%) and lowest for FLC (33%).

Figure 5.13: DEX reports: age profiles of individual clients by activity, 2022/23



Source: DEX data (DSS) and the 2021 Census

Insight into client risk profiles from the RFI

Half of the service providers participating in the RFI were unable to provide data in relation to the risk issues that clients presented with as these data were not readily available in their computerised client records management system but were instead collated in client files, session notes and other client forms that were not amenable to collection for this research. Data submitted by those service providers with ready access to their client risk profiles indicated that the most common risk issues nominated by the participating organisations were:

- family violence
- child safety concerns (including child maltreatment, child abuse and neglect)
- mental health issues
- addictive behaviours, including in relation to alcohol, other substances and gambling
- suicide.

Some service providers captured and provided more specific insights regarding the risk profiles of their clients. Family violence, child safety and mental health issues were most likely to be identified across the FRSP activities provided by service providers. These were also common factors emerging in the non-FRSP activities provided by these service providers.

One large service provider (Service 3) who gave data regarding client risk profiles according to FRSP activity most commonly identified family violence as the relevant risk, with similar risk patterns identified among clients of FRCs, FDR, SCASP and POP:

- **FRCs**: Family violence was a commonly identified risk factor, with between 40% and 49% of their FRC clients across their multiple locations reporting that their children had been exposed to conflict or family violence, and child safety concerns reported for 44%–50% of FRC clients across these locations. Mental health issues were screened for 29%–35% of

FRC clients and substance dependence was a risk issue screened for 7%–9% of these clients.

- **FDR**: This response pattern was identified across this service provider's FDR clients, with the most commonly identified risk issue being family violence related (46%–63%), then child safety concerns (20%–49%), mental health issues (25%–48%) and substance dependence (4%–17%).
- **SCASP/POP**: A similar response pattern was identified across this service provider's SCASP and POP clients with the most commonly identified risk issue being family violence related (23%–71%), then child safety concerns (33%–58%), mental health issues (35%–56%) and substance dependence (7%–17%).
- **FLC**: A slightly different response pattern was identified across this service provider's family law counselling clients, with the most commonly identified risk issue being family violence related (39%–64%), then mental health issues (37%–49%), substance dependence (18%–23%) and child safety concerns (9%–23%).

A second large service provider (Service 1) supplying risk profile data for their clients across FDR, FRCs and FLC again indicated that family violence was the most commonly identified risk issue among clients across these FRSP activities (41%, 27% and 38% respectively). The next most commonly identified risk issue was mental health issues (18%, 11% and 29%). Substance dependence and other addictive behaviours were the next most commonly reported risk issue, with current safety concerns for a child from physical or emotional abuse less common in this service provider's client base.

Another large FRSP service provider (Service 8) screened clients at lower risk, with almost 2 in 10 clients (19%) screened for a risk that required assessment and management, with the most common risks being family violence (12%) and concerns about children's safety (11%) for just over 1 in 10 clients. Substance dependence was reported in relation to 4% of clients.

A smaller service provider gave data relating to their FRSP and non-FRSP activities, with 4% of FRSP and 7% of their non-FRSP clients presenting with family violence as a risk issue, with mental health issues characterising 6% of the FRSP clients and 10% of the non-FRSP clients. Interestingly, this service provider reported child maltreatment, abuse or neglect at 18% of their FRSP client base, with a far smaller proportion of non-FRSP matters screened for this risk issue.

Section 60I certificates

Some insight may also be gained from the nature of the s 60I certificates issued by service providers participating in the RFI process. Data relating to the issuing of s 60I certificates were provided by 6 out of the 10 service providers participating in the RFI process but with the **caveat to interpret with caution** on the basis that it was not indicative of a specific outcome of the FDR/mediation process or of an intention to issue proceedings. The data collated as part of the RFI supports a more detailed understanding of the reasons for issuing the s 60I certificate.

The most commonly cited reasons among the participating services were:

1. The person did not attend FDR due to the refusal or failure of the other person or people to attend.
2. The person did not attend FDR because the practitioner did not consider it would be appropriate to conduct FDR.

3. The people attended FDR, conducted by the practitioner, and all people made a genuine effort to resolve the issue in dispute.

Services 2 and 3 reported a relatively even split between issuing a certificate due to a party's refusal or failure to attend or due to the practitioner considering FDR to be inappropriate (reasons 1 and 2 respectively). However, FDR not being an appropriate option was most commonly cited for Service 2 while the genuine effort (reason 3) was most commonly cited by Service 3.

Services 4 and 5 had more even splits between reasons 1 and 3, with Service 4 most likely to nominate a party's refusal or failure to attend or the practitioner considering FDR to be inappropriate (reasons 1 and 2 respectively).

Very small proportions of clients were issued certificates because:

1. the people attended FDR but one or more of them did not make a genuine effort to resolve the issue or issues in dispute

   or

2. the people began FDR, but partway through the practitioner decided it was not appropriate to continue.

FRSP usage indicators

Table 5.12 shows 4 indicators of FRSP usage nationally and across states and territories in 2022/23: number of clients per 1,000 residents, number of clients per 1,000 residents aged 25–49 years (the key demographic FRSP client population),number of clients per 1,000 persons in one-parent families with dependent children (i.e. under the age of 15 years or full-time students aged 15–24 years), and number of clients per 1,000 persons affected by separation (i.e. those who were divorced or separated from a registered marriage, those living in one-parent families with dependent children, those living in step or blended families with dependent children). Nationally, there were 4.9 clients per 1,000 resident population, 14.2 clients per 1,000 persons aged 25–49 years, 66.9 clients per 1,000 persons living in one-parent families with dependent children, and 25.4 per 1,000 people affected by separation (as defined above).

Individual client rates vary across jurisdictions, as shown in Table 5.12. Tasmania had the highest client rates with 8.1 registered clients per 1,000 residents (25.7 registered clients per 1,000 residents in core age 25–49), and New South Wales had the lowest client rates with 3.6 registered clients per 1.000 residents in 2022/23 (10.5 registered clients per 1,000 residents in core age 25–49). In addition, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory had client rates above the national levels, while Victoria and ACT had client rates lower than the national levels by the rate of general population and the population aged 25–49.

There were similar patterns based on the ratio of clients per 1,000 persons living in one-parent families with dependent children and the ratio of clients per 1000 persons affected by separation, with a higher ratio in Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory than elsewhere (e.g. New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT). The availability of outlets and the different practices of registering clients across states and service providers could be attributed to this wide variation in client rates, among other factors.

Table 5.12 also shows the 4 rates by remoteness. Inner and outer regions had higher client rates per 1,000 resident population and 1,000 residents aged 25–49 years than major cities and remote and very remote areas. Different patterns emerged in relation to the ratio of clients to 1,000 residents living in one-parent families with dependent children, with the rate being highest

for inner regions (at 90 per 1,000), followed by remote areas, with the lowest rate in very remote areas.

Table 5.12: DEX report: FRSP usage indicators by state/territory, 2022/23

State/remoteness	Resident population (June 2022)	Population aged 25–49 years (June 2022)	Persons living in one-parent families with dependants (2021 census)	Individual clients (2022/23)	Clients per 1,000 residents	Clients per 1,000 persons aged 25–49 years	Clients per 1,000 persons living in one-parent families with dependants	Clients per 1,000 persons affected by separation (divorced/separated & living in one-parent/step/blended families with dependent children) (2021 Census)
State/Territory								
New South Wales	8,165,269	2,791,022	587,371	29,425	3.6	10.5	50.1	19.1
Victoria	6,625,964	2,362,538	450,789	30,022	4.5	12.7	66.6	26.2
Queensland	5,320,496	1,785,089	435,224	31,076	5.8	17.4	71.4	27.0
South Australia	1,821,200	586,532	137,187	12,045	6.6	20.5	87.8	33.7
Western Australia	2,789,148	971,664	194,987	16,257	5.8	16.7	83.4	28.7
Tasmania	571,013	181,008	46,703	4,648	8.1	25.7	99.5	37.1
Northern Territory	250,219	101,469	21,949	1,902	7.6	18.7	86.7	37.4
Australian Capital Territory	456,844	178,631	29,020	1,976	4.3	11.1	68.1	26.4
Australia	**26,000,153**	**8,957,953**	**1,903,476**	**127,351**	**4.9**	**14.2**	**66.9**	**25.4**
Remoteness								
Major cities	18,785,137	6,637,551	1,333,624	77,454	4.1	11.7	58.1	22.6
Inner regions	4,622,896	1,309,602	367,430	33,067	7.2	25.2	90.0	32.3
Outer regions	2,099,287	611,765	367,430	14,685	7.0	24.0	40.0	32.2
Remote areas	301,686	99,260	21,133	1,657	5.5	16.7	78.4	28.0
Very remote areas	191,609	65,796	19,378	488	2.5	7.4	25.2	12.1

Notes: The estimated resident population in June 2022 and one-parent families in the 2021 Census. The number of clients in 2022/23 refers to registered individual clients.
Source: DEX data (DSS) and ABS data

Table 5.13 shows 2 indicators of FRSP usage by activities and overall from 2015/16 to 2022/23 – the number of individual clients per 1,000 residents and the number of individual clients per 1,000 persons aged 25–49 years. In line with Figure 5.1, the number of individual clients by activities and overall varied across years, peaking in 2018/19 and dropping afterwards. In 2018/19, the client rate was 6.9 clients per 1,000 residents (19.6 clients per 1,000 persons in core age 25–49), and it declined to 5.2 clients per 1,000 residents (14.9 clients per 1,000 persons in core age 25–49) in 2022/23.

FRCs had the highest client rate in 2018/19, with 2.4 clients per 1,000 residents (6.9 clients in core age 25–49). FRAL had the second-largest client rates in 2018/19, with 1.4 individual clients per 1,000 residents (4.0 individual clients in core age 25–49). The client rates in other FRSP activities in 2018/19 are comparatively low, with around 1.0 clients per 1,000 residents (1–2 clients per 1,000 persons in core age 25–49). It is worth noting that client rates of some FRSP activities vary little over time, such as for the POP, SCASP and Regional FDR.

Table 5.13: DEX report: FRSP usage indicators by activity (and overall), 2015/16–2022/23

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Clients per 1,000 residents								
All activities	6.4	6.7	6.7	6.9	6.8	6.3	5.7	5.2
Family Relationship Centres	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.6	2.5	2.3	2.0
Family Relationship Advice Line	1.3	1.2	1.1	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.1	1.1
Family Dispute Resolution	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.4
Family Law Counselling	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.4
Children's Contact Services	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.6
Parenting Orders Program	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.3
Supporting Children after Separation Program	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Clients per 1,000 persons aged 25–49								
All activities	18.2	19.0	19.1	19.6	19.3	18.1	16.4	14.9
Family Relationship Centres	6.8	7.1	7.1	6.9	7.3	7.1	6.7	5.8
Family Relationship Advice Line	3.7	3.5	3.1	4.0	4.1	3.8	3.2	3.0
Family Dispute Resolution	1.8	1.8	1.9	1.8	1.6	1.4	1.2	1.2
Family Law Counselling	1.4	1.8	2.3	2.3	2.0	1.8	1.5	1.3
Children's Contact Services	1.8	1.9	2.0	1.9	1.6	1.4	1.5	1.6
Parenting Orders Program	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.0
Supporting Children after Separation Program	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.5

Notes: The estimated resident population from 2016 to 2021 and the population aged 25–49 in similar periods. The number of clients refers to registered individual clients.
Source: DEX data (DSS) and ABS data.

FRSP usage by geographic area

FRSP usage rates varied across geographic areas (SA3). For example, Table 5.14 shows that the rates of clients per 1,000 residents ranged from 1.2 to 23 across 333 SA3 (see Appendix C5 for details), with a mean of 5.1, with one-quarter of SA3s below the rate of 3.4 and another quarter of SA3s above 6.3. Likewise, the rates of clients per 1,000 residents aged 25–49 years (the key demographics for FRSP) varied from 2.9 to 60.3 across SA3s, with a mean of 16.1. One-quarter of SA3s had the rates below 9.6, while one-quarter of SA3s had the rates above 21.3.

It is worth noting that the FRSP rates are strongly correlated across SA3s – for example, the Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.9333 between the rate per 1,000 residents, and the FRSP rate per 1,000 residents aged 25–49 years is, 0.812 between the rate of clients per 1,000 persons living in one-parent families with dependants.

Table 5.14: Summaries of FRSP usage indicators by SA3, 2022/23

	Clients per 1,000 residents	Clients per 1,000 persons aged 25–49 years	Clients per 1,000 persons living in one-parent families [a]	Clients per 1,000 persons divorced or living in separated families [b]
Min	1.2	2.9	8.4	5.5
Max	23.0	60.3	351.0	142.6
Mean	5.1	16.1	72.4	25.9
SD	2.5	8.4	36.6	12.0
Median	4.7	15.0	66.2	24.3
Number of SA3s	333	333	333	333

Notes: [a] Persons living in one-parent families with dependent children were derived from the 2021 Census.
[b] Persons who were divorced or separated and persons living in one-parent/step/blended families with dependent children derived from the 2021 Census. Excludes SA3s for no usual address and migratory/offshore areas.
Source: DEX data (DSS) and ABS data

Areas with likely unmet needs for FRSP

This section focuses on identifying areas with unmet needs for the FRSP program. In the absence of direct data on the extent to which people need the assistance of FRSP but do not receive it across geographical areas, this section takes an indirect approach to identify areas with high proportions of FRSP 'population' (i.e. an increased likelihood for the use of FRSP) but low FRSP usage. As indicated above, 2 characteristics separated FRSP clients from the general population – the high representation of people aged 25–49 years and people living in one-parent families with dependent children among FRSP clients.

The analysis also considers a wider separated population that is more likely to use FRSP than the general population, including divorced/separated persons or members of step/blended families with dependent children, and likely to involve more complex family relationships. If areas had higher levels of such populations but low levels of FRSP use, it may be an indication that there were unmet needs for FRSP.

Appendix C6 shows some SA3s with a higher concentration of these populations (e.g. the proportion of the population living in one-parent families with dependent children, the proportion of the population aged 25–49) but low levels of FRSP use. In other words, such areas have likely greater needs for FRSP services but appear to have low levels of attending FRSP services, which suggests potentially a high level of unmet needs for FRSP services for a range of reasons (e.g. accessibility, services awareness, and so on) and require further investigation.

Table 5.15 lists the top 20 SA3 areas with a higher concentration of the 3 populations (aged 25–49 years; those living in one-parent families with dependent children; and the separated/divorced and those living in one-parent/step/blended families with dependent children) but a lower rate of FRSP use (SA3 areas with the highest rates are provided in Appendix C6). Ten of these listed 20 SA3s were in the first decile (i.e. in the most disadvantaged areas) of the SEIFA Index of Socio-Economic Disadvantage. In addition, these 20 SA3s were either in major cities or remote/very remote areas.

It should be noted that while Table 5.15 identifies areas with higher levels of unmet needs – for some very remote areas with smaller populations, it would not be feasible to introduce new services due to their small population size.

Box 5.2: Composite score for likely unmet needs

According to client characteristics analysis, the composite score is derived based on the 4 FRSP usage indicators for each SA3 and the prevalence of 2 population groups identified as key FRSP client populations (people aged 25–49 years, people living in one-parent families with dependent children), along with the prevalence of those who were divorced/separated or living in one-parent/step/blended families with dependent children. The latter population is to capture a wider separated population that likely involve more complex family relationships.

First, SA3s were ranked from the highest to the lowest value for each of the 4 FRSP usage indicators (clients per 1,000 residents; clients per 1,000 residents aged 25–49; clients per 1,000 persons living in one-parent families with dependent children; and clients per 1,000 persons who were divorced/separated or living in one-parent/step/blended families with dependent children). For each SA3, the mean rank of the 4 indicator ranks was the FRSP usage score, the higher score indicating lower FRSP usage.

Second, SA3s were ranked separately for each of the 3 populations (the proportion of persons living in one-parent families with dependent children, the proportion of the population aged 25–49 years, and the proportion of the persons who were divorced/separated or living in one-parent/step/blended families with dependent children) from the lowest proportion to the highest proportion. The average of the 3 rankings for each SA3 formed the FRSP needs score, with the higher score indicating a higher demand.

Third, the composite score was the sum of the FRSP usage score and the FRSP needs score for each SA3. The final composite score is then ranked from the lowest to the highest, representing the final composite score, with a higher score (i.e. ranking) indicating an SA3 having a higher likelihood of unmet needs for FRSP.

Table 5.15: Areas with a higher level of unmet needs for FRSP (top 20 SA3s)

State	SA3 Name	Resident population (June 2022)	% of population aged 25–49 (June 2022)	% of population living in one-parent families with dependent children (2021 census)	% of population divorced/separated (2021 Census)	% of population divorced/separated & living in one-parent/step/blended families with dependent children (2021 Census)	Individual clients (2022/23)	Clients per 1,000 residents	Clients per 1,000 persons aged 25–49 years	Clients per 1,000 persons living in one-parent families with dependants	Clients per 1,000 persons divorced/separated & living in one-parent/step/blended families with dependent children (2021 Census)	SEIFA: Index of Relation Socio-Economic Disadvantage (decile from 1 most disadvantage to 10 least disadvantage)	Remoteness areas
NT	East Arnhem	14,602	40.8	19.6	5.6	24.0	17	1.2	2.9	8.4	5.5	2	Very remote areas
NT	Barkly	6,025	37.5	21.5	8.2	26.8	17	2.8	7.5	20.5	12.0	3	Very remote areas
NT	Katherine	21,359	38.7	16.7	7.6	22.8	49	2.3	5.9	22.1	11.5	4	Very remote areas [a]
NT	Daly - Tiwi - West Arnhem	18,128	37.2	15.2	6.9	21.5	35	1.9	5.2	18.5	10.3	1	Remote areas [a]
Qld	Far North	33,154	34.7	18.7	7.3	24.9	95	2.9	8.3	22.6	11.8	1	Very remote areas [a]
WA	East Pilbara	27,319	47.6	10.5	9.3	21.0	60	2.2	4.6	38.5	11.2	5	Very remote areas [a]
Qld	Forest Lake - Oxley	81,006	37.6	14.2	10.8	24.1	308	3.8	10.1	35.5	16.2	1	Major cities
NSW	Mount Druitt	116,232	34.0	14.1	8.4	22.9	401	3.4	10.2	29.5	15.2	1	Major cities
NSW	Lower Hunter	100,857	32.3	12.9	10.9	25.4	367	3.6	11.3	37.0	14.7	3	Inner regional areas [a]
NSW	Fairfield	193,421	30.9	11.8	10.5	21.2	370	1.9	6.2	18.9	9.0	1	Major cities
Qld	Springfield - Redbank	112,399	38.7	14.9	9.0	26.3	572	5.1	13.2	43.3	20.6	4	Major cities
WA	Kimberley	38,925	38.7	18.8	7.9	24.0	182	4.7	12.1	41.6	21.7	1	Very remote areas [a]
Qld	Outback - North	31,104	37.0	15.1	8.2	23.2	137	4.4	11.9	43.0	19.4	2	Remote areas [a]
NSW	Bringelly - Green Valley	152,866	37.4	10.3	7.7	19.3	413	2.7	7.2	31.5	14.9	3	Major cities
NSW	St Marys	57,364	34.8	13.0	10.0	23.6	247	4.3	12.4	40.9	18.4	2	Major cities
NSW	Richmond - Windsor	38,352	34.3	11.4	11.3	23.5	145	3.8	11.0	43.5	16.2	5	Major cities
NSW	Merrylands - Guildford	165,191	36.0	10.2	9.2	18.4	415	2.5	7.0	31.3	13.8	1	Major cities
NSW	Canterbury	141,094	36.8	8.9	9.3	17.2	239	1.7	4.6	24.3	9.9	1	Major cities
Qld	Caboolture	84,582	33.2	16.2	11.9	29.6	441	5.2	15.7	43.6	18.7	1	Major cities
NSW	Bankstown	187,173	33.2	10.7	9.7	19.9	490	2.6	7.9	29.5	13.2	1	Major cities

Notes: [a] For these SA3s, the majority of the population was in the category of remoteness (53%–68%) based on the 2021 Census.
Excludes SA3s for no usual address and migratory/offshore areas.
Source: DEX data (DSS) and ABS data

Table 5.16 shows the overall summary of 4 FRSP usage indicators by the SEIFA decile (i.e. SA3s were divided into 10 roughly equal groups according to SEIFA, with the most disadvantaged SA3s in the lowest decile and most advantaged SA3s in the top decile). It appears that the top most advantaged areas had the lowest client rates for all 4 FRSP use indicators. It is also notable that the most disadvantaged areas also had relatively lower client rates, which likely reflects a lack of access to services, as shown in Table 15.15.

Table 5.16: FRSP usage indicators by SEIFA Index of socio-economic disadvantage

SEIFA: Index of socio-economic disadvantage – decile	Clients per 1,000 residents		Clients per 1,000 residents aged 25–49		Clients per 1,000 persons in one-parent families with dependants		Clients per 1,000 persons divorced/separated or in one-parent/blended/step families with dependants		No. of SA3s
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1 most disadvantage	5.6	2.9	18.1	10.2	61.9	33.6	24.2	11.2	36
2	5.8	2	20.8	7.9	71.8	28.6	25.9	8.7	33
3	6.0	2.1	20.0	7.0	74.1	26.4	27.2	9.3	34
4	5.3	1.7	17.0	6.5	70.2	21.2	25.2	6.7	33
5	5.9	2	19.2	7.6	76.5	25.7	27.8	9.4	32
6	5.3	2.4	15.3	7.4	80.5	55.8	27.7	14.3	35
7	4.8	2.1	14.7	6.9	74.2	25.5	25.8	8.3	34
8	5.3	3.9	15.5	10.7	84.4	57.7	29.6	23.0	32
9	4.0	1.9	11.0	5.3	70.6	35.2	24.3	9.9	34
10 most advantage	3.1	1.7	9.4	5.2	59.4	33.2	20.7	10.7	30

Note: Excludes SA3s for no usual address and migratory/offshore areas.
Source: DEX data (DSS) and ABS data

DEX insights: client pathways

FRSP clients may use multiple activities for the same or different issues. To gain a better understanding of how FRSP clients interact with multiple activities, the analysis focuses on clients who were new to the FRSP program from the beginning of 2020 to June 2023 and looks into what activities these clients first used and what other activities they next used.

As shown in Table 5.17, there were nearly 237,000 first-time FRSP clients across different activities, with FRCs receiving the largest share of the new clients (38%), followed by FRAL (28%). The smallest numbers of new clients used the POP, Regional FDR and SCASP (3%–4% for each).

Of these new clients, 13% had subsequently used other FRSP activities within 12 months. The proportion of new FRSP clients who then subsequently used other FRSP activities was highest for the POP (21%), followed by FRAL (17%) and Regional FDR (15%), and it was lowest for CCSs and the SCASP.

Table 5.17: Number of new FRSP clients Jan 2020 to June 2023, by activity

First activity	Number of new FRSP clients	As % of all new FRSP clients	Clients who used other FRSP activities in 12 months as % of the new client
Children's Contact Services	13,125	5.5	7.3
Family Dispute Resolution	18,767	7.9	12.7
Family Law Counselling	24,003	10.1	7.8
Family Relationship Advice Line	67,097	28.3	17.2
Family Relationship Centres	89,884	37.9	11.6
Parenting Orders Program	7,967	3.4	20.7
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	8,885	3.7	14.8
Supporting Children after Separation Program	7,257	3.1	7.8
All new clients	236,985	100.0	13.0

Source: DEX data (DSS)

Table 5.18 further shows client pathways for those new clients who proceeded to other FRSP activities in 12 months after their first engagement with the FRSP program. The table breaks down the types of other FRSP activities that new FRSP clients used against the first activity used. Although most new clients did not use other FRSP activities, for those who did, the other FRSP activities subsequently used tended to be FRCs and the POP. The table shows that the common client pathways were FRAL followed by FRCs, and FRCs followed by the POP.

Table 5.18: New FRSP clients (Jan 2020 to June 2023) who used other FRSP activity: pathways

First activity	Other FRSP activities used within 12 months of first activity								
	Children's Contact Services	Family Dispute Resolution	Family Law Counselling	Family Relationship Advice Line	Family Relationship Centres	Parenting Orders Program	Regional Family Dispute Resolution	Supporting Children after Separation Program	All
	As % of all new activity clients								
Children's Contact Services	-	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.8	1.3	0.2	0.3	3.1
Family Dispute Resolution	0.5	-	1.4	1.5	2.7	0.8	0.2	0.7	7.7
Family Law Counselling	0.4	0.7	-	0.8	2.7	0.5	0.9	0.3	6.3
Family Relationship Advice Line	1.1	5.4	2.8	-	23.6	2.7	1.7	0.7	38.0
Family Relationship Centres	3.8	2.8	5.6	6.5	-	10.0	2.1	2.7	33.4
Parenting Orders Program	1.1	0.3	0.5	0.4	1.9	-	0.6	0.6	5.4
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	0.6	0.2	0.6	0.5	1.2	1.3	-	0.0	4.4

Supporting Children after Separation	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.7	0.3	0.0	-	1.8
All	7.7	9.7	11.3	9.9	33.7	16.9	5.7	5.2	100.0

Source: DEX data (DSS)

DEX insights: Client outcomes

In accordance with the Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting (SCORE) and the *Program Specific Guidance*, FRSP providers also collected data about client outcomes. SCORE assessments are recorded at least twice during a client's interaction with the service – early on and towards the end of service delivery. Where feasible, service providers also assess the client's outcomes during the course of service delivery (Australian Government, 2023, p 49).

There are 3 outcomes relevant to FRSP programs, with assessment domains for each outcome being outlined in Table 5.19:

- Circumstances: assess changes across 12 outcome domains at the beginning point and the end of a funded activity.
- Achieving goals: assess the extent of achievement of a client's individual goals at the beginning point and the end of a funded activity (6 items).
- Client satisfaction: measure a client's perception of the responsiveness and value of the services received (3 items).

The reporting of SCORE client outcomes is based on a simple 5-point rating scale. Table 5.20 shows how SCORE works for each outcome.

Table 5.19: SCORE assessment domains

Client circumstances	Goals	Satisfaction
Age-appropriate development	Changed behaviours	I am better able to deal with issues that I sought help with
Community participation and networks	Changed impact of immediate crisis	I am satisfied with the services I have received
Education and skills training	Changed knowledge and access to information	The service listened to me and understood my issues
Employment	Changed skills	
Employment, education and training	Empowerment, choice and control to make own decisions	
Family functioning	Engagement with relevant support services	
Financial resilience		
Housing		
Material wellbeing and basic necessities		
Mental health, wellbeing and self-care		
Personal and family safety		
Physical health		

Source: Australian Government, 2023

Table 5.20: SCORE assessment domains

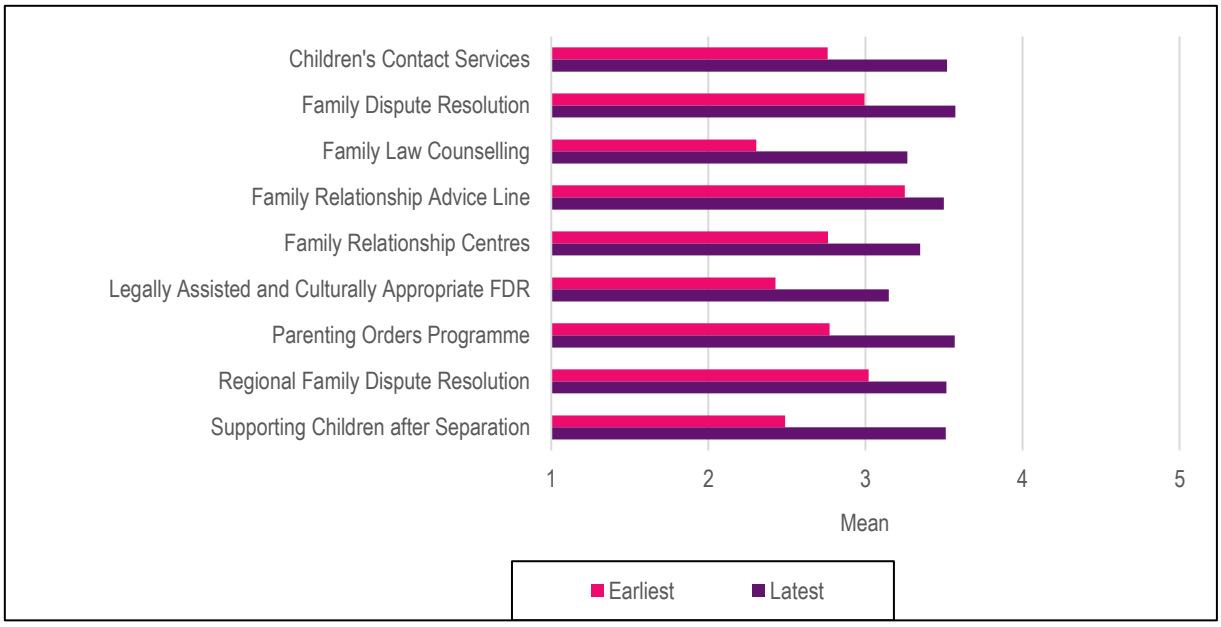
	Rating points				
	1	2	3	4	5
Client circumstances					
Family functioning	**No progress achieving outcome**	**Limited progress**	**Some progress**	**Moderate progress**	**Outcome fully achieved**
…					
Achieving goals					
Changed knowledge and access to information	**No progress achieving goals**	**Limited progress**	**Some progress**	**Moderate progress**	**Goals fully achieved**
Client satisfaction					
The service listened to me and understood my issues	**Disagree**	**Tend to disagree**	**Neither agree or disagree**	**Tend to agree**	**Agree**
…					

Source: Australian Government, 2023

The SCORE data presented in this section focus on the assessment recorded at the earliest and latest points during a client's receipt of service delivery, according to DEX reports from 2015/16 to 2022/23. It is worth noting that the latest SCOREs recorded may not represent the end of service delivery for some clients due to a range of circumstances – a client may need further sessions, or new emerging issues may require further support, and so on. Figures 5.14 to 5.16 show the mean ratings of all domains for the 3 outcomes at the earliest and latest points of service delivery by activity (the earliest assessment does not apply to client satisfaction).

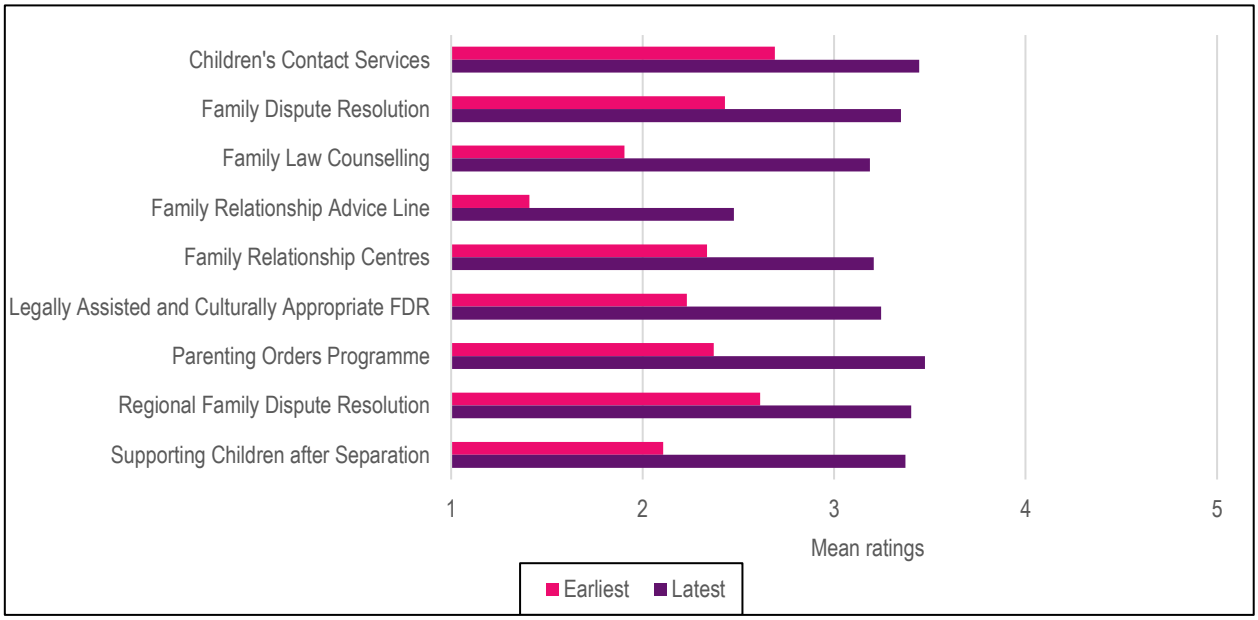
- For each activity, there were positive outcomes for assessed clients across 3 areas. Across all activities, the latest mean ratings were higher than the earliest mean ratings, the mean ratings increased by 0.2–1.0 rating points for circumstances and 0.8–1.3 rating points for achieving goals. Across all activities, the mean ratings of client satisfaction were very high, ranging from 4.3 to 4.8 on a scale of 1–5.
- Figure 5.14 shows that, for clients assessed from the earliest to the latest points, FLC and the SCASP achieved the highest improved circumstances. Clients assessed for other activities saw an improvement in their circumstances of 0.6–0.8 rating points. FRAL had a 0.2 rating point improvement.
- Similar patterns emerged with the outcome of achieving goals (Figure 5.15), with the positive change higher for FLC and the SCASP (increase of 1.3 rating points from the earliest to latest points for each) than for other activities (increase of 0.8–1.1 rating points).
- The mean ratings of client satisfaction with the receipt of service delivery were higher for FRAL (4.85) and Legally Assisted and Culturally Appropriate FDR (4.75) than for other services. The mean ratings ranged from 4.4 to 4.6 for other activities, while the mean rating was 4.3 for CCSs.

Figure 5.14: Client outcome – circumstances: mean ratings of the earliest and latest assessments (all domains) by activity, 2015/16–2022/23



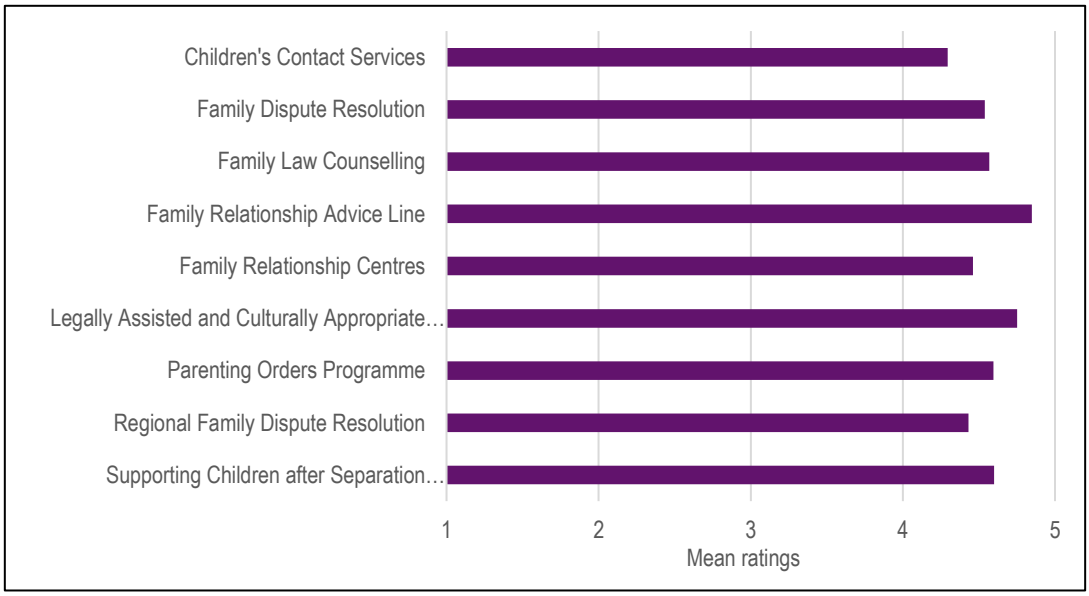
Notes: A higher rating indicates a better outcome.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.15: Client outcome – achieving goals: mean ratings of the earliest and latest assessments (all domains) by activity, 2015/16–2022/23



Notes: A higher rating indicates a better outcome.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.16: Client outcome – client satisfaction: mean ratings of satisfaction (all domains) by activity, 2015/16–2022/23

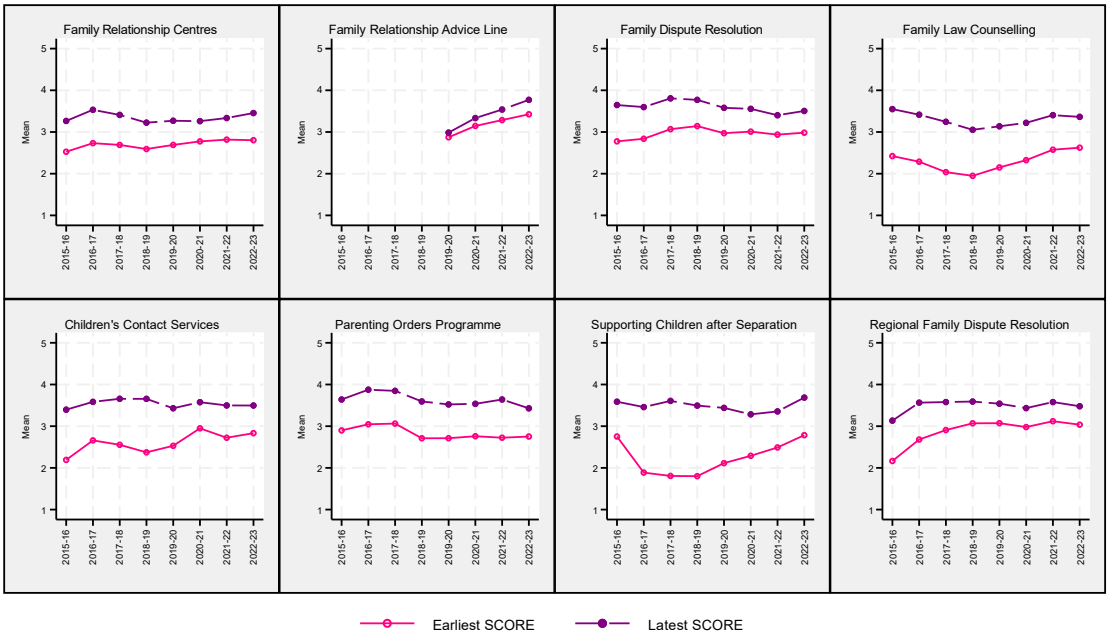


Notes: A higher rating indicates higher satisfaction.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figures 5.17 to 5.19 further present the trends in SCOREs for 3 outcomes by activity from 2015/16 to 2022/23. The patterns are consistent with the overall patterns described above.

- For each activity across all years presented, the most recent mean ratings were consistently higher than the mean ratings at the earliest point of service delivery, indicating improvement in the outcomes of client circumstances and achieving client goals. Across activities, the mean ratings of client satisfaction with service delivery were consistently high across all years presented, above the rating of 4 on a 1–5 rating scale.
- The improvements (i.e. the difference between the earliest and latest points) in client circumstances have subsided somewhat in recent years for some activities (e.g. FDR, Regional FDR, SCASP).

Figure 5.17: Client circumstances: mean ratings of the earliest and latest assessments (all domains) by activity by year, 2015/16–2022/23

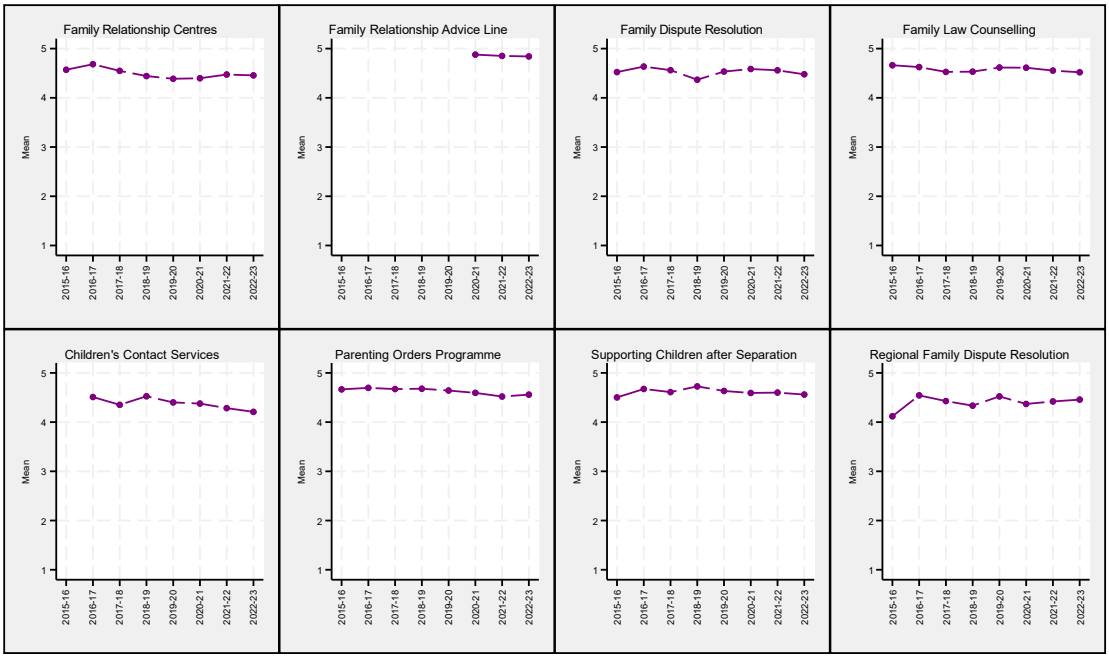


Notes: A higher rating indicates a better outcome.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.18: Client circumstances: mean ratings of the earliest and latest assessments (all domains) by activity by year, 2015/16–2022/23

Notes: A higher rating indicates a better outcome.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Figure 5.19: Client satisfaction: mean ratings (all domains) by activity by year, 2015/16–2022/23



Notes: A higher rating indicates higher satisfaction.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Summary

This chapter analysed the FRSP administrative data as reported to the DEX together with data reported through an RFI process. It provided an overview of the FRSP program, including the demographic characteristics of existing FRSP registered clients and service usage across jurisdictions, regional areas and by service activities. All analyses undertaken with DEX have used DSS-provided client and service provider data from 2015/16 to 2022/23. Where appropriate, the analysis used the ABS estimated resident population data 2022, the 2021 Census data, including SEIFA 2021 IRSD by SA3, and noted specific concerns with particular analyses and findings. The DEX data presented in this report may not align with the data from FRSP outlets receiving direct Commonwealth grants because DEX including outlets both receiving direct commonwealth grants and those being funded by their lead organisations because outlets in DEX include those with direct Commonwealth grants and those with funding arrangements through their lead organisation -but the First Nations Family Dispute Resolution Services were not in DEX at the time of analysis for this Review..

Although varying over time, the number of lead and delivery organisations was 72 in 2022/23. The number of outlets in 2022/23 stayed relatively the same as in 2015/16 (n = 416 and n = 415 respectively). With 50% of outlets being in major cities, the number of outlets trended down or remained the same over time in major cities, inner or outer regions and very remote areas, while FRSP outlets slightly increased in remote areas in 2022/23. NSW had the highest number of outlets from 2015/16 to 2022/23, while the ACT had the lowest over the same period.

The Commonwealth Government invested $244.81 million in the FRSP program in 2022/23, increasing from $215.89 million in 2015/16 in real values. The FRCs received the largest share of funding (nearly one-half), which is consistent with them servicing the largest number of clients among FRSP activities. Funding per individual client varied across activities, with funding per client being higher for FRC, CCS and POP than other activities. Funding per individual client also fluctuated over the financial years, with upward trends apparent for all activities since 2017/18. In addition, funding per individual client was higher for outer and remote areas than major cities and inner regions in general.

The number of FRSP individual clients declined over time despite moderate peaks in 2018/19 and 2019/20. This decline is notable in most states, except for Tasmania, and the two territories. Major cities and inner Australia also experienced a decline in client numbers. As discussed above, a change in administrative arrangements across jurisdictions and regional areas due to the COVID-19 pandemic and perhaps the availability of non-FRSP providers in post-COVID years may have reduced client volume.

In terms of individual clients by FRSP activities, FRC appears to be the largest service activity throughout the study period, with 41% of individual clients in 2022/23, followed by FRAL with 22% of individual clients. However, the number of clients for FRC and FRAL activities peaked in 2019/20 and declined afterwards. Similar diminishing trends in the number of clients for other FRSP activities have been noticeable since 2017/18, except for CCS, which provided services to increased numbers of clients from 2021/22.

Likewise, sessions and attendance have declined since 2019/20, though rather modestly in comparison to the decline in the number of clients. The downward trend in attendance might indicate that services are more tailored to the needs of individual clients. Still, the number of sessions in 2022/23 outnumbered those recorded in 2015/16 by about 25%, which may reflect increased client complexity in post-COVID years.

Most sessions in 2022/23 were clearly associated with information/advice/referral, counselling, supervised changeover/contact and processes such as intake/assessment. For example, FRC, FDR and RFDR usually provide information/advice/referral services (32%–35% of sessions), this is especially the case for FRAL (84%), while FLC and SCASP primarily engage in counselling (65% and 55%, respectively).

Service providers participating in the RFI nominated a broad range of tools to support the screening, assessment and triaging of clients accessing the FRSP services. Most service providers also reported their site specifications including consulting rooms, security cameras and duress alarms within the building, public transport accessibility, age-appropriate facilities for children, withdrawal spaces and separate entrances and exits. Most participating services indicated that their service sites were standalone premises.

In relation to FRSP activity staff, most service providers described requiring police checks, working with children checks, qualification verification and compliance with professional codes of conduct. Staff training was also described in the areas of domestic and family violence, trauma-informed practice, child inclusive practice, child safe practices, cultural awareness and cultural competency training and service provision for adults and children with disability.

The demographic characteristics of FRSP clients suggests that persons aged 25–49 are over-represented among FRSP clients compared to the average Australian population across all activities. At the same time, one-parent families with dependents are more common among FRSP clients than in the general Australian population. Notwithstanding this, the FRSP client

population aged 25–49 and one-parent families with dependents vary across jurisdictions, regional areas and by activities. FRSP usage (or client) rates fluctuate based on the number of clients in the general population and in the core age population, as well as one-parent families with dependents, people who were divorced or separated from a registered marriage, those living in one-parent families with dependent children, and those living in step or blended families with dependent children. Tasmania, for example, had the highest client rates in each of these usage indicators, while NSW had the lowest in 2022/23.

Regional areas had higher client rates based on resident population and resident population aged 25–49 than major cities in 2022/23. However, the inner region had higher client rates based on residents living in one-parent families with dependents in 2022/23 than elsewhere, placing additional complications on service provision in regional areas. It is worth noting that strong positive correlations are found between the usage indicators across SA3 areas. FRCs have higher client rates for all jurisdictions over time than other FRSP activities.

The analysis suggests likely unmet needs of FRSP usage within populations in the core age group 25–49 and one-parent families with dependents as well as the broader population affected by separation (i.e. persons who were divorced or separated, living in one-parent/step/blended families with dependent children). Indeed, some SA3s have a higher concentration of populations in these core groups but low client rates, reflecting unmet needs of FRSP use. It is worth noting that some of these SA3s were in the first decile (i.e. in the most disadvantaged areas) of the SEIFA IRSD and either in major cities or remote/very remote areas.

The data presented also includes data from the RFI that show the most common risk issues nominated by participating organisations regarding their clients were family violence, child safety concerns (including child maltreatment, child abuse and neglect), mental health issues, addictive behaviours, including in relation to substances and gambling, and suicide. Family violence, child safety and mental health issues were most likely to be identified across the FRSP activities of service providers but were also common factors emerging in the non-FRSP activities of these service providers.

This chapter also examined the extent to which clients use other FRSP activities after their first engagement with an activity as well as client outcomes. The DEX data indicate that only a small proportion of new FRSP clients (13%) used other FRSP activities within 12 months after their first engagements with an FRSP activity. When clients did use other FRSP activities, they tended to use FRC and POP.

Client outcome data indicate that, overall, clients experience positive outcomes, with apparent improvement in circumstances, achieving their goals after receiving services, and a high level of satisfaction with the services. These patterns apply to each activity and across all years since 2015/16.

6. Insights from professionals: Findings from stakeholder interviews, focus groups and Survey of Professionals

This chapter sets out findings from surveys and interviews (individual interviews and focus groups) undertaken with professionals working in FRSP and non-FRSP family law system services. A total of 239 professionals participated in the survey, with survey recruitment open from 8 November 2023 to 2 January 2024. Interviews were completed with 59 stakeholders working in the family law system, including 11 focus groups and 2 one-on-one interviews. Interview topics covered client service use patterns and pathways, factors affecting service use, clients service needs and unmet needs, key service gaps, perceived quality of design and delivery, effectiveness of service delivery and the interface between FRSP services and the family law system.

Key messages

Client presenting issues

FRSP and non-FRSP professionals participating in the survey and interviews said their clients were often experiencing complex issues, such as the use or experience of family violence.

- FRSP and non-FRSP professionals had similar views on client profiles and caseloads.
- Interview participants also reported seeing increasingly complex needs, whether clients were accessing FRSP services, non-FRSP services or a combination of both.
- This complexity was identified as potentially involving high levels of dependency on family law services, greater need for long-term support and the requirement for more intensive case management and coordination of support.

Client needs

Professionals participating in the survey most commonly identified their clients' needs to include:

- information about making post-separation parenting arrangements
- assistance with resolving disputes about post-separation parenting arrangements
- assistance with managing personal or interpersonal issues and/or building better post-separation relationships.

Service use and client pathways

Professionals indicated that it was common for clients to use both FRSP and non-FRSP services.

- The combination and order in which services were used varied depending on a range of client circumstances including engagement in and status of their legal proceedings, the complexity and/or uniqueness of their needs, and their perceptions about the quality of private versus government-funded services.

Although demand for FRSP services was high, the survey and interview data show lower levels of client engagement with FRSP and non-FRSP services from clients who are First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, or who are living with disability.

- In particular, First Nations stakeholders interviewed reported that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are separated or separating do not often seek support from FRSP or non-FRSP services. First Nations people described a general mistrust of western legal systems based on historically negative and discriminatory experiences and described a lack of services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and staff.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that do use these services tend to have specific entry pathways. They are more likely to become involved in the family law system if they have a non-First Nations partner, if they are grandparents seeking residence or contact with children/grandchildren, or they are seeking assistance from the family court for recovery orders.

Interview participants said that lower cost is a key reason why clients use the FRSP, while others noted that clients used the FRSP because the services were flexible to their needs, noting:

- the importance of service practitioners having discretion to adapt services to client needs (others said that it was important for clients to have a say in how to adapt services)
- some clients' use of the FRSP is shaped by its ability to meet their needs holistically and over the long term
- the holistic and wraparound focus is particularly useful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients
- FRSP service providers are committed to delivering effective services to clients who have high needs and/or complex issues that require extra support.

Barriers to accessing FRSP services were identified as:

- costs
- delays (leading families to use alternative services/processes including private services)
- geographic distance from services
- time-limited services
- lack of knowledge of what services are available or how to access them (among clients and referring professionals)
- lack of appropriateness, tailoring or sensitivity to accommodate clients' specific needs (i.e. not culturally safe or appropriate, literacy and language issues, and/or unable to include children and extended family).

Unmet needs

Professionals participating in the interviews indicated that demand for the FRSP is high and many services are struggling to keep up with demand due to the complexity of clients' needs and presenting issues, as well as limited resources (both staff and funding).

Professionals survey responses indicated 5 areas where client needs are not being matched because they do not have access to the appropriate services:

- education and skills programs for adults: 62% (cf. 31%)
- therapeutic support for adults and children experiencing family violence: 57% (cf. 29%)
- therapeutic support for adults and children using family violence: 45% (cf. 21%)

- therapeutic support – adult mental health: 54% (cf. 28%)
- support for adults focusing on the needs of their children post-separation: 88% (cf. 67%).

Integration and coordination of service provision

When family law system professionals referred clients to FRSP funded services, the most common referrals were to FDR and family law counselling, followed by referrals to the Post Order Program/Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Program. Non-FRSP professionals were more likely to refer clients to private FDR practitioners/mediators.

Although differences were not statistically significant, when the survey referral patterns were analysed by whether professionals participated in Family Law Pathways Network (FLPN) events, those who regularly attended events had higher levels of referrals compared to those who did not. Similarly, professionals participating in interviews indicated that FLPNs assist in establishing greater coordination and familiarity with referral pathways across the family law system, including between FRSP and non-FRSP services.

> I do think that the Family Law Pathways Networks do really great work in providing those referral pathways, especially if – or at least – providing a central resource for what referral pathways there could be, especially if it's a region that you're not familiar with. (Legal professional (non-FRSP), Victoria)

The 2 exceptions in the survey results were referrals to private mediators and court FDR/mediation – professionals who did not attend FLPN events had a higher level of referrals to these 2 service types compared to those who regularly attended.

Professionals interviewed provided positive comments on the FLPN and its role in promoting collaboration among FRSP and non-FRSP service providers to better meet the needs of clients and providing education and professional development opportunities for practitioners.

However, they also indicated that information sharing, coordination and referral between FRSP services and the broader family law system were generally ad hoc and dependent on effort and knowledge of individual practitioners.

Effectiveness

The professionals' survey data indicate that, overall, FDR and FRCs were the FRSP service types with the highest effectiveness rating.

For other FRSP activities, there was a clear relationship between lower ratings of effectiveness and professionals being more uncertain about their ability to rate the effectiveness of these FRSP activities.

- A majority of non-FRSP professionals agreed that FRSP activities were being delivered effectively but these proportions were lower (with this difference being statistically significant) than the corresponding ratings of FRSP professionals from that service type.
- Other FRSP professionals rated the effectiveness of each FRSP activity more highly than non-FRSP professionals but at a lower rating than FRSP professionals directly working in that FRSP activity.

In interviews, professionals described FRSP services as delivering high quality and effective services to families. However, they also identified substantial barriers to effective and/or timely engagement with clients, particularly for First Nations clients. Clients from culturally and

linguistically diverse backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ clients, clients with a disability, and clients living in regional, rural or remote communities also faced these barriers.

They also identified some gaps in services that separated and separating families need to support their wellbeing and capacity to settle separation issues outside court that are not currently included or available in the FRSP suite. These include men's behavioural change programs, lawyer-assisted services and family counselling/therapy.

It is also noted that although some participants indicated that 'family counselling' is an FRSP funded service, and that 'family therapy' is a private one, others used the terms interchangeably to refer to counselling or therapeutic services in general (hence they are amalgamated as 'family counselling/therapy' in this chapter). This may reflect a lack of understanding of what is delivered under the FRSP.

Efficiency

Professionals interviewed noted that delays in service access and lack of coordinated service provision can exacerbate existing problems and lead to families seeking help from multiple services, which over a prolonged period can increase duplication and longer-term costs.

Suggested changes

The most frequently suggested changes to enable FRSP activities to better meet families' needs were greater use of child inclusive practice and holistic/coordinated service provision. Improved collaboration with other FRSP and non-FRSP family law system services were also identified as important changes.

In addition to nominating greater case management and more holistic service delivery, including having co-located services, professionals described the need to facilitate greater inclusivity, flexibility and tailoring in service delivery to accommodate clients' unique needs.

Professionals also suggested broadening the suite of services to address critical gaps, especially for men's behavioural change programs, lawyer-assisted services and family therapy/counselling.

Improved funding was also cited to ensure that service providers can meet the demand and provide services at a pace and in a manner that appropriately and sustainably meets clients' needs.

Sample

Stakeholder interviews (group and individual)

- The consultation process comprised 11 focus groups and 2 one-on-one interviews conducted with 59 stakeholders from the family law system.
- Interviews and focus groups covered how the FRSP is working for different client groups and families.
- Stakeholders with different levels of contact and familiarity with the FRSP were included, from 39 FRSP services staff and 20 non-FRSP service providers.
    - Staff from FRSP service providers included FDRPs, family law counsellors and senior managers and program leads in FRCs.

- Non-FRSP service providers included judicial officers, community and private legal professionals, community and private mediators and community service providers.

- The range of stakeholders invited to participate was designed to ensure that it would provide insight into a range of different families and experiences. Participants included those who specialise in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, CALD and LGBTQIA+ clients, and representation from every state and territory (except the ACT). The clients they engaged with used a range of FRSP services but most frequently FDR, FRCs and CCSs.

Survey of Professionals

- The Survey of Professionals commenced on 8 November 2023 and closed on 2 January 2024 with 239 participants completing the survey.
- Participants were recruited through a broad range of FRSP and non-FRSP family law, legal, domestic and family violence and men's support services. These services were asked to circulate a project information sheet containing a link to the survey through their professional networks.

The sample demographic characteristics are presented in Appendix D1, Table D1 and show the following participant characteristics:

- 20% of participants were male, 74% were female, 1% was non-binary and 5% preferred not to say or response was missing
- tended to be older with 25% aged 45–54 years and 36% aged 55 years or older
- representation from every state/territory jurisdictions with 25% from Victoria, 23% NSW and 17% Queensland
- 1% were First Nations and 14% spoke a language other than English at home
- geographical spread was varied: 22% work in a CBD, 27% suburban, 39% regional and 6% rural
- highly educated sample: 88% hold a bachelor degree or above and 9% have other post-secondary qualifications (TAFE, diploma, trade, etc)

Figure D1 in Appendix D2 shows distribution of participants by professional role.

- Overall, 62% of participants reported working in an FRSP funded service, and 37% work in a non-FRSP funded service (1% missing).
- Almost one-third (32%) reported their role as a practitioner in an FRSP funded service, a further 15% were private practice lawyers (including those providing FRAL services), 13% were program managers of an FRSP funded service, with 6% of participants identifying as either a private FDRP or service coordinator of an FRSP service.

Where participants indicated they worked in an FRSP funded service, they were asked a follow-up question to gather information about which FRSP service type they worked at. This information is shown in Appendix D1, Table D2. Participants could choose more than one service if appliable (and this is why percentages sum to more than 100%).

- Participants were most likely to report working in an FRC (37%), followed by FDR (21%), family law counselling (19%), Post Orders Program/Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Program (14%), and CCS (13%). Smaller proportions worked in regional family dispute

resolution, the Family Law Pathways Network, the Supporting Children after Separation Program, FRAL and First Nations FDR.

Client presenting issues

This section sets out professionals' reflections of the complex issues that separated and separating families experience. Interview participants noted several sources of complexity faced by clients, including financial pressures (and added pressures due to the cost of living crisis), DFV, substance abuse and mental health issues. Clients could often present with multiple issues, and factors such as having a CALD background, disability, sexual diversity and/or complex family structures increased the complexity of cases. The survey data echoed the interview data and showed caseloads are characterised by high levels of clients who use or experience DFV and have post-separation family law issues. There was no difference in the levels of representation of clients with these characteristics between professionals delivering services in FRSP funded services compared to non-FRSP services.

Survey professionals were asked to provide an estimate of the proportion of their work that involves the provision of services to people with post-separation family law issues, people experiencing or using domestic and family violence, children and young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, CALD families, people with disability, and people from regional, rural and remote settings.

As shown in Figure D2, the responses of FRSP and non-FRSP professionals indicate similar levels of representation of these client groups in their caseloads, with differences not reaching statistically significant levels. Three-quarters or more of the following types of clients were reported in caseloads:

- post-separation family law issues: 69% of FRSP and 80% of non-FRSP professionals
- people experiencing or using domestic and family violence: 57% of FRSP and 52% of non-FRSP professionals
- regional, rural and remote settings: 40% of FRSP and 43% of non-FRSP professionals
- children and young people: 33% of FRSP professionals (33%) and 28% of non-FRSP professionals (28%).

Professionals working in both FRSP and non-FRSP funded services reported lower levels of their work involved: about three-quarters or more of their work was with First Nations clients (2% FRSP; 5% non-FRSP), clients with disability (5% FRSP; 2% non-FRSP) and CALD clients (11% FRSP; 12% non-FRSP).

Client needs

This section sets out professionals' reflections of the various needs of their clients and separated and separating families more broadly. According to surveyed professionals, the most common client needs were information and assistance around resolving disputes about post-separation parenting arrangements. Interviewed professionals emphasised the need (not always met) for effective case management, including coordination and referral to non-FRSP services, to ensure services effectively address diverse needs in order to reach agreement and manage the separation. The interview participants spoke of client needs for case management and long-term supports. Effective case management can also foster trusting relationships, which was another important facet of effectively engaging clients.

Figures D3a and D3b in Appendix D2 provide information from the perspectives of professionals in the survey on the most commonly identified client needs.

More than three-quarters of FRSP professionals and non-FRSP professionals reported that more than half their clients had needs in relation to:

- information related to making post-separation parenting arrangements (82% cf. 83%)
- assistance in resolving disputes about these arrangements (79% cf. 81%,)
- assistance in managing personal or interpersonal issues and/or building better post-separation relationships (80% cf. 71%) respectively.

FRSP and non-FRSP professionals also reported that more than half of their clients had needs relating to individual counselling (52% and 55%), education and skills programs (62% and 48%), therapeutic support with the experience of domestic and family violence (55%) and adult mental health issues (51%) respectively.

FRSP professionals were more likely than non-FRSP professionals to report clients needing support to understand and focus on the needs of their children post-separation. However, there were no statistically significant differences in FRSP and non-FRSP professionals' views around other client needs such as information in relation to making post-separation parenting arrangements, therapeutic supports, counselling, and education and skills programs.

Rather than focusing on individual/specific issues/services that clients needed help with, stakeholders who participated in interviews focused on what clients need holistically to support their wellbeing during separation and to settle issues in the family law system. They said that due to the increasing complexity of client issues, many clients need intensive/effective case management, including coordination and referral to non-FRSP services. This can include management of all aspects of communication between separating adults, support and coordination of access to services in and out of the FRSP system (booking appointments, completing forms and explaining family law system processes).

Participants also said that due to this complexity, clients often need (and expect) high levels of support from FRSP service providers over a long period. For example, some clients may need/expect sustained involvement (particularly assistance with co-parenting) until their children turn 18 and are no longer subject to the jurisdiction of parenting orders made in the family court.

Extent to which clients are accessing services to meet their needs

This section sets out professionals' reflections on the extent to which the needs of separating and separated families are currently being met by FRSP services.

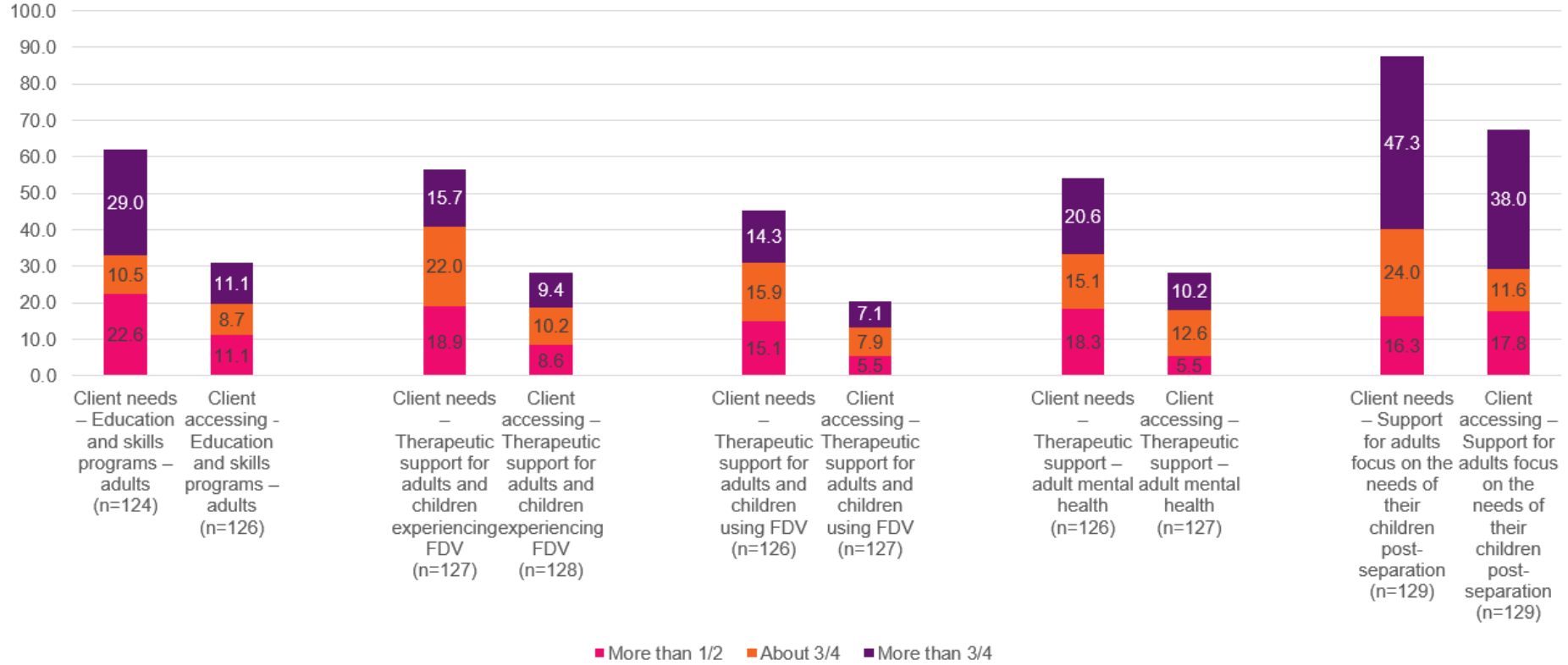
Figure 6.1 shows 5 areas of client need where substantial proportions of surveyed FRSP professionals identified more than half of their clients as not having adequate access to support services to meet these needs:

- education and skills programs for adults: 62% (cf. 31% accessing support services for this need)
- therapeutic support for adults and children experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence: 57% (cf. 29% accessing support services for this need)
- therapeutic support for adults and children using family, domestic and sexual violence: 45% (cf. 21% accessing support services for this need)

- therapeutic support – adult mental health: 54% (cf. 28% accessing support services for this need)
- support for adults to focus on the needs of their children post-separation: 88% (cf. 67% accessing support services for this need).

This analysis is restricted to FRSP professionals to provide an indication of potential 'unmet' needs from the perspectives of professionals in the FRSP sector and may not reflect the views of clients on this issue.

Figure 6.1: Survey of professionals: FRSP professionals, comparison of proportion of clients have these following needs and proportion of clients accessing services to meet these needs



Notes: There may be slight variations in the proportions of client needs reported by FRSP professionals earlier, as the analysis in this figure describes clients' needs using data also for the separate question about clients accessing these services. The previous analysis of client needs described all valid responses for that question only.

Reasons for unmet needs

Duration of use

Interview participants noted that one of the reasons FRSP services are not meeting needs is that some services were not funded to assist clients for a long enough duration. As one non-FRSP consultation participant said:

> the biggest problem from our point of view, I think, is – as [my colleague] said, is – [FRSP service providers are] limited in terms of how long they can engage with a particular family. (Judicial officer (non-FRSP), WA)

Providing services over a long duration was identified as important for a range of reasons. Some clients require service providers to invest a considerable amount of time in developing trust and rapport and establishing appropriate and accessible communication styles before they can effectively use FRSP services. This may be, for example, due to FDV concerns, language and/or literacy difficulties, and/or because the client is First Nations, CALD, LGBTIQA+, and/or lives with a disability.

> We know, you know when we're talking with mob conversations take longer, we have a different way of communicating … (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist legal professional (non-FRSP), WA)

They also noted the importance of service providers building a trusting relationship with clients to ensure families remained engaged in – and returned to – services.

> [Clients] need to come back to their trusted relationship, and normally that is the first person that they contact … or the person that they first tell their story to. [That] is going to be that connection. (Community service provider (non-FRSP), WA)

Interview participants noted that some clients may not be able to resolve their issues within the time frame permitted by the FRSP and might have to effectively restart the process with a non-FRSP service. For example, if parties do not resolve their property and/or parenting dispute during a set number of 2-hour FDR sessions, then they may try to reach resolution via legal aid dispute resolution instead, or formally through the court – meaning they effectively start the process from scratch (noting the lack of information sharing across these different dispute resolution mechanisms mean that clients must exchange disclosure and information afresh in each process).

Additionally, participants indicated that clients may feel pressured into settling disputes quickly before the dispute resolution time frame ends (FRSP or non-FRSP), whether or not the settlement is appropriate.

> I would hope that we don't just say ‘oh, well, you can have 6 sessions instead of 4’ … maybe we just don’t give a limit, so then people don't feel that pressure, like, ‘I must resolve this within X time or I'm not going to be able to resolve it at all’, because then we're looking at people that are making decisions under pressure that might not be in their best interest of their children, without being

> able to properly consider it. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist legal professional (non-FRSP), WA)

Survey responses raised similar issues. When asked what changes could be made to improve the efficiency of the Post Order Parenting Program/ Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Program , some participants opined that families should be supported for longer to ensure effective parenting arrangements. One participant discussed the shifting nature of client needs throughout the separation process, and the need to support families post separation as illustrated by a practitioner working in a FRSP service response:

> There needs to be an increased focus on post programs to support separated parents. At present, most of our clients are 'returning clients' as their parenting agreement is no longer working. Post separation support will empower parents and assist them to deal with further conflicts. Needs of family and children also grow with time and it is essential that we remain connected to families. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, NSW)

Service use

This section describes professionals' reflections of the non-FRSP services that separating and separated families use in conjunction with – or instead of – FRSP services. Interviewed stakeholders noted that it is very common for families to use both FRSP and non-FRSP services, and that there is a high demand for FRSP and non-FRSP services for separating families (often in combination).

The non-FRSP services most often used, according to stakeholders interviewed, were non-FRSP dispute resolution services (e.g. via private mediators or legal aid), lawyers, and non-FRSP mental health providers. They also referred to families' use of community-based forms of informal dispute resolution, court-based dispute resolution, family therapy/counselling, parenting coordination (specially trained, child-focused practitioners working with high-conflict separated parents to manage co-parenting, adhere to court orders and implement parenting agreements), private CCS, men's behavioural change programs, non-FRSP children's programs, financial planners and social workers.

Factors affecting use patterns

Interviewed stakeholders described a range of factors that drive patterns of use and of FRSP services and other services in the family law system, including whether they use multiple parts of the system sequentially or simultaneously. This section describes factors affecting use of FRSP versus non-FRSP services and use patterns as a whole. At a higher level, the types and combinations of FRSP services used depended on the client's needs and presenting issues; those with higher needs may use a larger combination of services and do so concurrently. Many participants highlighted the cost effectiveness of the FRSP as a positive factor, particularly for clients who could not afford private services. A range of factors could affect the take-up of services including waiting lists, lack of awareness of services, duplication with private services, and geographical and cultural barriers.

Using multiple services consecutively or simultaneously

Stakeholders said it is common for clients to use several services at once, but particularly if their issues are acute and/or they are at a critical point in their court proceedings. Overall, the

combination of services used depended on the clients' needs, presenting issues and court progression.

For example, if a client's needs are high and/or their post-separation issues are more acute, then they may use a large combination of services simultaneously to provide them with intensive support. By contrast, other clients might only have staggered use of services or use a smaller combination because their needs/issues are more predictable/stable and/or less urgent.

Participants generally agreed that the more complex the family, the more likely they are to be using numerous services concurrently. Some stakeholders said this can be overwhelming for clients, and impact on their ability to effectively engage with the services.

> Sometimes, we get people saying they're doing too many [services]. They're ordered to go to a whole lot of things. But that's because, as [my colleague] said, they've got complex needs, and there is a mental health issue, there is substance abuse, there is domestic violence. So, they do have to do them all, but it might be too many, and it's just overwhelming. (Judicial officer (non-FRSP), WA)

> Sometimes people will say, 'I have just got too much on. I can only do one thing at a time, so I need to do mediation and that's what I'm going to do.' (FRSP service provider, Victoria)

While some raised concerns about intensive use of services by clients, others stressed the importance of clients engaging with a range of services to ensure they are holistically supported through their separation journey and that meet their needs.

Cost

Interview participants said that lower cost is one of the key reasons why clients use the FRSP rather than private services to agree separation matters and meet other family needs around separation (e.g. counselling). In particular, clients who have the means to afford private legal services will use them to avoid the waitlists and fast track settlement. However, some participants mentioned that these clients may still opt to use the FRSP to reduce cost if they can wait.

> They ring around, see what the wait time is, and then make a decision based on the reality of the environment. And if they're happy to wait – and often they are happy to wait – they'd rather wait and not pay as much, but for some they're happy to go privately because they can get a service sooner. (FRSP service provider, Victoria)

Some interview participants noted that while low cost was a reason for choosing the FRSP over private services, costs can also be a barrier to accessing FRSP services for some families, who have limited means to pay for any services, even when they were significantly reduced or waived for some sessions. This is not solely because of the fees for services but also because there are incidental expenses such as travelling to and from services, taking time off work, and/or organising child care arrangements.

Delays

As noted, stakeholders interviewed said that one reason families use private rather than FRSP services is to avoid waitlists. Delays were identified as particularly problematic given the time-sensitive nature of the matters that can arise in relation to a separation, including:

- establishing safety and security after separation (e.g. away from DFV)
- organising child care arrangements (e.g. care, parental responsibility and parenting time, etc.)
- organising financial matters (e.g. interim payments and/or final division of assets).

Some participants noted that delays in resolving time-sensitive matters can complicate and escalate conflicts, make clients more oppositional and disrupt the progress towards an amicable settlement. Stakeholders noted delay as a particularly concerning issue for clients who needed CCS – noting an inability to see their children was a particular source of distress and conflict for parents/carers.

For example, if one parent/carer holds concerns about a child having unsupervised visits with the other parent/carer and withholds that child from them (which many participants noted as particularly likely to cause post-separation conflict), then those parties may need to go to court to organise visitation arrangements. By the time the parties get those orders, understand them, and make contact with a CCS for the purposes of supervised visits, the waitlist may be so long that the child has not had contact with one of their parents/carers for many months, escalating the post-separation conflict.

Lack of awareness of services

Stakeholders interviewed (particularly those involved in FRSP service delivery) mentioned that there is a widespread lack of knowledge of what the FRSP is and the services that it offers. Many attributed this to the limited education and promotion of the program since it was first launched. One participant noted that this lack of awareness can affect service delivery:

> … I think that there's also some misunderstandings from other – or from both services – either way, from privately delivered family therapy, family counselling, all of those kinds of things [about what] FRSP services can and can't do. And so, the limitation of knowing what's in and what's out of what we can and can't provide … it can cause them tension … (FRSP service provider, Victoria)

Stakeholders noted that this lack of familiarity and/or visibility was a barrier to client use. Some noted that by the time clients do become aware of the FRSP, they may already be engaged in court and/or with a family lawyer (which are often more well known), and it may be difficult or impractical for them to commence meaningful engagement with the FRSP once they are entrenched in litigation.

Lack of knowledge of FRSP services also limits effective referral to FRSP services by professionals working in the system. Reflecting this lack of knowledge, some professionals who participated in interviews (including some currently working under the FRSP) were not familiar with the names of specific FRSP services – for example, they did not refer to the SCASP (Supporting Children after Separation Program) or POP (Parenting Orders Program) but more generally to 'children's programs' or 'parenting programs'. When asked which FRSP services participants were familiar with, almost all of them (except one judicial officer and 4 FRSP service providers) did not specifically identify the FRAL, which may indicate a lack of knowledge

of this service. Some non-FRSP participants mentioned fluctuations in FRSP funding made it difficult for them to know what services were available at any given time.

> … we do a lot of Googling [to find out what FRSP services are available]. And the reason why [we] do that is because depending on the funding the services that are being offered can change. So, there may be a particular program being run for a few months and then not available later on … [or] [t]hey may have introduced something new. (Legal professional (non-FRSP), Victoria)

Others noted that FRSP funded FDR providers do not always observe the same rules around whether parties affected by FDV are eligible or ineligible. This lack of familiarity with FRSP services and lack of certainty of eligibility and availability presents a barrier to clients' use of services and non-FRSP services referring clients to the FRSP. The lack of familiarity with the FRSP was identified as a particular issue in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For example, one FRSP provider reflected on her experience having to do considerable community outreach to increase awareness and education around the FRSP before she was able to successfully overcome this barrier (and incidentally establish clients' trust – another barrier to engaging with the FRSP that participants discussed during interviews).

Competition with private practice

In addition to lack of awareness about FRSP services among non-FRSP service providers, some stakeholders interviewed indicated that the FRSP is not being used by the broader family law sector as much as it should be due to competition within the sector, and a desire to keep services 'in-house' or refer them within networks of other private practitioners.

> My understanding is – anecdotally, from some of the feedback I've got from clients – is that they weren't made aware of government funded, subsidised mediation services. They were kept 'in-house', if you like, by some of those people that are in competition with us.' (FRSP service provider, NSW)

Service providers linked this back to the need for greater promotion of FRSP services and their value.

> … I think it would be really timely if [the Department] could do some more service promotion that some of their other departments are doing, just to put us back on the map. Because I think … we're increasingly seeing competition from family lawyers, who are really trying to muscle in on this space. (FRSP service provider, NSW)

Geography

Many consultation participants identified that the location of FRSP services can be a barrier to use of FRSP services – for clients who live too far away from available services, so that travel is impractical, and for clients who cannot afford travel arrangements.

Many participants noted geography as a critical barrier in regional and remote areas, particularly because these areas are often already underserviced generally (not just by the FRSP but the broader family law system, including private CCS, mediators, etc.) and these areas often have greater numbers of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander clients.

Some noted that there were specific locations where there were very few non-FRSP services available such as the central Northern Territory. As there are no private services, the FRSP services that are funded have higher demand and less ability to deliver.

> We've got sort of a distinct issue here that then leads me to make this next point, which is that because of that, there is a lot on FRSP services, so those that are funded, there's major capacity issues there because there are no alternatives. I would also like to emphasise what some of my colleagues have already said, which is that funding and capacity, increasing capacity would go a long way. (FRSP service provider, NT)

Although many FRSP services are offered digitally, so clients who are unable to attend in person could still engage online, some participants stressed the importance of giving service providers the funding to deliver place-based services. This may be preferred by practitioners due to safety concerns, because it is preferred by clients, and/or because it is the culturally appropriate option.

Cultural barriers

FRSP and non-FRSP professionals who work with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, CALD and/or LGBTIQA+ clients indicated that separated and separating families in these groups were less likely than other families to use FRSP services, due to expectations of culturally unsafe or inappropriate practices.

> [There is] a perception that the way that FRCs are set up may not be right for [some clients], whether it's because they're from a cultural background or an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family, or a LGBTIQ+ family. And I think we need to be doing some really good work in that space to be seen as inclusive and welcoming in a genuine way that doesn't make people feel invisible or not heard in our space. (FRSP service provider, NSW)

> … I think where people don't think it's for them, and because it's very heteronormative, it still is cis-heteronormative. (LGBTIQA+ specialist FRSP service provider, Victoria)

Stakeholders that specialise in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients want to engage with services that are delivered by Aboriginal organisations and staff:

> … definitely a constant thing that comes through from Aboriginal people [is] like 'why am I being made to do this?' 'Why is there a white man telling me how to deal with my ex-partner who's abusive?' or similar. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist legal professional (non-FRSP), WA)

Clients' previous negative experiences of services can prevent them from seeking help from the FRSP and other services in the family law system. These barriers were most often identified as affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, some of whom were described as 'putting off' the separation process due to reluctance to engage with services in addition to lack of funds.

> … what we're finding is [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients are] putting off any sort of separation or divorce because they either can't afford and or they [are] shamed or feel ashamed coming forward. So the issues then compound. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist community service provider (non-FRSP), WA)

Some stakeholders that specialise in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients noted that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients do use services, their use is generally initiated by a non-Indigenous partner or is a requirement of a court order. They noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are less likely to proactively seek help from the family law system and may only do so reactively.

> I think it's often because the non-Aboriginal parent is likely to be the one that's initiating … you know, proceedings or similar. Whereas I find the First Nations community are much less likely to engage until they have to; until it's a reactive sort of [thing]. Unless of course, we're doing outreach where we're right in their face. And then they might come and talk to us because they've got a pressing issue. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist legal professional (non-FRSP), WA)

> In terms of Aboriginal people, the reality is, we have very little engagement ... It's very, very rare for an Aboriginal family to come to the family courts in Australia. Often, they're reluctant to identify that they are Aboriginal, and if they do, we tend to see them on an urgent basis where they're seeking a recovery order for children, and then they, effectively, then abandon the proceedings, and we don't see them again. (Judicial officer (non-FRSP), WA)

Further, some consultation participants noted that clients from minority groups that do attend FRSP services can have difficulty effectively engaging in the services without lawyers' assistance because they might not know or advocate for their legal interests and rights. This can be exacerbated by language barriers, cultural differences and power imbalances.

> … for our CALD clients particularly, those families, I might tend to do a legally assisted [FDR] and it gives them that safe space of going, 'Okay, this is what the advice is and now I can engage fully.' (FRSP service provider, NSW)

> I'm not a lawyer but if anyone asked me what would be the best way to do mediation, the first thing I would say to them – if it's an Aboriginal woman and especially when it's a non-Aboriginal partner – is get legal advice and speak to them. Because not only have you got the gender imbalance, you also have that imbalance of culture as well, like – and some Aboriginal women would probably think 'I've just got to say yes to him 'cause he's a whitefella, he's going to get it anyway'. So, they could be in that mediation thinking that it's all fair but really it's not because they don't know what sort of rights they have. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist community service provider (non-FRSP), NSW)

Delivery format

Interview participants noted that offering face-to-face and online options for service access were important to support client use. Some clients preferred face-to-face and lack of local options to engage face-to-face were a barrier to service use. Other clients preferred online engagement,

with digital formats allowing some participants to feel safe (e.g. if they have anxiety, PTSD or other issues that may make it difficult for them to be close to and/or sustain eye contact with other people). Providing people with multiple options also supports attendance by allowing people to make appropriate practical arrangements (e.g. managing child care or work so they can attend).

Perceptions of quality

Some clients and/or referring professionals may prefer non-FRSP services due to a perception that the FRSP may not offer the same quality as private services, which can affect service use and outcomes for families. Interviewed stakeholders said this perception affected use of multiple types of services within the FRSP suite, including dispute resolution and counselling.

For example, one non-FRSP participant indicated that the perception that private mediation is better may be because private service providers can afford to bring in 'extra professionals' to assist on a case, and private providers often have more experience working in the family law system.

Some participants indicated that there appeared to be discrepancies in the FRSP guidelines for practice. The most common example of this was with respect to FDR because some FDRPs allowed lawyers or First Nations liaison professionals to be involved in the process while others didn't, and only some FDRPs allowed parties to engage despite FDV allegations. These inconsistencies may contribute to confusion or doubt about the nature or quality of FRSP services.

Some stakeholders also noted that internal referral between FRSP services (when a client is referred from one FRSP service to another) had important benefits of ensuring a more coordinated approach to meeting client's needs but it can also create a concern or perception among some clients that the new service might not be impartial. Information sharing across the different services may give a client the impression that their information is not being kept confidential.

> … there's also sometimes a sense of being referred into counselling for instance, whilst you're in mediation at an FRC, some expectation that it might not be impartial enough. There'd be too much file sharing … I think it's important that FRSPs show that clear boundary and delineation in terms of the services that they can provide, but the benefit is, you can then be identified and referred through to many other services, meeting your need at the time you need it. And external counselling services dealing only with what you're presenting with at the time and may not see the whole family or the whole client story. (FRSP service provider, Tasmania)

Assumptions that government-funded services were lower quality than private, or perceived stigma from having to attend government-funded services could also affect client service use of FRCs and counselling. Stakeholders working in the FRSP generally felt it was a misperception that government services were lower quality and that the opposite is true – that the FRSP offers better quality services, noting the much more rigorous risk assessments and stricter standards that apply in the FRSP (i.e. government-funded) context. They said that it would be very helpful if further promotion of FRSP services could be undertaken to counter this view.

> One other area I can think of is, in relation to family counselling, if there's an option to refer or to self-refer to a non-FRSP family counsellor, there's a subtle stigma

> against publicly funded versions of family counselling that I think plays an element in driving people toward those private services, rather than the publicly funded ones and it's something that [other participant] put so eloquently by saying – those clients don't think that they belong in that centre as opposed to going and seeing somebody privately.
>
> Whereas there is such a high level of expertise within, say, family relationship centres, that it's a shame that people think that and if something could be done to correct those misapprehensions that people have that they won't get the quality of service by going through a publicly funded version of the same. (FRSP service provider, NSW)

There were positive comments on the quality and expertise of FRSP services that related to safety standards required from FRSP services. For example, one FRSP consultation participant mentioned that their clients regularly reported feeling 'safer and better held' in FRSP than non-FRSP CCSs. This was also raised in circumstances where presenting issues were complex (e.g. DFV) because the FRSP has expertise around this by way of compulsory standards and training.

> There are so many safety protocols put in place around the FRCs for clients. There's such an abundance of training and professional development that the private versions do not access for themselves, that – they are really strengths of the FRSP services that can be drawn on to promote to the public that that is actually a better option a lot of the time than the private ones. (FRSP service provider, NSW)

Unmet needs

Interviewed stakeholders identified a small number of critical service offerings that were not widely available in family law services (including the FRSP). Many participants identified lawyer-assisted services and family therapy/counselling as unmet needs. Notably, some participants identified men's behaviour change programs as another critical gap.

Participants also noted some issues in service design and/or delivery. These included that sometimes FRSP services do not effectively cater to diverse families and the changes required in staff expertise for clients from diverse backgrounds to feel welcomed and supported when engaging services.

Service gaps

In light of issues affecting patterns of service use of separating and separated families, interviewed stakeholders identified a few critical service gaps for separating and separated families that were essential services that are not widely available in the family law sector, including the FRSP.

FRSP services sometimes do not effectively cater to families from different cultural backgrounds. Participants stressed the importance of child inclusive practice, which is sometimes an unmet need, and how family inclusive practices were particularly important for First Nations families.

Many participants identified lawyer-assisted services as an unmet need – particularly in the context of FDR. For example, some participants noted that lawyers complement FDR and

heighten their efficiency, because the FDRP can focus on clients' cultural, social and personal needs, while lawyers can focus on their legal needs and formalising any agreements on the spot.

> … lawyers might think about all the legal stuff and stuff, that's where it would benefit to have an Aboriginal worker in with the client to talk about the cultural stuff as well … it does help to have that cultural support while the mediation needs to happen … with a lawyer. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist community service provider (non-FRSP), NSW)

As discussed earlier in this chapter, some participants noted that lawyer-assisted services are particularly important for First Nations clients or for CALD clients – to assist them to understand or assert their legal interests. Some participants noted this was also important for other clients with complex needs and/or with experiencing challenges with communication.

> I find particularly for clients with disability as well, legally assisted is much more helpful for them. And we know that for clients where there is an ADVO in place, it creates safety. So I think from a family violence perspective, that's one of the main benefits, that we'd be looking at changing the FDR model possibly to include more supports. (FRSP service provider, NSW)

Many participants referred to family therapy/counselling as an unmet need for many families because it was simply too hard for many families to access this service in a timely manner, and/or without paying for private therapy. They noted that non-FRSP family therapy can complement the family counselling offered by the FRSP because it plugs this gap in availability but there are not enough providers delivering family therapy/counselling generally. This was described as a critical service gap as it can 'help families to work together' in the agreement process and can 'have a real impact on … children's lives and their relationship with their parents in a really major way'.

> [Family therapy] complements the family counselling that's offered, but there's just not enough of it and there's not enough providers out there. And there's a real gap. It's very hard to get family counselling in an FRSP setting and then family therapy, even privately funded. There's not that much of it out there or it costs extra – huge amounts of money is what I'm trying to say. Yeah, it's a real barrier. (Legal professional (non-FRSP), Victoria)

Many participants referred to men's behaviour change programs as a critical gap – that is, programs that assist people (usually alleged perpetrators of DFV) to recognise, understand and stop using abusive and violent behaviours. The need for these kinds of programs overlaps with feedback about the significant rates of FDV in cases coming before the FRSP and family law system in general. Stakeholders who participated in the interviews acknowledged that these services were not funded under the FRSP because they were delivered under other (DFV) funding streams and programs. However, many indicated that there was a strong argument to be made for funding men's behaviour change programs more intensively given the amount of DFV that exists among separating families and/or for case managers to provide high quality psychoeducation.

> So, I think one of the weaknesses – perhaps there are other programs that could be included in the FRSP sphere that gets government funding because that's

> another program – a bit like the men's behaviour change, we just almost can't have enough of them, and that is one program I think that would be good. So, it's sort of a weakness, because it might be an area that's missing. And perhaps again … the long-term therapy where there are these cases which are really hard, where there has been parental alienation or whatever. (FRSP service provider, SA)

Some FRSP participants also indicated that it would be useful for clients to access psychoeducation programs in general. For example, regarding the 'best interests of the child', and regarding DFV. Participants noted that these kinds of programs might assist in getting parties on a similar starting position before attempting to engage in settlement discussions and decision making. By contrast, 2 interviewed stakeholders who were not FRSP service providers worried that requiring clients to engage in psychoeducation programs before being eligible to access other services could exacerbate delays.

Issues in service design and/or delivery

Sensitivity to different cultures, needs and perspectives

As noted, many interview participants indicated that FRSP services do not always effectively cater to First Nations families, families from CALD, or LGBTIQA+ groups, due to staff having a lack of specialised knowledge in the issues facing these kinds of client groups. Some noted that FRSP services are not always prepared or trained in how to navigate conflicts between parents in relation to their children's gender or sex (e.g. if they are trans or nonbinary) nor how to support LGBTIQA+ children and young people. Others said that FRSP services need more information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family practices or customs.

> You know, it's simple. Things like 'my ex partner wants to take my child up to country for 3 weeks and that interferes with my visitation' … just getting a better understanding of what that means and what that looks like and why that's appropriate. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist community service provider (non-FRSP), NSW)

Similarly, when discussing the changes required to staff expertise, a service coordinator from an FRSP service remarked that services need to make the effort for clients from marginalised communities to feel welcomed within services, something this participant indicated is not consistently achieved within service delivery.

> I have observed, over my years working in a number of different settings in family law services, that First Nations families (and to a lesser extent CALD and LGBTQI+ families) tend to be more likely to use services where they feel comfortable and welcomed. I think many services don't make the effort to ensure that those clients do feel comfortable and welcomed. Sometimes there will be one worker who will reach out to different communities of clients and there will be an increase in the numbers of those clients who attend the service. But if that worker leaves, there seems to be little effort to continue the outreach and community relationship, and the clients from those communities stop using the service. (Survey, Woman or female, 55 years or older, WA)

Interviewed stakeholders noted that when funding these services, sufficient time needs to be provided for services to build trust with these clients to understand and participate in FRSP

processes and reach sustainable outcomes. Further, that models for engaging Aboriginal clients in the first place should consider including options such as intentional outreach or embedding these services within community-controlled organisations in community.

A lack of interpreter services (or effective interpreter services) for CALD clients who are not proficient in English was also raised by interview participants.

> These contact services, they don't have interpreting services either so how are these parents, particularly mothers, being accommodated when they can't speak English? That also raises a whole other issue in terms of children being able to enjoy and experience their culture through language, their mother tongues as well. (Legal professional (non-FRSP), WA)

> People often over-assess [translators'] capacity with the language as well. They might be good at speaking the language but not necessarily the nuances around emotion and how that's translated, [or] some of our legal terms. (Specialist CALD FRSP service provider, Queensland)

Some participants stressed the need for co-design to meaningfully address limitations in the FRSP's expertise and sensitivity with respect to diverse needs. As one participant said:

> We want real solutions, so it has to come … 'for Aboriginal people by Aboriginal people'. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist community service provider (non-FRSP), WA)

Some FLPN participants noted that they would be well placed to implement co-design but are not funded to do this.

> From a personal point of view, we would be able to meet the needs better if we had the autonomy to choose where we travel and how long we spend in a region getting to know what that region and area needs. I'd be able to effectively and efficiently identify and meet the needs of the regions by travelling and meeting them firsthand. (FRSP service provider, WA)

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of clients having a say in how services are delivered and service practitioners having some flexibility and discretion to adapt services to specific client needs.

> … choice is a major thing for people to have in their life when they are often in situations when they feel like all their choices have been taken away. (CALD specialist FRSP service provider, WA)

Some participants said that one of the most useful things about the FRSP's approach is that it does give service providers some 'agency' and choice in relation to tailoring services to participant needs. But views on their actual ability to flexibly deliver services were mixed.

> As the needs and the complexities have changed, services have become very effective at tailoring for individualised needs … [A]nd that shift takes us to a place where we really are meeting the needs of adults and children, and it is about putting the client at the centre of the process and understanding what they need. (FRSP service provider, NSW)

Child and/or family focused

Some consultation participants indicated that the FRSP does not effectively allow for children and young people or extended family to engage in services, which constitutes an unmet need.

> I was thinking about the nature of some of the FDR programs in terms of it being child informed or child inclusive. That's often the purview of those in the private space who can then afford the skill set of that extra professional trained in social science to meet with the child, get some sense of the child's views and lived experience to feedback in the most neutral way to mum and dad or parents generally, what it is that they want. So that's, for the right case, a very valuable resource. But my experience is that that's not something that the FRSP space can provide or does provide. I guess to a degree the [Victoria's subsidised statutory legal organisation]'s program in the sense that you've got the ICL as a party to those negotiations can bring those views through the report or having met with the child, etc. But that's only in the context of there being litigation where you've got that [honest broker and neutral person]. (Legal professional (non-FRSP), Victoria)

While most participants focused on the importance of child inclusive and child focused practices in FRSP service delivery, as already noted, family inclusive approaches were considered particularly important to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participants – that is, the inclusion of other people in the extended family.

Many participants considered child inclusive practices critically important, especially for the sake of children in separated and separating families. Some interview participants felt strongly that child inclusive practices are essential across the whole system and should be made mandatory. For example, one consultation participant noted that it is of fundamental importance to children's mental health and ability to engage in adult life, and that the breaches of trust that can arise from children and young people being kept in the dark in relation to family matters can profoundly affect their ability to have healthy relationships in the future.

Some participants indicated it was important to ensure that child inclusive practices are not weaponised in a way that can adversely affect children and young people. They warned against child inclusive practices in circumstances that are not carefully managed and monitored.

> … the problem is in the context where there's ongoing litigation, often that therapeutic intervention is then used for forensic purposes and what the children say within that therapeutic context is effectively used against them in the conflict between their parents. And so those children, who probably very much need therapeutic intervention and support on an ongoing basis, are very much at risk of being put off the whole process moving forward, they have their trust betrayed. (Legal professional (non-FRSP), Victoria)

Changes to staff expertise

A total of 54 survey responses provided insight to the specific nature of changes to staff expertise they believed are required to meet the needs of separating families. Some participants remarked that professional development needed to be ongoing in nature. Development needs included education regarding child development and/or child inclusive practices, DFV and trauma-informed practices, inclusive practices and improved education regarding CALD and or First Nations, persons with a disability or neurodiversity, and LGBTIQA+ persons, improved

education regarding mental health (including suicide) and counselling, managing conflict and property settlement.

> Continuing provision of professional development, external supervision and ongoing training, especially in child development, mental health, counselling, managing conflict, trauma informed practice, working with First Nations, cald [sic], disability, FV and substance abuse. (Survey, Woman or female, 55 years or older, Vic)

Some also expressed the difficulty of recruiting specialised and/or adequately skilled professionals in regional areas of Australia. One participant also described how the need for staff in regional areas results in the hiring of staff without the necessary qualifications. This response described the multi-faceted skills required to adequately assist and provide best practice support to clients experiencing separation. The quote below from a program manager of a FRSP service highlights that in order to assist effectively, staff expertise must extend beyond the knowledge of legal practices and service systems to holistic and person-centred practices.

> Due to a lack of skilled workers in regional areas organisations are improvising to continue to deliver services. Unqualified staff are appointed to do part of the process. Although staff are receiving constant training, professional development and support it can take years before staff have in-depth knowledge and competent skills to work with complex matters. Working with parents going through separation requires a unique set of skills that are both empathetic and practical. Active listening is paramount, as it allows the professional to understand the concerns and emotions of each parent fully. Communication skills are also critical, as they help in conveying information clearly and mediating discussions. Empathy is necessary to provide support and understanding, while impartiality ensures that the professional remains neutral and focused on the best interests of the family. Conflict resolution skills are essential to help parents navigate disagreements and find workable solutions. (Survey, Woman or female, 55 years old, Qld)

Additionally, knowledge of family law and child development can be invaluable in guiding parents through the legal and emotional complexities of separation.

> Ultimately, the ability to remain calm under pressure and maintain professional boundaries while offering support is crucial for effectively working with parents during this challenging time. Regional community organisations can also not compete with the wages offered in, for instance, mining and some other industries. (Survey, Woman or female, 55 years old, Qld)

Links between the FRSP and the family law system

This section discusses linkages, duplication and referral patterns between the FRSP and the broader family law system. The interview participants highlighted the potential for private practitioners to complement, duplicate or conflict with the FRSP program. The survey data show that the most common referrals made by family law system professionals to FRSP services were to FDR and FLC. There was some variation in referral practices between FRSP and non-

FRSP professionals, with non-FRSP professionals were more likely to refer clients to private FDR/mediators.

Many interview participants noted the important role that the Family Law Pathway Network (FLPN) plays in encouraging collegiality, learning and linkages and collaboration in the family law sector. Despite these positive aspects, most participants indicated limited communication and coordination across the system with limited opportunities for information sharing, holistic approaches to service delivery and case management. The survey data provided some further evidence that those who regularly attended FLPN events made more referrals for clients to both FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Referral pathways

Key referral pathways to the FRSP that interview participants described include:

- directly approaching the FRSP – most often initially via FRAL or an FRC
- seeking legal advice and being instructed to engage in the FRSP
- participating in family court proceedings and being instructed by the family court to engage in the FRSP.

  Note that FDR is mandatory before parties can initiate parenting proceedings in court: *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) section 60I; *Family Court Act 1977* (WA), section 66H.

Data collected from professions in the survey presented in Table D3 in Appendix D1 shows the most common referrals to FRSP activities were to FDR and family law counselling (over 50% of professionals reported that they referred half or more of their clients to each of these services), followed by referrals to Parenting Order Program/Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Program (43%) and FRCs (41%).

With the exception of referrals to FRCs, there was little difference in the pattern of referrals made to FRSP activities when comparing the responses of FRSP professionals to non-FRSP professionals.

Overall, the most common non-FRSP services that clients were referred to included:

- domestic and family violence services: 50%
- a counsellor or other therapeutic professional who provides services in private practice to adults or children in separated families: 46%
- Community Legal Centre (including Women's Legal Service): 45%
- Legal Aid Commission including Family Advocacy and Support Services (FASS): 40%.

There was greater variation in referral practices between the 2 professional groups when non-FRSP services were considered.

- Non-FRSP professionals were more likely to refer clients to private FDRPs/mediators (44% compared to 10% of FRSP professionals).
- FRSP professionals were more likely to refer clients to Community Legal Centres (including Women's Legal Services) (56% cf. 27%) and domestic and family violence services (54% cf. 45%).

Many participants in focus groups and interviews indicated that they were not fully aware of the referral pathways that bridge the FRSP with non-FRSP family law services. They generally indicated that they relied on ad hoc measures to facilitate referrals – often based on their own personal networks, word of mouth, or Google searches for services as and when the need arises.

Referral patterns by participation in Family Law Pathways Network

Referral patterns were also analysed by whether the professional indicated they participated in the FLPN (Table D4 in Appendix D1).

Slightly more than one-third of participants (36%) reported they regularly participate in FLPN events; a further 39% occasionally participate and the remaining proportion of participants (25%) indicated that they did not participate in the FLPN (data not shown).

- Noting differences were not statistically significant, when referral patterns were analysed by whether professionals participated in FLPN events, those who regularly attended events had higher levels of referrals to FRSP activities and non-FRSP services compared to those who did not:
  - Parenting Order Program/Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Programs (60% cf. 21%)
  - family law counselling (68% cf. 39%).
- The 2 exceptions were referrals to private mediators and court FDR/mediation – those professionals who did not attend FLPN events had a higher level of referrals to these 2 service types (35% and 30% respectively) compared to those who regularly attended (20% and 23% respectively).

Interface: Effective, coordinated, connected?

Participants generally indicated that private practitioners could either complement, duplicate or conflict with the FRSP. For example:

- Private practice complements the FRSP when it addresses gaps that arise due to delay.
- Private practice can conflict with the FRSP when private practitioners fail to refer clients to appropriate FRSP services due to lack of awareness of FRSP services, or actively discourage use of FRSP services and only refer clients within a network of other private professionals.
- Private practice conflicts with the FRSP when clients use both FRSP and non-FRSP services (for a range of reasons) and receive conflicting advice from both – an experience described by some separating adults in chapter 7.

This also raised some systemic issues resulting from a poorly managed interface between the systems. Some stakeholders referred to issues that can arise when there are insufficient avenues for quality information sharing in relation to a case. For example, if a client declines to pursue FDR through an FRSP, then the FDRP is required to issue a certificate (per section 60I of the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) or section 66H of the *Family Court Act 1977* (WA) to indicate that the relevant party did not genuinely attempt to resolve the dispute via FDR (as mandated). The FDRP does not necessarily have to expand on what that party's reasons were for refusing to engage in FDR, even though they may be due to legitimate fears for safety or wellbeing (e.g. due to FDV). Therefore, this kind of certificate may be used to justify an argument in court that the refusing party was unreasonably obstructing the progression towards settlement.

> … often we'll get fathers who have already initiated mediation through [an FRSP service] and then if our clients say 'I don't want to do that, I'd prefer to do [dispute resolution through Legal Aid]', often then [the FRSP] will produce a [section 60I] certificate that says our client refused to participate, which is not entirely true and can then be used against her to say she was a withholding mum or she was just trying to frustrate the system when really she was trying to say 'no' so that she

> could move forward in a way that was more safe for her, more equal for her. (Legal professional (non-FRSP), Victoria)

Most interviewed stakeholders who worked in FRSP services indicated that they think the FRSP is not being used by the broader family law sector as much as it should be due to lack of cooperation and collaboration. Some participants noted that a difference in focus and/or training across the sector may explain this, given that non-FRSP services may be primarily focused on responding to clients' legal needs and managing immediate safety risks, whereas FRSP services may be focused on clients' holistic wellbeing. The FRSP services were identified as providing a scaffolded response to their immediate needs as well as their long-term safety, social and personal needs. FRSP participants in particular noted that the latter focus ensures that clients are provided with skills and support to continue on a pathway towards a healthy future (not just out of a crisis).

> I've always understood that there is a lack of cooperation and collaboration between, at times, the legal sector and the social sciences, and that doesn't seem to have improved ... (FRSP service provider, SA)

> … there is this disconnect, and this lack of focus upon what really matters, which is ensuring, as much as possible, that those that experience relationship breakdown, family violence, are provided with the best pathway forward. (FRSP service provider, SA)

Many participants reflected positively on the fact that the FLPNs have encouraged collegiality and collaborative learning in the broad family sector – so that various professionals can work together and continually learn from each other. In general, most participants provided positive feedback about the FLPNs and suggested it would be valuable for their work to be scaled-up.

Despite positive feedback about the FLPNs and their ability to build stronger links across the family law system, most participants indicated that there is still limited (if any) communication and coordination across the system. They noted limited opportunities for information sharing, holistic service delivery and case management, despite the need for these things.

> … as people present with these complex needs, it would be amazing to have a case management model opportunity available in the space. (FRSP service provider, NSW)

These views were echoed in the survey responses. The majority of survey participants who provided a text response (*n* = 20/27) included positive statements about the FLPNs and described them as providing networking opportunities, promoting collaboration among service providers to better meet the needs of clients, and providing education and professional development opportunities for practitioners. A similar number (*n* = 23) also identified challenges for the effectiveness of the FLPNs, including a lack of awareness of FLPNs among the profession and issues with timing and accessibility of FLPN events.

One participant referred to the holistic approach used in 'family conferences' (in family courts) and noted that it would be useful to have a platform like that for the various service providers involved in supporting a family to collectively discuss that family's needs and presenting issues, to maximise the capacity for those services to meet the family's needs in a holistic way.

Two judicial officer participants also referred to family courts' centralised access to information about whether parties have engaged with the FRSP, child protective services, police, etc. and

noted that having this information can be useful to ensure the parties' (and their children's) needs are viewed and managed through an appropriately wide and holistic lens.

Some participants noted that the lack of holistic service delivery and overarching case management in the family law system (outside the above 2 examples from the family courts) can cause providers to duplicate work, and can cause clients to reach unsustainable outcomes, because clients are not always supported to make informed choices about what routes to take to settlement and/or what supports to use to assist them to reach an appropriate outcome.

- Some non-FRSP participants gave negative examples of clients' experiences with the FRSP because it was not holistically integrated with legal support – for example, because lawyers were not involved in FDR to advocate for settlements that meet their clients' needs and/or protect their legal interests.
- Some FRSP participants gave negative examples of clients' experiences using non-FRSP services because they were not holistically integrated with social service support – for example, because they reached agreements that were too legalistic and therefore not appropriately adaptive to their dynamic lives.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the FRSP

Overall, both survey and interview participants reported that FRSP services were being delivered at a high quality level and were making an effective contribution to meeting the needs of adults and children in separated/separating families. They also identified significant issues and limits to their ability to deliver services effectively and fully meet needs of separated and separating families. However, perceptions of effectiveness of delivery of specific FRSP services varied and stakeholders also identified some significant limitations to the effectiveness of services as a whole, due to barriers to meeting specific client needs and delivering a holistic connected service.

Effectiveness

The survey data in Figure 6.2 show that most participating professionals 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that FDR services (77%) and FRCs (69%) were delivering services effectively to separating/separated families. Service types with lower levels of agreement that services were being delivered effectively such as First Nations FDR and FRAL had much higher rates of 'don't know' responses (60% and 49%) respectively as shown in Figure 6.3. The response pattern for First Nations FDR is likely explained by this service type only recently commencing and respondents therefore unfamiliar with the service and unable to assess effectiveness.

Figure 6.2: Survey of professionals: FRSP professionals, proportion who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' FRSP services are delivering services effectively?

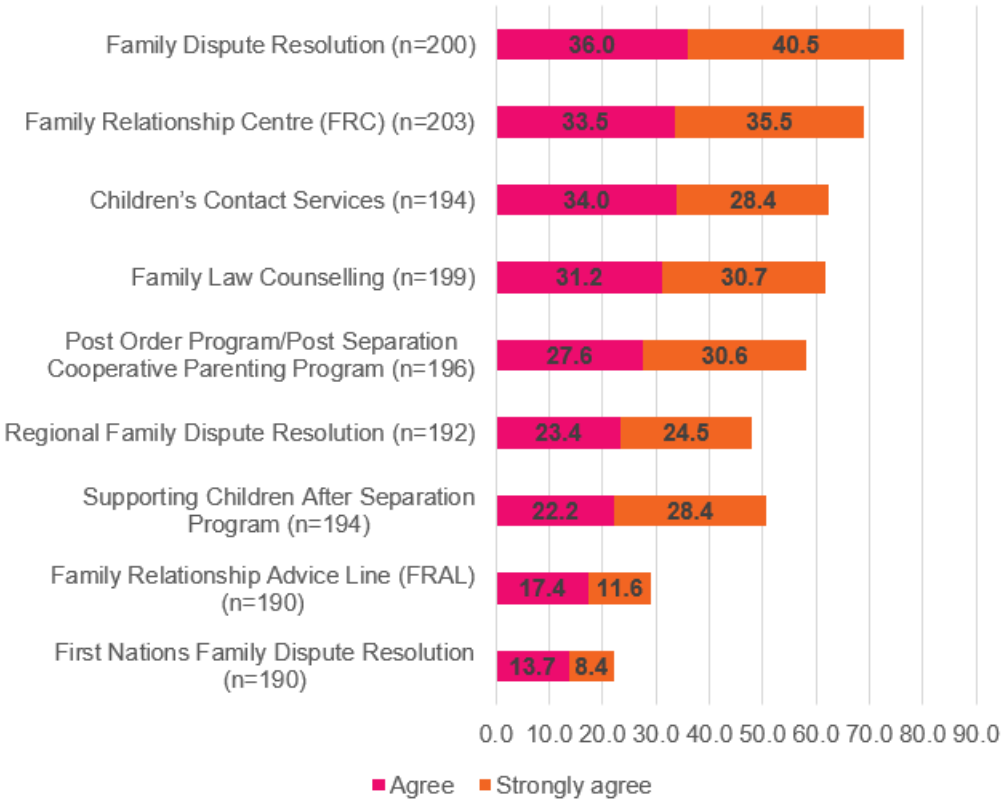


Figure 6.3: Survey of professionals: FRSP professionals, proportion who 'do not know/cannot say' FRSP services are delivering services effectively?

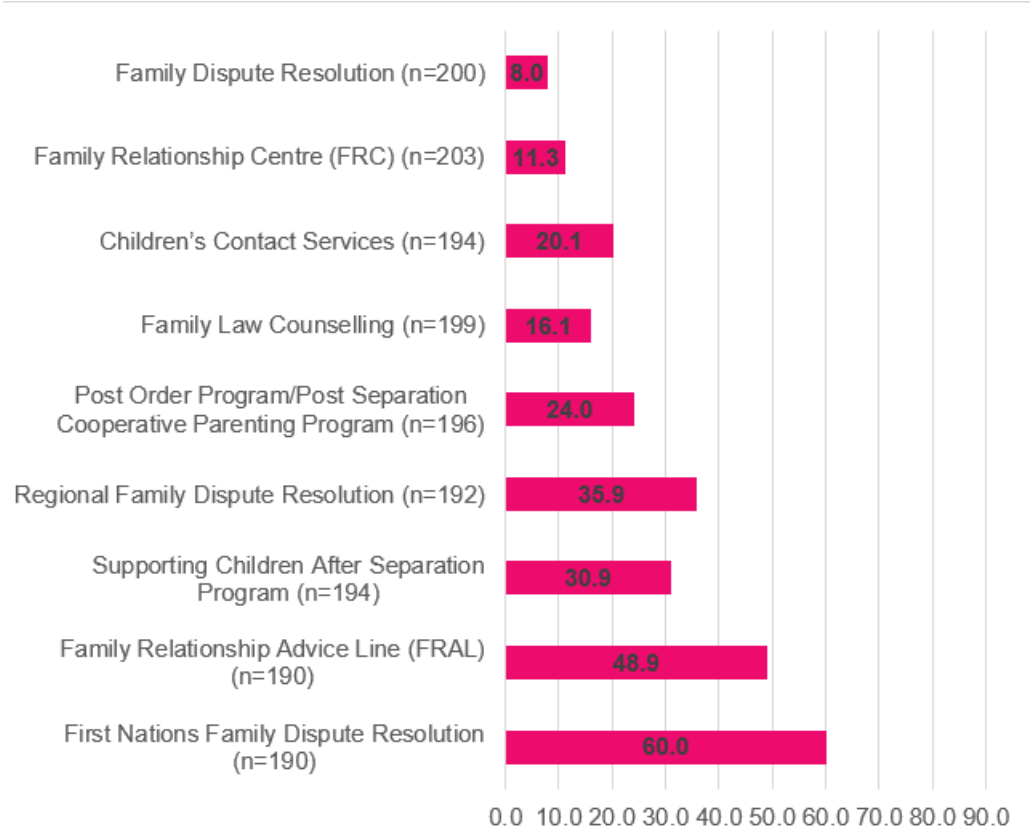


Figure D4 in Appendix D2 shows a majority of participating professionals (when excluding 'do not know/cannot say' survey responses to these questions) 'agreed' or strongly agreed' that FRSP services were delivered effectively.

FRSP professionals working directly in each FRSP activity were most likely to agree (to a statistically significant extent) that their FRSP activity type was delivering services effectively, followed by other FRSP professionals and non-FRSP professionals (Figure D5).

- 95% of FDR professionals 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that FDR was delivered effectively (cf. non-FRSP professionals: 67%).
- 89% of CCS professionals 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the CCS activity was delivered effectively (cf. non-FRSP professionals: 62%).
- 87% of FRC professionals 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the FRC activity was delivered effectively (cf. non-FRSP professionals: 57%).
- 80% of family law counselling professionals 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the family law counselling activity was delivered effectively (cf. non-FRSP professionals: 50%).

Of note, there were higher 'do not know/cannot say' responses about the effectiveness of service delivery from FRSP professionals not directly working in the FRSP activity type being assessed than other non-FRSP professionals.

Most stakeholders that participated in focus groups and interviews also provided generally positive feedback on the effectiveness of FRSP services in addressing the wellbeing and support needs of separated and separating families and assisting them to settle disputes outside the family court. In interviews, stakeholders generally reported that the FRSP was able

to assist families resolve matters outside of court if their circumstances were not too complex, while also supporting their broader wellbeing needs. However, as discussed throughout this chapter, stakeholders also identified some significant limitations to their ability to meet the needs of more complex families and minority groups and substantial issues arising from limited availability of some services for separated and separating families.

Family law professionals said the evidence that the FRSP FDR service had been effective, in their view, was that family lawyers were increasingly only needing to assist the more complicated clients.

> I think the family dispute resolution program has been very successful since its introduction. And the hallmark for me, and the measure of that is back in the day I used to do a combination of easy work and complicated work. … Now it seems that I only do complicated work and I think that's the experience of most family lawyers. The people who have disputes are either sorting it out themselves, to their credit, or they're engaging in these programs and are sorting it out with the assistance of a neutral mediator, which is fantastic, and that might then be populated into a parenting plan, maybe a parenting order, if that's appropriate.
>
> And as a consequence of that, the work that then comes to the lawyers where they need actual legal engagement or the lawyer-assisted program is often as a consequence of the complexity of the matter or the complexity of their parenting dynamics or the family violence allegations or the risk factors; whether it's alcohol, drugs, mental health issues, and so on. It's – that tends to be the things that I'm now seeing as a consequence. (Legal professional (non-FRSP), Victoria)
>
> Overall, I'd have to say that they do … this invaluable job that we don't know about, and it's all the really good stuff, we wouldn't know, because we wouldn't see those people. Hopefully they're all resolving it, and – really, when you look at how many people get separated, there's really only a small proportion that come here. (Judicial officer (non-FRSP), WA)

Many stakeholders also reported that FRSP services were more effective and better quality than many private alternatives due to requirements to comply to quality guidelines and standards. This was noted above in relation to counselling and other FRSP services but was also a specific concern in regard to private CCSs.

> You've reminded me to just talk about CCSs, in particular. I think there's an absolute risk in the sector and I know the department is looking at it, around the number of private providers that are opening up without any necessary guidelines, compliance or quality control. Families that have the means to pay, and it can be $500 for a couple of hours, can access these services without full risk assessments, et cetera, and so therefore, they sort of – they're duplicating a service, but without the quality standards that might exist within a funded CCS, but they're actually meeting a need of a particular client cohort, so they can afford it and they want access and, therefore, they don't want to have to wait. (FRSP service provider, Tasmania)

Some interview participants noted that FRSP services were more effective than private service use for most high needs clients because of its ability to meet their needs holistically and over the long term.

> … the restorative and educative nature of the services means it's possible for them to work with people over an extended period of time, in a positive fashion … as opposed to the court, which will work with people over a period of time, but not towards resolution, just towards getting a risk-based approach sorted out. That means that parenting plans can be revisited. As children grow, as circumstances change in families ... (FRSP service provider, SA)

Interview participants indicated the FRSP is well-placed to provide holistic, wraparound services – either by referring clients to a range of services within the FRSP suite or referring them externally to other providers that can support their needs and presenting issues (e.g. to manage AOD issues, FDV concerns, housing etc.). However, participants also referred to the lack of effective integration and referral to services with the broader family law system – which can contribute to delays, duplication of services and client distress. Interview participants also identified barriers that limit the FRSP's capacity to meet client needs, including:

- reluctance to use FRSP services among some groups due to lack of cultural safety
- issues with clients being able to commence and/or sustain engagement with the FRSP services long enough to meet their needs (e.g. geographic constraints and service time limits; costs of services, delays, and funding and staffing issues)
- persistence of key service gaps including lack of men's behavioural change programs, lawyer-assisted services, and family counselling/therapy.

Efficiency

Many stakeholders that participated in interviews reflected positively on the cost-effectiveness of the FRSP, noting that FRSP service providers are effectively assisting clients with high needs and complex issues – typically those least able to access private support – with the modest funding available. However, interviewed stakeholders also indicated that FRSP services (and services in the broader family law system) are often delivered in silos, with limited information sharing and case management. This can give rise to inefficiencies including duplication of data gathering (because clients give information to numerous different services that do not cross check or share that information) and delays in meeting clients' needs.

Many stakeholders that participated in focus groups and interviews also noted that there are issues with funding and staffing in the FRSP that can give rise to inefficiencies. Some mentioned inflexible arrangements in terms of distributing funds and staff across different services, leading to inefficiencies because service providers with more availability cannot easily share the load of busier providers. Most felt that there is insufficient resourcing overall. Lack of overall resourcing can mean that clients' issues are not adequately addressed in the first instance. Instead, the problems escalate which can then lead to service duplication and higher need for future support.

> If you just picked the children's contact services, that, for us, I think is fantastic, because we know the children are safe, there's lots of anecdotal evidence – and people, if they're not seeing their children, even in a supervised setting, that's when things can escalate. And we know that when there's a huge delay between getting into them, there'll be more applications and – people can get frustrated and there might be more involvement with the parties when there is restraining orders. And so, that is something that is – the lack of available supervised contact centres is something very concerning. (Legal professional (non-FRSP), WA)

Delays in accessing other supports may also lead to worsening client issues (mental health, conflict) down the track and the need for more intensive support. Other examples of inefficacies resulting from lack of resourcing include:

- If there is a long delay in a client's ability to attend a service, their issues may compound and the service may no longer match their needs.
- A client may go to mediation before they do a parenting course, or before they get assistance from a lawyer, and they realise later that the agreement reached in mediation is not appropriate.

Suggested changes to enable the FRSP to better meet needs of separated and separating families

Both interview and survey participants identified more holistic service delivery as an important change to enable FRSP services to better meet the needs of separated families. The interview participants also highlighted greater flexibility in service delivery and offering more services to address critical gaps as important changes that could be made. The most common change nominated by surveyed professionals was a greater use of child inclusive practice.

Focus group and interview participants were not directly asked whether they had any suggestions around changes that could be made to improve the FRSP. However, some of the suggestions that can be inferred from focus group and interview discussions are:

- greater case management and more holistic service delivery – e.g. having co-located services (this was recommended for the FRSP and the broader family law system)
- facilitating greater inclusivity, flexibility and tailoring in service delivery to accommodate clients' unique needs
- broadening its suite of services to address critical gaps, especially for men's behavioural change programs, lawyer-assisted services and family therapy/counselling
- improved funding, to ensure that service providers keep up with the demand and provide services at a pace and in a manner that appropriately and sustainably meets clients' needs and avoids causing or contributing to service provider burnout (particularly for providers working with clients with particularly complex and sensitive presenting issues and needs, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients).

Similar suggestions were raised in survey items regarding improved effectiveness or efficiency of services as illustrated below regarding FDR services:

> A requirement to include the participation of children and young people. A case-management approach to responding to needs identified in assessment that could be supported/addressed through consented direct referral to other FR and FL services/programs co-located with the FDR service under the same FRC (Survey, Woman or female, 55 years or older, Qld, program manager of FRSP service)

In the survey, the most frequently suggested changes to enable FRSP activities to better meet families' needs were:

- greater use of child inclusive practice: 60%
- holistic/coordinated service provision: 59%
- increased availability of support services (i.e. hours of operation or reduced waiting list) of the service to better meet the demand): 58%

- improved collaboration with non-FRSP family law system services: 46%
- improved collaboration with other FRSP services: 43%
- provision of services in other locations to better meet the demand: 43%.

There was little difference in the views of FRSP professionals when compared to non-FRSP professionals for this survey response. Detailed quantitative data relating to suggested changes are presented in Appendix D1, Table D5.

Some participants providing an open text survey response gave more detailed insight into the need for more holistic, streamlined and collaborative service provision by family law system services (*n* = 8/74). For example:

> Clients need government funded services to be more responsive and faster ... Their model is to book Party A into intake then ask for Party B's contact details. Then they invite Party B to intake. This process takes months. The government funded organisation is mostly delivering intake sessions to Party As. A better model is to get Party Bs contact details and invite them to mediation before intake. Then, if Party B agrees to participate in mediation, intake for both parties can be booked sooner. This would save a lot of time for families in need of conflict resolution. The children are suffering while the parents are waiting for mediation. (Survey, Lawyer – private practice)

Some survey participants also referenced the duplication of FRSP and non-FRSP services in their open text responses (*n* = 10/74). Most of these participants reflected positively on this duplication of services, indicating that it provided flexibility and choice for clients and helped to address any issues with waiting lists for FRSP services. Other survey participants indicated that they considered there to be conflicting service provision by FRSP and non-FRSP services, describing how services competed for clients or had competing aims in their service provision (*n* = 20/74). These participants suggested a need for better communication, coordination and collaboration between FRSP and non-FRSP services:

> There is a conflict with the FRS programs competing actively with private practice and wasting resources that could be better used for people who can't afford private provision of services ... While some family law pathways networks are meeting their purpose, others exclude private FDRPs and other practitioners and are not collegiate in their approach. (Survey, Professional role not specified)

> ... I do not believe that the FRSP usually are on the same page as the family law system. The family law system in contrast tends to have a belief that referral to any FRSP solves the party's issues. I call it box ticking. As an example, often when the courts order parties to attend programs, such as Post Separation, a parent who is open to gaining more skills benefits. But usually a parent with substance or violence issues will gain nothing. (Survey, Lawyer – private practice)

> There is an incredible level of conflict between Family Relationship Services Programs (such as the Family Relationship Centre) and broader parts of the family law system (such as private family lawyers). There is a level of distrust between private family lawyers and workers within the Family Relationship Services Program that prevents an improved level of collaboration. (Survey, Practitioner working in a Family Relationship Service Program service)

Some participants (*n* = 10/74) described conflict between service providers and confusion among both professionals and clients about the nature of service provision and interrelationship between FRSP and non-FRSP services:

> Confusion between legal-based mediation and FDR programs … the family legal system has an overall lack of understanding of the FRSP, which can often be difficult to navigate for referral and collaboration. (Survey, Executive at a service provider organisation that operates a Family Relationship Service Program service)

> Our clients often experience confusion and [are] overwhelm[ed] with the array of services and agencies they must engage with. (Survey, Lawyer – Community legal centre)

> The entire family law system is incredibly segmented and does not follow a holistic approach. (Survey, Practitioner working in a Family Relationship Service Program service)

Summary

This chapter has analysed the interviews (individual and group) undertaken with 59 stakeholders and the survey responses from 239 professionals delivering FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Separating and separated families present to their services with complex needs and issues, including domestic and family violence, substance abuse and mental health issues and financial pressures. Clients often present with multiple issues, and factors such as client diversity and/or complex family structures can increase the complexity of caseloads. The survey data also showed that there was no difference in the caseloads of professionals working in FRSP funded services in terms of the representation of clients using or experiencing domestic violence when compared to those working in non-FRSP services.

Professionals emphasised the need (not always met) for effective case management, including coordination and referral to non-FRSP services. Longer-term supports are also critical, and effective case management assists in engaging clients by supporting the building of trust and relationships. There is a high demand for FRSP services, which providers struggle to meet due to high client needs and a lack of resourcing. Surveyed professionals identified both the provision of information and assistance around resolving disputes about post separation parenting arrangements as the most common client needs. The survey data also showed that education and skills programs, various therapeutic supports for those using or experiencing domestic and family violence, and mental health supports were the greatest client needs that were not matched by adequate access opportunities for clients.

Interviewed stakeholders noted that it is very common for separating and separated families to use both FRSP and non-FRSP services, and that there is a high demand for both services (often in combination). There is a range of factors that drive patterns of use of FRSP services and other services in the family law system, including whether clients use multiple parts of the system sequentially or simultaneously. The types and combinations of FRSP services used depended on the client's needs and presenting issues; those with higher needs may use a larger combination of services and do so concurrently. Many participants highlighted the cost effectiveness of the FRSP as a positive factor, particularly for clients who could not afford private services. A range of factors could affect the take-up of services including long waiting

lists, lack of awareness of services, duplication with private services, and geographical and cultural barriers.

From the perspective of stakeholders, services for men, including men's behavioural change programs, together with lawyer-assisted services and family counselling/therapy were critical service gaps that were not widely available in family law services (including the FRSP). Some of the challenges in service design and/or delivery included that sometimes FRSP services may not cater to diverse families.

In terms of linkages and referral pathways between the FRSP and the broader family law system, interview participants noted there was the potential for private practitioners to complement, duplicate or conflict with the FRSP program. The most common referrals professionals made to FRSP services were to FDR and family law counselling. Non-FRSP professionals were more likely to refer clients to private mediators than their FRSP counterparts.

The FLPN plays an important role in encouraging collegiality, learning and linkages and collaboration in the family law sector. There was also some evidence that professionals who regularly attended FLPN events made more referrals to both FRSP and non-FRSP services. Despite these positive aspects, most participants indicated limited communication and coordination across the system with limited opportunities for information sharing, holistic approaches to service delivery and case management.

FRSP services were being delivered to a high level of quality and making an effective contribution to meeting the needs of adults and children in separated families. There were also some issues and barriers that limited the effectiveness of services as a whole and impacted the program's ability to deliver a holistic and connected service. This was the case for First Nations and non-First Nations families. It was also particularly so for First Nations clients, as well as clients from CALD backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ clients, clients with disability, and clients living in regional, rural or remote communities.

These findings dovetailed with the changes identified by participants that would enable FRSP services to better meet the needs of families; more holistic service delivery and greater use of child inclusive practice were the necessary changes most frequently identified by professionals.

7. Insights from separating and separated adults: findings from the Survey of Adults and qualitative interviews with adults

This chapter sets out findings from online surveys and in-depth interviews with separating and separated adults. The survey attracted responses from 246 separating or separated adults who had used FRSP funded or other family law system services and it covered characteristics of those using FRSP and non-FRSP services (including those who did not use any services), prevalence of safety issues, and the number, types and patterns of FRSP and non-FRSP service use.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 28 separating or separated adults and covered clients' separation journey, use of FRSP and non-FRSP services, reasons for service use, experiences of service use (accessibility, timeliness of access, format, cultural safety, effectiveness), unmet needs (services families needed but were unable to access) and perception of the impact of services on family wellbeing.

Key messages

- The complexity of clients' circumstances was highlighted across the survey of adults and in-depth interviews with clients, with participants reporting multiple and co-occurring relationship problems and safety concerns.
- Emotional abuse and mental health concerns were the most commonly reported issues within the survey of adults, a finding also reflected in the interviews.
- Multiple service use (including combinations of FRSP and non-FRSP services) for relatively long periods of time was common amongst participants.
- There are significant challenges associated with navigating the post-separation service system, and the participants reported a profound lack of support in relation to understanding the services and supports that were available to them, how to access them, and what they were eligible to access.
- Interview participants shed light on multiple barriers to service use and access, including limited service availability, financial and geographic barriers, family violence related barriers, and service wait times or delays.
- Families reported diverse experiences of services and perceptions of whether they were effective in meeting needs. Many expressed high levels of satisfaction and gratitude for the support they received, describing how services helped them cope with the emotional, legal and practical challenges of separation. Negative experiences included high costs, limited access, delays, administrative issues, perceptions of bias and lack of safety in service delivery.
- Some families from priority groups reported concerns that services were unable to meet their needs, with examples from rainbow families and culturally and linguistically diverse families.
- There was a range of pathways that participants used to support them during their separation. Notably, survey participants reported higher levels of satisfaction with counselling, mediation and dispute resolution as a main pathway. In-depth insights from

the interviews into client experiences of these pathways showed that many participants had attempted mediation with a variety of service providers due to several reasons including ineffective service provision and duplication.

- These findings, particularly in relation to the complexity of clients' circumstances and the challenges associated with navigating the service system, support the need for:
  - a single point of contact into the system
  - effective case management for clients with complex issues
  - expanded access to timely and affordable legal information and advice
  - measures to address service gaps and wait times
  - further service development to ensure FRSP services are accessible, tailored and culturally appropriate for families with diverse needs and experiences.

Sample

Survey of adults

The Survey of Adults commenced on 20 November 2023 and closed on 1 February 2024, with 246 participants completing the survey. The recruited sample is not representative of all separating or separated parents. Nevertheless, the data provide useful insights into the number, types and pattern of services used by separating and separated parents and, where sample sizes allow, enable further analysis such as cross-tabulations by gender or main pathway used to resolve parenting arrangements.

Participants were recruited through a broad range of FRSP and non-FRSP services, including family law, legal, DFV, and men's support services who were asked to circulate a project information sheet containing a link to the survey to their clients. The survey was also promoted though AIFS social media and newsletters. Additionally, the FCFCoA promoted the survey through their social media channels.

The sample demographic characteristics are presented in Appendix E1, Tables E1 and E2 and key characteristics summarised below:

- In terms of gender, 68% of participants were female and 31% were male.
- Participants tended to be older in age than the general population of separated parents with 28% of the sample aged 35–44 years, 39% aged 45–54 years and 26% aged 55 years+. The proportion of separated parents aged over 45 years in the Survey of Recently Separated Parents was lower at 16%.
- Participants were recruited from each state and territory. When compared to the Australian population, the survey sample had higher representation of participants in New South Wales (37%) and Queensland (26%) and lower representation of participants living in Victoria (18%).[12] Few participants reported living in the Northern Territory (1%), Tasmania (2%), the Australian Capital Territory (4%) and Western Australia (5%).
- Additionally, most participants reported living in suburban areas (57%) and regional areas (30%). A small proportion lived in the CBD and in rural areas (4% and 9% respectively).
- Although targeted recruitment activities were not undertaken for First Nations Peoples, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants was in line with their

[12] See: www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/latest-release. For June 2023, share of population living in NSW was 31.3%, Vic, 25.6% and Qld 20.5%.

representation in the general population: 3.7% of the sample identified as Aboriginal, and 0.4% Torres Strait Islander.

- Most participants were born in Australia (73%). A further 9% were born in a non-English speaking country.

Table E2 further describes the education, employment, income and housing characteristics of the sample.

Almost three-quarters of participants (70%) reported they had children at the time they separated or accessed services. Overall, the average number of children was 1.9, with no difference between men and women who both reported 1.9 children on average. Data were collected for *n* = 330 children. They showed the average age was 13.3 years.

Based on the age of participants and their children, and later data that are reported on multiple relationship issues, services used and the total duration of service use, the sample has a profile that is consistent with a significant degree of complexity and prolonged engagement with the family law system.

In-depth interviews with separated adults

Separating or separated adults were recruited to participate in in-depth interviews with the support of staff from FRSP and non-FRSP service providers, and via advertisements in a range of forms including AIFS e-Newsletters and social media (Facebook and LinkedIn). Service providers were asked to either pass on the contact names of participants directly to the research team (with participant consent) or give information about the study to their clients (a participant information sheet/and or a printed digital postcard) so they could then contact the AIFS Research Team directly if they wanted to volunteer. Social media was used to try to recruit separating/separated adults who might not be using services, or other hard to reach groups.

Interviews with 28 separating or separated adults were completed. Demographics of the interviewees included:

- 20 women, 8 men, 0 non-binary persons
- 18 in a major city, 5 inner-regional, 3 outer-regional, 2 remote, 0 very remote
- representation from every state and territory except for Tasmania and Western Australia (state /territory break in Table E3, Appendix E1)
- 5 participants identified as CALD, 2 participants with a CALD ex-partner, and 3 where the participant and their ex-partner identified as CALD
- one participant who identified as lesbian, one participant who identified as bisexual, one participant who had a son who identified as gay, and one participant who had a child who identified as transgender
- one participant who identified as Aboriginal, as did their ex-partner and children, and one participant who said only their child identified as Aboriginal. No participants identified as a Torres Strait Islander
- one participant who lived with disability, one case where the participant and their child lived with disabilities, 2 participants with an ex-partner who lived with disability, and 3 where the participant, their ex-partner, and their child or children lived with disabilities.

Clients had complex issues and needs

This section sets out survey and interview data highlighting the issues that affected separating or separated families that accessed services. Surveyed adults reported multiple relationship

issues, with emotional abuse and mental health problems reported by a majority of the sample. Many also reported safety concerns for either themselves and/or their children. The interview participants also described a range of circumstances and challenges related to their families and separation.

Relationship issues

Relationship issues were commonly reported by adults in the survey as well as in-depth interviews. Survey participants had the option to report whether any of 7 relationship issues affected them or the other party in their separation. The most reported issues were emotional abuse (72%) and self-reported mental health problems (59%). Women were more likely to report emotional abuse (78%) compared to men (62%) and pornography use (21%) compared to 4% of men.

Multiple relationship issues were also common – on average, participants reported 2.4 of these issues. Women reported more relationship issues on average (2.6 issues) compared to almost 2 relationship issues reported by men (1.9 issues on average).

Overall, 24% of the sample reported 4 or more relationship issues; women were more likely to report 4 or more issues (28%) compared to men (14%).

Table 7.1: Survey of Adults: 'When experiencing relationship issues or separating, were there any issues for you or the other party/former spouse/partner with?', by gender

	How do you describe your gender?		
	Man or male (%)	Woman or female (%)	Total (%)
Emotional abuse **	62.3	77.7	72.0
Mental health problems [a]	57.1	60.2	59.3
Alcohol or drug use	23.4	36.1	31.7
Physical violence	23.4	35.5	31.3
Internet or social media use	18.2	19.9	19.1
Pornography use **	3.9	20.5	15.0
Gambling problems	3.9	10.2	8.1
Four or more relationship issues reported (%) *	14.3	28.3	23.6
Average number of relationship issues	1.9	2.6 *	2.4
n	77	166	246

Notes: [a] Participants could select this option in response to the question, 'When experiencing relationship issues or separating, were there any issues for you, or the other party/former spouse/partner with?', this measure is not the Kessler 6 scale of psychological distress. *n* = 3 participants who reported 'prefer not to say' in response to gender question not reported. ***p < .001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05, Significant difference in pattern of responses by analysis variable using Chi-square test of difference. Differences in mean number of relationship issues, statistical significance test is based on bivariate regression ***p < .001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05. Multiple response for this set of questions, so percentages may not sum to 100.0%

Safety concerns

A majority of the survey sample (61%) reported safety concerns (either for themselves, their child/ren or both) as a result of ongoing contact with the other party or former spouse (Table 7.2). There was a statistically significant difference in the pattern of responses between men and women, with 48% of women reporting they were concerned about both themselves and their children compared to 28% of men. Conversely, 27% of men reported they were concerned only about the children compared to 6% of women. This pattern of responses meant that, overall, 63% of women indicated safety concerns for either themselves or their children compared to 59% of men.

Table 7.2: Survey of Adults: Any concerns about children or your own safety, by gender

	Man or male (%)	Woman or female (%)	Total (%)
When experiencing relationship issues or separating, did you have any concerns about the child/children's safety (where applicable) or for your own safety as a result of ongoing contact with the other party or your former spouse/partner? ***			
Yes, concerned about both of us (myself and child/children)	28.0	47.9	41.6
Yes, concerned about myself	4.0	9.1	7.4
Yes, concerned about child/children	26.7	5.5	11.9
Safety concerns subtotal	*58.7*	*62.5*	*60.9*
No	34.7	27.3	29.6
No contact with other party or former spouse/partner	1.3	4.2	3.3
Do not know/Cannot say	5.3	4.8	4.9
Prefer not to say	0.0	1.2	1.2
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**
n	**75**	**165**	**243**

Notes: *n* = 3 participants who reported 'prefer not to say' in response to gender question not reported. *n* = 3 missing responses to safety concerns question not reported. ****p* < .001; ***p* < 0.01; **p* < 0.05, Significant difference in pattern of responses by analysis variable using Chi-square test of difference.

Appendix E1, Table E4 provides data on how the participant described their current relationship with the other party. Participants could choose from a list of 5 options: 'Friendly', 'Cooperative', 'Distant', 'Lots of conflict' or 'Fearful', with prefer not to say and don't know options also provided. Overall, 35% of the sample reported their relationship as being characterised by lots of conflict, a further 27% said they were fearful, with a higher proportion of women reporting this response (35%) compared to men (10%). The qualitative survey responses provided some further insights into safety issues, with 48/130 participants elaborating that they had been subject to abuse by their ex-partner or the other party around the time of their separation.

Interview participants also described a range of circumstances and challenges related to their relationships, families, separations that consequently affected their service needs. While some reported none of the above issues, others reported a range of issues including substance use and/or gambling, homelessness, mental health problems and experiences of family violence that often continued during and after the separation. The impact of these issues on service use patterns and needs is explored further below.

Appendix E4 provides further discussion on the complex issues among separated families based on an analysis of the *Survey of Recently Separated Parents* (2014).

Service use and pathways

This section describes service use, duration of service use, types of services used, satisfaction and pathways. The survey data show that multiple service use is common and that the total duration of use across all services is often considerable. Adults who report relationship issues such as emotional abuse and physical violence or safety concerns report using more services on average and using these services for a longer duration on average. More intensive service use was also found when safety concerns were present.

A range of pathways by which parenting arrangements were mainly reached was reported. Participants who used counselling, mediation or online dispute resolution as their main pathway were significantly more likely to have higher levels of satisfaction about the process and consideration of their needs.

The most frequently used FRSP services were FRCs, FDR and FRAL and the most commonly used non-FRSP services were private lawyers, counsellors or other therapeutic support professionals and the courts. The most typical service use pattern was a mix of both FRSP and non-FRSP services and, when this was the case, more services were used on average compared to those who only used FRSP services or only used non-FRSP services exclusively.

Multiple service use is common

Survey participants could indicate the FRSP and non-FRSP services they were currently using or had used in the past 5 years for their separation or relationship issues. A total of 23 services were listed, plus an additional 'other family law service' option that required participants to specify the additional service.[13] Of the 23 listed services, 9 were FRSP funded activities and 14 were non-FRSP services. Participants could select as many services as applicable. Response options included: 'Currently using', used 'In the past 5 years' or if they 'Considered using this service but did not use', 'No I did not need this service, so did not use it'.[14] Participants were classified as using a service if they had selected 'Currently using' or 'In the past 5 years'.

Highlights from the data reported in Table E5 in Appendix E1 include:

- **Multiple service use is common**: 41% of survey participants reported using 2–5 services and another third (34%) reported using 6 or more services. Overall, participants used 4.8 services on average.
- **On average, participating adults use services for a considerable amount of time**: The average number of days that all services were used as reported by participants was 1,622 days (or around 4.5 years).[15] The median duration of 92 days was much lower, indicating that some clients are using services for a long time, increasing the average duration of service; however, the typical adult is using services over a shorter time period.
- **Limited differences in patterns of service use for those born in a non-English speaking country**: Noting the small sample size of those born in a non-English speaking country (n = 23) and that the differences were not statistically significant, 61% of those born in a non-English speaking country used 2 or more services compared to 75% of those born in Australia. The mean number of services used by those born in a non-English

[13] After n = 4 responses were backcoded to private lawyers, there were n = 6 responses of using other services (these were reported as Facebook groups, self-representation or in the process of finding appropriate services).
[14] Participants also had a *'Do not know/Cannot say'* response option.
[15] The average duration of services used (days) was based on the average length of completed services use across all of the services used. Participants who reported to be 'currently using' services were not included in the calculation of average length, given they had not finished using the service(s).

speaking country was 4.1 compared with 4.7 for those born in Australia and 5.5 for those born in another English-speaking country. This pattern of service use can be placed in the context that those born in a non-English speaking country reported less relationship issues on average (1.4) than those born in Australia (2.6).

- **Participants reporting relationship issues use more services and for a longer duration:** Participants who reported relationship issues used more services on average and used these services for a longer period of time. Statistically significant differences are summarised here (Figure 7.1):
  - *Alcohol or drug use reported*: 6.3 average number of services used compared to 4.1 services where this issue was not reported.
  - *Self-reported mental health problems*: 5.3 average number services used compared to 4.1 services where this issue was not reported.
  - *Pornography use reported*: 6.4 average services used compared to 4.5 services where this issue was not reported.
  - *Emotional abuse reported*: 5.9 average services used compared to 2.1 services where this issue was not reported.
  - *Physical violence reported*: 7.7 average services used compared to 3.5 services where this issue was not reported.

  Additionally, where the following issues were reported, there were statistically significant higher average duration of service use days (Figure 7.2):
  - *Alcohol or drug use reported*: 2,530 days (average) compared to 1,201 days.
  - *Emotional abuse reported*: 2,050 days (average) compared to 524 days.
  - *Physical violence reported*: 3,193 days (average) compared to 907 days.

Figure E1 (in Appendix E2) shows the proportion of participants reporting emotional abuse and physical abuse by the number of services used. A higher proportion of those who used 6 or more services were more likely to report emotional abuse (44%) and physical violence (61%) compared to the corresponding proportions (6% and 3% respectively) who reported using no services.

Figure 7.1: Survey of Adults: average number of services used, by type of relationship issue

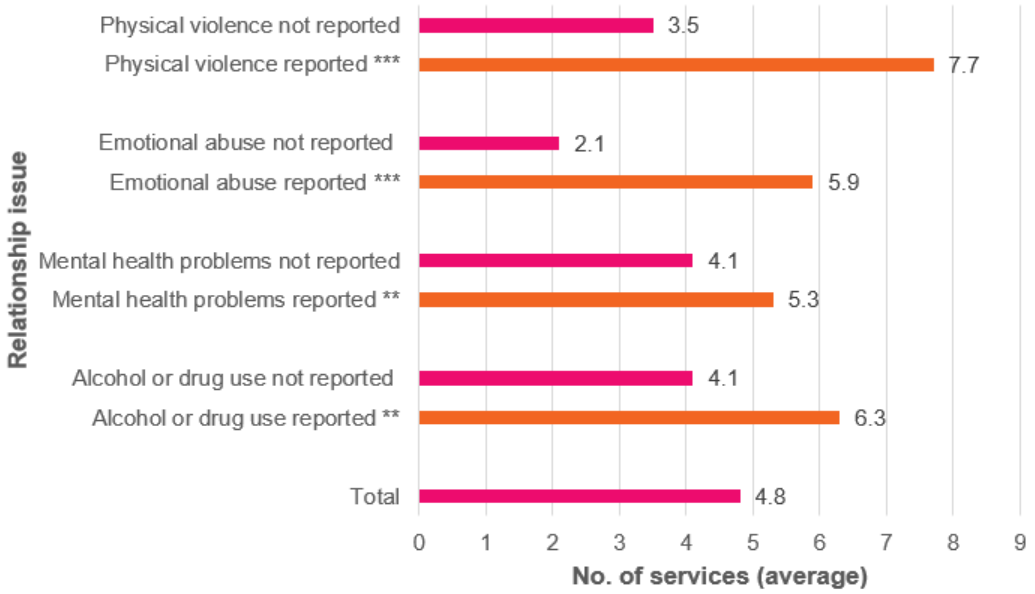


Figure 7.2: Survey of Adults: average duration of services used (days) for selected relationship issues

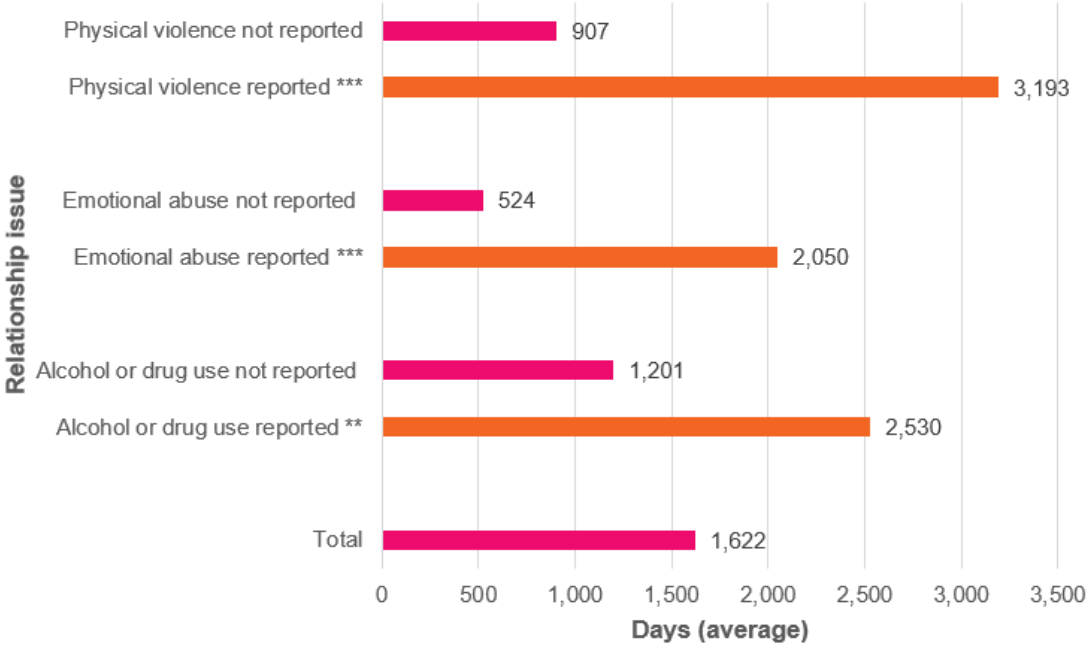


Table E5 further describes the number of services used, the average number of services used and duration of services used – further analysed according to gender, country of birth and risk of psychological distress as measured by the Kessler 6 scale (see Appendix E3 for details on this scale and its scoring). There were no statistically significant differences in the number, average number of services, or average duration of services when further analysed by these variables.

Number and duration of services used by geographic area and income

Table E6 in Appendix E1 presents the number and average number of services used and average total duration of all services used, further analysed by geographical area and income. No statistically significant differences were found in the pattern of service use by these 2 variables. This indicates that there is no difference in the number and duration of services used across the income spectrum.

Noting the small sample size for those living in rural areas and non-significant differences overall, on average, participants from rural areas used 3.8 services compared to 4.5 services in regional and 5.1 in suburban areas. The total average number of days participants used all services was around 1,000 days for those in rural and almost 1,600 in suburban areas.

Number and duration of services used by safety concerns

Participants who reported safety concerns used more services for a longer period than those who did not report safety concerns to a statistically significant extent (Table E7). For example, 57% of participants who indicated they were concerned for themselves/and or their child used an average of 7.1 services for an average duration of 2,252 days compared to 2.5 services for an average of 469 days for those without safety concerns.

Main service used to resolve parenting and financial/property arrangements

Table 7.3 presents data relating to the main pathway reported by participants to reach agreement about parenting/carer arrangements, property/financial arrangements, or resolving relationship issues by participants' gender. For each question, participants could select only one of the options listed in the table.

Participants identified a range of pathways in the analysis of responses regarding the main pathways used to reach parenting/care arrangements. Around one-fifth (19%) of the eligible sample (*n* = 158) reported using informal approaches such as 'discussions with the other party' (11%) or 'nothing specific it just happened' (8%). From the services listed, 21% mainly used the courts, 15% mainly used counselling, mediation or dispute resolution services and 13% mainly used a lawyer to reach parenting/carer arrangements.

Additionally, 17% of participants reported that they mainly used 'something else' to reach parenting/carer arrangements. The most common other specified responses were that parenting arrangements were still to be resolved and a smaller number of responses indicating self-representation. There were no statistically significant differences in the main pathway used for parenting/care arrangements when analysed according to participants' gender. As noted in the key messages, this pattern of response is a typical of representative samples of separated parents, who are much more likely to use informal pathways to resolve their parenting arrangements.

Table 7.3 (second panel) also sets out participants' reports on how they mainly reached resolutions to their property/financial arrangements (*n* = 122). Legal advice was commonly reported in the resolution of property financial arrangements (25%) compared to parenting arrangements (13%) by participants in this sample. Due to the smaller sample size of participants who resolved property and financial arrangements, no further analysis of satisfaction by main pathway was undertaken.

The third panel of Table 7.3 describes the main pathway used where participants reported the resolution of relationship issues (*n* = 40). Counselling, mediation or dispute resolution services (23%) was the most commonly reported main pathway for resolution of these issues.

Table 7.3: Survey of Adults: how arrangements were mainly reached, by gender

	Man or male	Woman or female	Total
	%	%	%
Which best describes how parenting/carer arrangements were mainly reached? Did you mainly use:			
Counselling, mediation or dispute resolution services	15.3	14.6	14.6
A lawyer	18.6	10.4	13.3
The courts	16.9	24.0	20.9
Discussions with the other party	15.3	8.3	11.4
Nothing specific, it just happened	8.5	8.3	8.2
Something else (Please specify)	18.6	14.6	16.5
Do not know/Cannot say	5.1	15.6	11.4
Prefer not to say	1.7	4.2	3.8
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
n	**59**	**96**	**158**
Which best describes how property/financial arrangements were mainly reached? Did you mainly use:			
Counselling, mediation or dispute resolution services	7.0	6.5	6.6
A lawyer	20.9	27.3	24.6
The courts	14.0	19.5	17.2
Discussions with the other party	16.3	7.8	11.5
Nothing specific, it just happened	7.0	5.2	5.7
Something else (Please specify)	23.3	16.9	19.7
Do not know/Cannot say	11.6	15.6	13.9
Prefer not to say	0.0	1.3	0.8
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
n	**43**	**77**	**122**
Which best describes how the relationship issues were mainly reached? Did you mainly use:			
Counselling, mediation or dispute resolution services			22.5
A lawyer			5.0
The courts			10.0
Discussions with the other party			20.0
Nothing specific, it just happened			17.5
Something else (Please specify)			5.0
Do not know/Cannot say			10.0
Prefer not to say			10.0
Total			**100.0**
n			**40**

Notes: Participants who had previously indicated in the survey that they had separated from the spouse/partner they are accessing (or previously accessed) relationship support services with, or that they are in the process of separating that person or another (e.g. the other person or you are a grandparent) were asked to describe how parenting/carer arrangements were mainly reached (*n* = 158). They were also asked a follow-up question to describe how property/financial arrangements were mainly reached (*n* = 122). Participants who had previously indicated in the survey that they had not separated from the spouse/partner they are accessing the relationship support services with or other (e.g. the other person in the relationship or you are a grandparent) were asked how relationship issues were mainly reached (*n* = 40). *n* = 3 responses where gender 'prefer not to say' not reported for parenting arrangements. *n* = 2 responses where gender 'prefer not to say' not reported for financial arrangements. Due to small sample sizes, information on how relationship issues were mainly reached, not reported by gender.

Satisfaction with main pathway to resolve parenting arrangements

As Figures E2 to E5 in Appendix E2 show, participants who reported their main pathway as counselling, mediation or online dispute resolution were significantly more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction. This level of satisfaction was measured by their agreement in response to a series of statements about the process working for them, their children, their children's needs and how safe they felt using the service.

- 65% of participants whose main pathway was counselling, mediation or other online dispute resolution agreed/strongly agreed that the process worked for them, compared to 53% who mainly used a lawyer and 23% of those who mainly used the courts.
- 59% of participants whose main pathway was counselling, mediation or other online dispute resolution agreed/strongly agreed that the process worked for the children. The corresponding proportions agreeing with this statement for those who mainly used lawyers and the courts were lower at 25% and 17% respectively.
- There was a similar pattern in response to the statement: 'The child/children's needs were adequately considered' with 55% of participants who mainly used counselling, mediation or other online dispute resolution agreed compared to 23% for participants using lawyers and 16% for the courts.
- 41% of participants who mainly used counselling, mediation or other online dispute resolution agreed with the statement that 'safety plans were put in place and/or I felt safe using the service'. This was double the corresponding proportion of participants who mainly used the courts (20%).

Participants' survey responses also highlighted that there were low rates of agreement with the statement that 'the service/process acknowledged the domestic and family violence and responded appropriately'. Overall, 19% agreed in response to this statement, the highest proportion agreeing was for those participants who reported that they mainly used counselling, mediation or other online dispute resolution (Figure E6). Due to small sample sizes for those using lawyers, this analysis could not be taken further.

Types of services used

Figures 7.3 and 7.4 show the most commonly reported FRSP and non-FRSP services used when participants were separating or experiencing relationship issues.

For FRSP funded services, the 3 most commonly used services were:

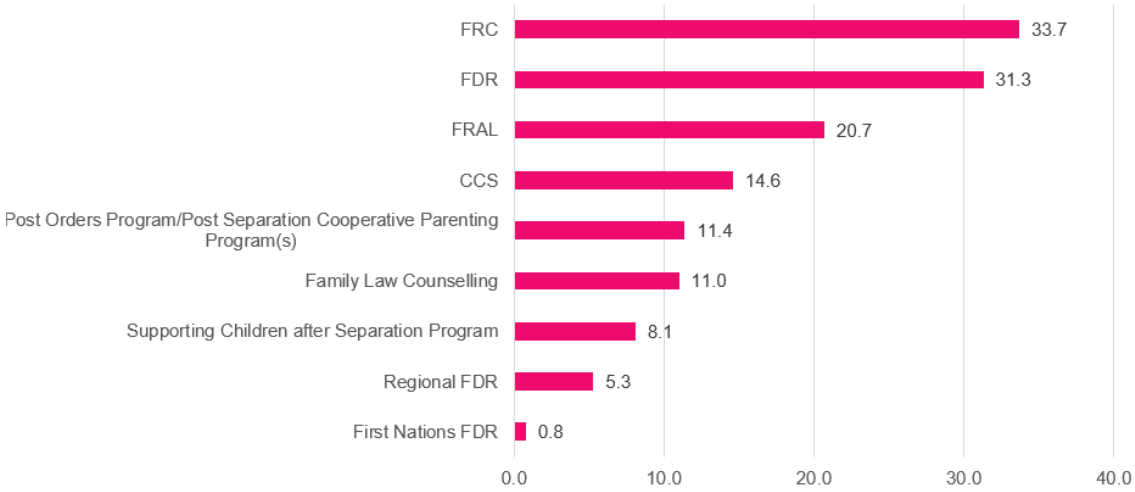
- FRCs (34% of the sample indicated they had used a FRC)
- FDR (31%)
- FRAL (21%).

A further 15% had used a CCS. Fewer participants reported using POP (11%), family law counselling (11%) or SCASP (8%) services. As noted in the Survey of Professionals findings,

parent support (e.g. parenting arrangements) and mental health support (adult and child) were commonly identified client needs from the perspective of professionals.

A statistically significant higher proportion of men (44%) reported FRC use compared to women (30%) (Table E8 in Appendix E1). There was no statistically significant difference between gender and the service used for the remaining FRSP services.

Figure 7.3: Survey of Adults: types of FRSP services used



Note: Multiple services could be selected, so percentages do not sum to 100.0%.

For non-FRSP services (Figure 7.4), the 3 most commonly reported services participants used were:

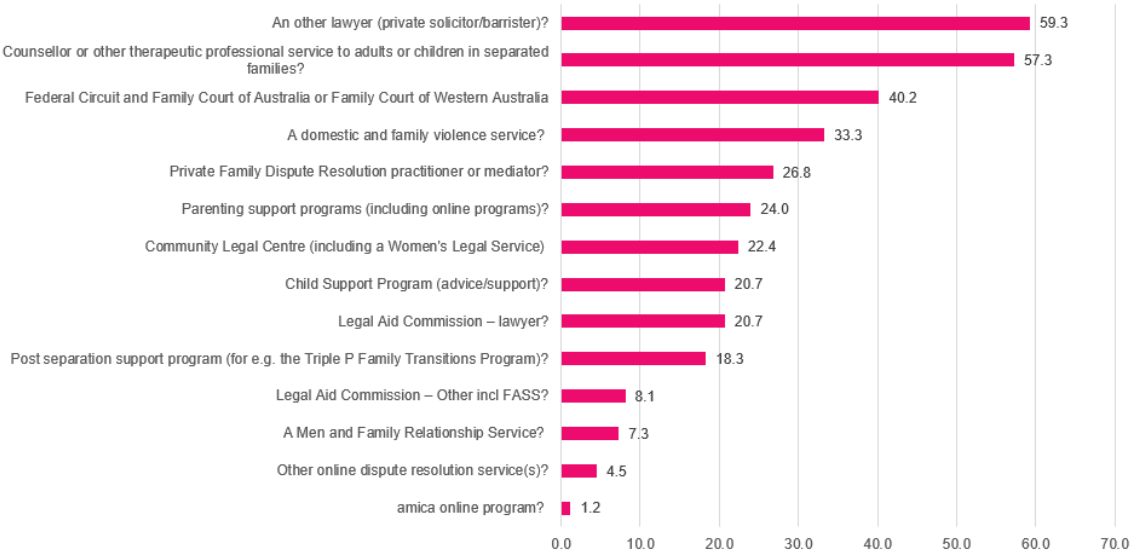
- another lawyer (private solicitor/barrister) (59%)
- a counsellor or other therapeutic professional service for adult or children in separated families (57%)
- the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia (40%).

One-third of participants (33%) reported using a domestic and family violence (DFV) service while very few participants reported using the amica online program (1%).

Significantly more women reported using a domestic and family violence service compared to men (43% cf. 14%) and a Community Legal Centre (including Women's Legal Service) (27% and 13% respectively) (Table E8).

A higher proportion of men reported using a Men and Family Relationship Service compared to women (18% cf. 2%) (Table E8).

Figure 7.4: Survey of Adults: types of non-FRSP services used



Note: Multiple services could be selected, so percentages do not sum to 100.0%.

Types of services used by geographical area, income and risk of psychological distress

Tables E9, E10 and E11 in Appendix E1 present a similar analysis of the types of services used, further analysed by geographical area, income and risk of psychological distress.

When service use was considered by geographical area (Table E9), the only statistically significant difference found in use of services was for parenting support programs (including online programs). About a quarter of participants living in suburban areas used this type of service compared to 5% of those living in rural areas. With the expected exception of regional FDR, and a Men and Family Relationship Service, the proportion living in a rural area accessing each service was lower than the corresponding proportions in either suburban or regional areas.

Analysis by income data (Table E10) indicates that those with higher income ($100,000 or more) were more likely to report the use of private FDR (37%) compared to between 16% and 29% of those reporting lower income bands. These differences were statistically significant. There was also some indication (though not to a statistically significant degree) that those reporting between $40,000 and $79,999 in income did not access each service as frequently as those with over $100,000 in income, notably for FRC, FDR, family law counselling, and counsellor or other therapeutic professionals.

Table E11 shows some statistically significant differences in the types of service used by risk of psychological distress:

- A higher proportion of participants classified as having ‘no probable serious mental illness’ used FRC services (46%), compared to 38% of those classified as having a ‘probable serious mental illness’. Differences were also found in FRAL use where the corresponding proportions were 29% and 23%.
- For non-FRSP funded services: for those classified as having a ‘probable serious mental illness’, 40% used a CLC and 21% used a parenting support program (including online programs) compared to the corresponding lower proportions of 18% and 16% who were classified as having ‘no probable serious mental illness’.

Types of services used by safety concerns

The survey data also highlight that clients are often presenting to services with safety concerns when accessing both FRSP and non-FRSP services.

The data in Table E12 in Appendix E1 show that almost all adults accessing the Post Orders Program/ Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Program (93%) and CCS services (92%) reported safety concerns for either themselves and/or their children, as would be expected. A majority of clients (between 69% and 82%) reported such concerns for the other indicated FRSP services (FDR, FRAL, family law counselling and FRC).

Between 71% and 92% of adults reported safety concerns for the selected non-FRSP services including a domestic and family violence service, Community Legal Centre (including Women's Legal Services), parenting support programs (including online support), Legal Aid Commission lawyer, the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia or Family Court of Western Australia, and counsellor or another lawyer (private solicitor or barrister).

Participants used a mix of FRSP and non-FRSP services

This section describes the mix of services used by survey participants in terms of FRSP and non-FRSP services.

Overall, for those who used at least one service, 6% used only FRSP services, 39% used only non-FRSP services, with the remaining 54% using a mix of FRSP and non-FRSP services (Table 7.4).

Table 7.4: Survey of Adults: summary of mix of services used (including no services used)

	Including no services used		One or more services used	
	No.	%	No.	%
Mix of services used?				
FRSP funded service only	14.0	5.7	14.0	6.4
non-FRSP services only	86.0	35.0	86.0	39.3
Mix of FRSP and non-FRSP services	119.0	48.4	119	54.3
No services used	27.0	11.0		
Total	246	100.0	219	100.0

As Table 7.5 shows, those who used a mix of FRSP and non-FRSP services used more services on average (7.7 services), significantly higher than the corresponding average number of services used for those using only non-FRSP services (2.9 services) and FRSP services only (1.4 services), noting the small sample size of those who used only FRSP services (*n* = 14). Those who used FRSP services only used between 1 and 3 service types, those who used only non-FRSP services used between 1 and 8 service types, and those who used a mix of both used between 2 and 17 service types.

Table 7.5: Survey of Adults: summary of mix of services used, by number of services used

	Mixed services used?			
	FRSP funded service only (%)	non-FRSP services only (%)	Mix of FRSP and non-FRSP services (%)	Total (%)
Number of services used?				
1	78.6	27.9	0.0	16.0
2	7.1	23.3	6.7	13.2
3	14.3	20.9	10.1	14.6
4	0.0	8.1	7.6	7.3
5	0.0	8.1	13.4	10.5
6	0.0	4.7	11.8	8.2
7	0.0	3.5	5.0	4.1
8	0.0	3.5	2.5	2.7
9	0.0	0.0	10.9	5.9
10	0.0	0.0	5.9	3.2
11	0.0	0.0	5	2.7
12	0.0	0.0	5	2.7
13	0.0	0.0	4.2	2.3
14	0.0	0.0	5.9	3.2
15	0.0	0.0	3.4	1.8
16	0.0	0.0	1.7	0.9
17	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.5
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
n	**14**	**86**	**119**	**219**
Mean number of services used	1.4	2.9	7.7***	
Median number of services used	1.0	2.0	7.0	

Notes: Significant difference in pattern of responses by analysis variable using Chi-square test of difference. Differences in mean number of services, statistical significance test is based on bivariate regression ***$p < .001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

Further analysis of the mix of services used by whether the participant reported safety concerns shows an interesting pattern of results (see Table E13 in Appendix E1). Those who used a mix of FRSP and non-FRSP services were most likely to report safety concerns (76%), compared to 55% of those who only used non-FRSP services, 43% who used only FRSP services and 19% of those who used no services.

Subsequent services used

For 5 selected FRSP activities – FRC, FDR, FRAL, CCS and family law counselling – analysis was undertaken to identify the concurrent or subsequent service that was accessed after completing each of these selected FRSP activities. These data are reported in Table 7.6 and show:

- Those accessing a CCS were most likely to next access a non-FRSP service, with 72% of these participants reporting that their next subsequent service used was a non-FRSP

funded service. These subsequently used services were most commonly the courts or a non-FRSP Post Separation Parenting Support Program (19% each).

- On the other hand, for those who reported using FRAL, 51% reported that they then went on to access an FRSP funded service. The most commonly used next service was an FRSP activity such as an FRC (21%) or FDR (21%).
- For those using FRCs, their next most commonly reported service was FDR (22%), followed by a private lawyer/barrister (17%).[16]
- In terms of those accessing FDR, 17% of this sample reported that they next used an FRC, private FDR or a private lawyer/barrister (12% each).

Table 7.6: Survey of adults: next service used when selected FRSP service used and completed

	FRC	FDR	FRAL	CCS	Family Law Counselling
	%	%	%	%	%
FRSP services					
FRC		16.9	20.9	4.8	5.0
FRAL	7.8	3.4			20.0
FDR	21.9		20.9	4.8	5.0
Regional FDR	3.1	3.4	2.3		
First Nations FDR			2.3		
Family Law Counselling		5.1		4.8	
CCS	6.2	1.7			
POP / PSCPP	1.6	1.7	2.3	14.3	
SCASP		3.4	2.3		5.0
FRSP services subtotal	***40.6***	***35.6***	***51.0***	***28.7***	***35.0***
Non-FRSP services					
LAC Lawyer	6.2	8.5	2.3	4.8	5.0
Other LAC including FASS		1.7	2.3		
CLC incl WLS	3.1	8.5	4.7	4.8	10.0
Private Lawyer / Barrister	17.2	11.9	14.0		10.0
Court	7.8	6.8		19.0	
Counsellor / therapeutic	14.1	8.5	7.0	9.5	10.0
amica					
Other online dispute resolution	1.6				
Parenting support programs	1.6	1.7	4.7	4.8	10.0
Post separation parenting support	3.1	3.4		19.0	10.0

[16] Questions relating to FRC and FDR were asked as separately funded service types in the survey, it is likely that FRC clients undertook a FDR process funded through the FRC stream, but did not understand that FDR in this case refers to a separate funding stream under the FRSP (i.e. outside an FRC). The analysis reports the responses as given in the survey.

programs					
Private FDR	1.6	11.9	7.0		
DFV service	3.1		4.7	4.8	
Men's service			2.3	4.8	10.0
Child support		1.7			
Non-FRSP subtotal	***59.4***	***64.6***	***49.0***	***71.5***	***65.0***
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100.2**	**100**
n	**64**	**59**	**43**	**21**	**20**

Notes: This table presents information on next service used for those cases where the selected service was completed. If service was still currently being used, the next service is not reported.

Navigating service pathways

Interview participants had unique experiences navigating their way through family and relationship services and for some this was challenging. This section describes how participants' unique family circumstances or challenges influenced their ability to forge a clear pathway. It also explores participants' experiences of accessing services and whether they found the system to be efficient, connected and holistic and whether the services complemented or conflicted with each other.

Family circumstances or challenges

Participants often had difficulties navigating service pathways due to family circumstances or what they described as challenges in their families and separations. Interview participants discussed issues of addiction within their relationships (e.g. alcoholism, illicit drug use and/or gambling) as well as homelessness, mental health issues and experiences of family violence that often continued during and after the separation.

When these participants reached out to their first service, these complex family circumstances increased their reliance on the service to help navigate the service pathway. Consequently, some participants ended up deciding to not seek the help of FRSP or non-FRSP services, or they attended one but were unable to fully participate in the service due to their circumstances.

> [Ex-partner's] coping mechanism was to get blackout drunk and then my job was to try and not have her into the house while the kids were here … I didn't attempt to use any [separation services]. I mean again I looked through websites, I couldn't see anyone that could actually help in any of that stuff [e.g. mediation with alcoholism]. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, NSW)

> I was battling so many different things like homelessness, mental health, drugs and alcohol, Child Protection … I was overwhelmed with everything at the time so I think I was just overloaded with information. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, Vic)

Similarly, participants often discussed the challenge of not having informal supports due to their family and life circumstances (e.g. having family living far from them due to work or immigration, or due to religious and cultural factors). This often meant that these participants were more reliant on services to help them navigate their separation than those who could get help from their family and social networks.

> I don't have any support from here, or from my parents. Because they live in [Southern and Eastern Europe]. And I don't have any relatives. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

Similarly, one interview participant came from a culture where separation/divorce and/or relationship issues in general (including family violence) are not openly discussed and are highly stigmatised. This made it difficult for them to get support and advice from friends and family and they relied more on FRSP services to help them navigate their separation.

> People who are coming from my background, and religion, it's not an easy decision … as soon as you separate, or as soon as you are divorced, everything will be gone. You will be isolated completely from the community. You will never have the friends that used to be your friends, you will never have those neighbours that used to be your neighbours, everybody will really just cut you off. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, Vic, both identify as CALD)

In contrast, while the current and ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members who participated in our interviews lacked informal supports due to their family circumstances (being posted far from family and friends), rather than initially relying on FRSP services to help them, they were able to access formal supports for Defence families and veterans who subsequently provided them with pathways to civilian supports such as FRSP mediation.

A participant who was serving in the ADF said that they received a lot of formal support from Defence/veteran services during their separation. They indicated that being in the ADF helped them get access to services that they needed.

> I had support from the chaplain and the Army organised the psychologists and stuff for me to see and then I had regular doctor appointments, as well, with the medical officer … I used Open Arms they organised counselling ... If I did it again right now, I think I would struggle with not being in the Army and not having that massive support network that I had while I was in there. (Veteran, man with woman ex-partner, outer-regional, NT)

The ADF then provided him with time off for FRSP mediation and other separation services:

> They gave me heaps of time off. It didn't come from my direct chain of command, it came from my doctor, my medical officer, but no, they gave me a lot. They were very good and very supportive overall, I think. (Veteran, man with woman ex-partner, outer-regional, NT)

Nevertheless, another veteran interview participant indicated that being in the ADF hindered his ability to access domestic violence services due to a stigma in asking for help and a belief that reporting family violence within a Defence family could hinder his career:

> it's a real career stopper. Like, I know blokes that have just been like, 'Oh, I'm having a hard time at home.' And then they've been halted in their trade. So, I just felt like I couldn't really talk to anyone. (Veteran, man with woman ex-partner, inner-regional, NSW)

Lack of awareness and/or confusion

Most of the interview participants said that when they separated, they were not aware of what they were required to do, what service they needed to contact or what was available to them.

> It is quite hard. Unless you know someone that's been through this, you wouldn't know. It's very hard to know what services there are. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, ACT)

> Interviewer: Had you heard about these services before you separated?
> Participant: No. No, I never thought I would need it. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, SA)

Some interview participants also described how moving between services added to their overall confusion, while others indicated that it was difficult to navigate when they had an urgent need to get the process started (e.g. in cases of family violence) and/or had so much going on in their lives.

> [it was confusing] overall, just finding out what things you can access in general … it's more the moving between them [FRSP services]. (Woman with man ex-partner, outer regional, NT)

> It was [difficult] finding out about them all in a very short period of time and then having the space and time to go and investigate all of them. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

When people did access services, some did not know what they were meant to do or what the purpose of the service was. For example, one participant said that they went to mediation but neither they nor their former partner knew what they were meant to be mediating or why it was required … They indicated that this lack of awareness hindered the process.

> Yeah, because I didn't know what to actually mediate for at that time. Like as a first person who is going through all of this situation for the first time … [Likewise, my ex-partner and] his family or his social circle doesn't know anything about how these things work. (Man with CALD woman ex-partner, major city, Qld)

Most participants first found out about services through online searches, advice from friends/family, or referral from non-FRSP services providers. Common first services used or contacted were telephone advice lines, mediation providers, family relationship centres, private lawyers or community legal services, and family violence services.

> I had to act very quickly and just try and get some information and facts together. And it was just a Google search. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

A few participants said they knew about the services before they separated, some due to their employment, but this was less common.

> I've known about it forever since I was young. I think probably work too, I know a lot of things because of where I worked. (Woman with man ex-partner, inner regional, NSW)

The complexity of the service systems was elaborated on by survey participants when responding to the (unmet) needs and support survey items (19/130 responses). Some participants reflected on the confusing and conflicting nature of the service system and the challenges they faced in navigating these services. Describing the complexity of the court system:

> The court process is made incredibly difficult, stressful, expensive and time consuming. (Woman or female, 35–44 years, Qld)

> The Family Court process grew in complexity requiring further agencies to be involved, further delays imposed and still the Family Court ignored what was recommended. (Man or male, 55+, WA)

Others noted the challenges associated with navigating DFV services:

> Family violence services have been great but often confusing. I'm told I should have a case worker and then don't get one. Lengthy wait lists. Nothing to address behaviour of [my ex and his] … violence towards me and my child who the courts ignorantly housed under his roof. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Vic)

Some (25/130 responses) highlighted the limited scope of services to assist with complex needs and circumstances. The following quote points to the benefit of having an 'advocate' to assist with accessing services, while noting that services are limited in that they 'only offer advice':

> Services only offer advice – without a private social and community worker/advocate I would not have been able to access DV assistance nor housing or access to services I have a legal right to access but have no mechanism for access. (Woman or female, 35–44 years, NSW).

Another survey participant reflected on the complexity of the family law system as a whole, as well as the limited scope of many services to provide meaningful assistance:

> The family relationship services program offers a good alternative. However, it does not have any power to help make decisions that are in the best interest of the child when needed and/or provide the required level of legally binding support. The family law system is too complex, arduous and painstakingly slow to have a working solution for parents and children. (Man or male, 45–54 years, NSW).

Efficient, connected or holistic?

Interview participants indicated that it was difficult to navigate the FRSP and non-FRSP services and found that the process was unclear and disconnected.

> [It's been difficult] having to search for it all on my own and feeling – yeah, feeling isolated. My husband's left me, I've got 3 kids, very limited time to myself, personal time, and having to search for that and find all of it … This is very idealistic, but it would be nice to have one contact person, or one agency that you just contact and they can refer you. It's been very bits and piece-y for me. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

Although many were referred to other services they needed by their initial service provider, others still had to search for subsequent services online or by asking friends/family. Those that reported being connected to other services from their initial provider did so by seeing pamphlets in waiting rooms and/or being specifically told by a provider of another service that they should or could access (note: some private providers recommended FRSP services to clients).

> I came across some lawyer on YouTube, some private lawyer centre. I contacted him, and, yes, we just had a brief chat. He said their services are very expensive, and I'm better to find some free options … They give me some options, like [State/Territory] services, some federal services, lots of options. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, SA)

Complement, duplicate or conflict?

Some participants reported attempting mediation at multiple providers resulting in inefficient service provision and often duplicated or conflicting advice. This was often a consequence of:

- one of the former partners disliking a specific mediator (or conflict between provider and one of the couples)
- delays and/or administrative issues with the provider
- the provider telling the client the mediation was unsuccessful and one of the partners wanting to try again with another provider (often several times)
- interconnectedness of smaller communities (e.g. clients knowing providers personally, being related to providers, or worried about privacy in small location).

> So all of last year we were in mediation, and we didn't come to an agreement in the end. And then [Provider 1] weren't able to continue mediating with us. They became conflicted. And so now we've been handed over to [Provider 2], so we're starting from scratch again with [Provider 2], which is so annoying – so incredibly annoying. But I just have to suck it up and get on with it. There's no point in worrying about it. Just do it. I don't like the mediator, I don't like any of the process, but I just have to do it. (Woman with male ex-partner, remote, NT)

Some participants described how theywould start at either an FRSP or private service and switch to the other, often simply duplicating services rather than one complementing the other. For example, they start at an FRSP mediator and then switched to a private one due to delays, dislike of a provider, or switched from a private mediator to an FRSP due to cost barriers or an initial unawareness of subsidised FRSP services.

Main reason participants chose to use family law services

The reasons that separated adults chose to use and access different service types were varied. Overall, adults most commonly reported that they knew the service was the most appropriate across a range of service types. Advice to use services by a family law professional was the next most common reason for choosing to use a service. There were exceptions to this overall pattern; those accessing the Post Order Program or CCS services were most likely to nominate court appointed/court ordered as reasons for these service types.

Table 7.7 describes the main reason that participants chose to access various FRSP and non-FRSP services. The exceptions to the general pattern of responses reported above were users

of the Post Order Program/ Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Program and CCS services where the most commonly reported reason was 'They were appointed by the court/I was court ordered to use this service' (44% and 29% respectively). For those accessing FRAL, the most frequently selected response was 'This was the only service I could find' and 'I was advised to use this service by another family law system professional' (16% for each response).

Notably, few participants chose to access any FRSP services because the service was most convenient to them, indicating factors beyond mere convenience likely influenced their decisions (less than 10% response for each FRSP service, Table 7.7). Few participants also said the main reason they chose a FRSP service was a recommendation from a friend/relative.

Similar to FRSP services, the main reason for accessing most non-FRSP was that the participant considered the service to be appropriate. The exceptions were Legal Aid Commission – Lawyer, CLC, and a private FDR practitioner. Participants most commonly selected 'I was unable to financially afford an alternative preferred service' for Legal Aid Commission – Lawyer (45%) and CLC (27%), whereas 39% of participants said their main reason for accessing a private FDR was because they were advised to do so by another family law system professional.

- When participants indicated another family law professional had advised them to use an FRSP service, the most commonly reported professionals were legal professionals (e.g. judge, lawyer, solicitor, barrister, court) and/or service (e.g. legal aid, Women's Legal Centre or an unspecified free legal service). Other sources of referral for FRSP services included Centrelink and SafeSteps or another unspecified DFV service, FRAL, a post-parenting program coordinator and a family report writer.

Table 7.7: Survey of Adults: main reason chose to access indicated FRSP and non-FRSP services

	Service type					
FRSP service	FRC (%)	FDR (%)	FRAL (%)	CCS (%)	Post Orders Program/PS CPP (%)	Family Law Counselling (%)
What is the MAIN reason you chose to access a ….						
I knew that this was the appropriate service	34.1	25.3	14.0	23.5	32.0	21.7
I was advised to use this service by another family law system professional	19.5	24	16.0	17.6	12.0	17.4
A relative/friend recommended that I use the service	8.5	6.7	12.0			4.3
I had a negative experience with other services so I decided to try the <indicated service>	1.2	2.7	8.0	2.9		4.3
This service was the most convenient	2.4	4.0	4.0			8.7
This was the only service that I could find	4.9	5.3	16.0	5.9		4.3
I was unable to financially afford an alternative preferred service	13.4	8.0	14.0	5.9		13.0
They were appointed by the court/I was court ordered to use this service	3.7	9.3		29.4	44.0	13.0
Other reason	12.2	9.3	8.0	11.8	4.0	8.7
Do not know/Cannot say		5.3	8.0	2.9	8.0	4.3
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
n	**82**	**75**	**50**	**34**	**25**	**23**

Non-FRSP service	Another lawyer (private solicitor/barrister) (%)	Counsellor (or other therapeutic professional to adults or children) (%)	Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia or Family Court of Western Australia (%)	Legal Aid Commission Lawyer (%)	Community Legal Centre (including a Women's Legal Service) (%)	Domestic and family violence service (%)	Private Family Dispute Resolution practitioner (%)	Parenting support programs (including online programs) (%)
I knew that this was the appropriate service	38.3	58.0	28.9	20.4	25.0	51.1	19.4	21.2
I was advised to use this service by another family law system professional	8.3	4.0	14.5	10.2	10.4	8.5	38.9	15.2
A relative/friend recommended that I use the service	14.3	10.0		2.0	14.6	10.6	2.8	6.1
I had a negative experience with other services so I decided to try the <indicated service>	9.0	4.0	5.3	4.1	2.1		2.8	
This service was the most convenient	1.5	1.0			10.4		2.8	3.0
This was the only service that I could find	8.3	5.0	1.3	4.1	2.1	4.3		6.1
I was unable to financially afford an alternative preferred service	0.8	4.0		44.9	27.1			6.1
They were appointed by the court/I was court ordered to use this service	0.8	6.0	15.8	14.3	4.2		8.3	18.2
Other reason	17.3	7.0	28.9		4.2	23.4	19.4	15.2
Do not know/Cannot say	1.5	1.0	5.3			2.1	5.6	9.1
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
n	**133**	**100**	**76**	**49**	**48**	**47**	**36**	**33**

Notes: FRSP funded services: Data for SCASP (*n* = 14), Regional FDR (*n* = 13), First Nations FDR (*n* = 2) not reported due to small sample sizes.
Non-FRSP funded services: Data reported for services where sample size *n* = 30 or higher

Barriers to service use and unmet service needs

Interview and survey participants spoke of the barriers to service use and unmet service needs they encountered navigating the family law services system. This section presents a discussion of these issues. These included participants' lack of awareness of the full range of services available to separated families, touched on above. Almost all participants identified challenges or the inability to access free or subsidised legal services that met their needs. Those who did access such services noted the limited advice and general nature of these services. Many noted long wait lists and delays, and this issue had the potential to negatively impact participants' wellbeing and the development of suitable parenting arrangements.

Several participants provided positive feedback on cultural sensitivity in service delivery – however, some faced challenges with cultural understanding and respect from the service providers. Location and geographic coverage of services was another barrier that limited some participants' ability to access services. Some participants appreciated the flexibility that online tools gave when there were geographic challenges, while others still preferred face-to-face service delivery. Family violence was also identified as a barrier, particularly in cases deemed to be 'too complex' and unsuitable for mediation despite participants willing to attempt mediation.

Echoing the findings from the professionals in chapter 6, mental health support and counselling was an unmet need that was commonly raised by separated adults. Difficulties in accessing family violence counselling service for children was also raised. The survey responses identified child safety needs as another unmet need – in particular, ongoing protection due to ongoing risk in the post-separation period.

Unaware of services

While the interview participants often knew of at least one FRSP service, most were unaware of the full range of services available to them. Participants often indicated they were unaware of the FRSP services mentioned in the interview and Participant Information Sheet for the study and say that it was the first time they had heard or read about them. Some said they would contact them after the interview while others said that if they had known about them when they were going through their separation, they would have used them as they were either a service they had needed and not found or they had had to access private services but would have preferred a free or subsidised FRSP provider had they known it was available.

> When I read the sheet and linked up with these family services that are available, that was the first time I knew about them. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

Many participants discussed their need for free legal advice and when asked if they knew of any government-funded services such as the CLC or FRAL, some participants were unaware of one or all of these services and for some this meant they had engaged private providers:

> I did see [government-funded legal service] when I was trying to do the survey … and I'm like, that's one thing I did not know about. (Woman with man ex-partner, inner regional, Vic)

Similar to the interview findings, some survey participants said they did not use a service as they were unaware of it and/or had not been informed about it. This was raised within some

responses for most FRSP and non-FRSP services (with the exception of FDR, CCS and the courts). For example, an Aboriginal participant stated:

> [I] couldn't find a service. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Vic, reason for not using a Regional FDR)

The same participant also noted that she did not use an FRC because they were:

> [Too] hard to access.

Sharing a similar experience, in response to the question that asked participants to 'please indicate why you did not use a Legal Aid Commission – lawyer', a Torres Strait Islander participant shared:

> I'm just learning about it now. (Woman or female, 45–54 years)

The survey responses of this nature also discussed having limited capacity to seek information about the services they may have required and suggested the service identification process was too complex and was a barrier to service access.

> Information was not entirely clear or easy to navigate when experiencing a relationship separation and adjusting to single parenting with no (family) support. (Woman or female, 35–44 years, NSW, reason for not using a community legal centre survey response)

> Do not have the capacity to manage my case work and investigate this service. (Woman or female, 45–55 years old, ACT, reason for not using a FRC survey response)

Access to free or subsidised legal services

Almost all the participants interviewed discussed their challenges or inability to access free or subsidised legal services that could meet their needs. Those that did access the services often said that they did not meet their needs as the free or subsidised legal service could only provide limited advice that was general in nature.

> I used to call [government-funded] law phone number. After waiting many hours, I get a single call and then I get a booking for one or two weeks after. And then I can only ask a very general question. And they only give general advice. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, Qld)

> They didn't give me official legal advice but I did actually have a few phone calls with some lawyer, legal person from the [government-funded legal service] who was able to provide general advice. But it is quite hard … It's very hard to know what services there are. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, ACT)

Of those who knew about the free and/or subsidised legal services, some reported having not been able to access support due to their assets or overall income. Some participants reported that while they may be 'asset rich' or have a decent income, the assets were often tied up due to the separation and unable to be sold, or that they believed their disposable income was low.

> I'm desperate to get help and I cannot get legal help, Legal Aid, because of the criteria of that only looks at the income that I receive. They don't look at how much goes from my pocket to pay my debts and pay child support and all of that thing. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, Qld)

> I didn't qualify for [government-funded legal service], financially I do have a high income, but I am a casual and that job is not safe. I can't even get a car loan because of that. (Woman with man ex-partner, outer regional, NT)

> I called up all the [subsidised legal service] and because of my income [at the time] … even though I hadn't been earning much for years … I wasn't eligible for any of the legal aid or the services. So I just had to pay a private lawyer and borrow money off people. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, ACT)

Some participants interviewed were both aware of the free and/or subsidised legal services and eligible to receive them. However, they chose to engage private legal services because it provided more specialist or personalised service or due to a perception that private legal services would achieve a better result – particularly in circumstances where their former partner had their own private lawyer.

> I did call them and ask them how it worked and tried to get some advice from them, but it's not really a personalised service, it's more general. They sent me an email with some links and said I need to be on a waiting list … So I decided to abandon that and just pay and get advice from a private lawyer [because] I couldn't talk to my personal situation or guide me in a more personalised direction … it felt a bit dismissive and I didn't really find them very helpful. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

> I had to go to the private lawyer, give them $1,500. I found the cheapest private lawyer, who they were asking $5,000 … [The private lawyer has] the better and further particulars [qualifications], and [it's] too expensive [and] I am already in debt but the thing is, [my ex-partner] is so smart and he had a [private] lawyer. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, Vic)

Similarly, one interview participant who used a government-funded legal service for a parenting issue during their separation said the experience was challenging as they were not able to have one lawyer see them through the case and had been given 4 different lawyers over 14 months. At the time of the interview, the participant said they once more needed the use of a free or subsidised service but were not going to use them due to their previous experience and were not sure what they were going to do:

> [I'm] not [using government-funded legal services] because I had them for the custody battle and I ended up having […] 4 lawyers throughout the 14 months matter. But that's [government-funded legal services], I'm not very confident in them. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, Vic)

Responses to the 3 (unmet) needs survey items also provided insights into service use and unmet needs. Out of the 130 participants who responded to questions about the 3 items, 93 participants (approximately 72%) described either having unmet needs or insufficient support while accessing services for their relationship issues and/or separation. Notable within the

responses was the common presence of multiple co-existing unmet needs, reflecting the complexity of this particular cohort of adults. Around 27% of those reported to have unmet needs identified needing financial support to assist with services and progress with the separation (25/93 participants), in particular, financial assistance for legal costs regarding the separation. Most of these were women (21/25 participants, 84%). The survey responses also described needing advice and/or protection around financial settlement, dissatisfaction with financial settlements, and/or the process involved in achieving settlement, as illustrated in this quote:

> Financial needs. I am working as much as possible. I believe that there should be more help financially. I was the one who brought the matter in the Federal Circuit Court. I represented myself as far as I could. When the matter went to trial, I needed representation and that is when I had to get a loan to cover those costs. Orders were made and I thought the matter was at an end. I was wrong. My ex-partner refuses to comply with those Orders so therefore I continue to pay for lawyer's fees to try and get the property sold and to resolve the matter. My ex-partner has not paid a cent. He was represented by a Legal Aid lawyer given the DVO he served on me! He doesn't pay rent. I was forced to do so. He doesn't pay rates. He doesn't maintain the property so therefore is stalling the process of the sale of the property. How is this able to happen. So therefore I must pay for lawyers to apply to the courts to appoint myself trustee so my ex-partner is vacated from the property in order that I can clean it up for sale. Unbelievable frustrating. How can this happen? I am extremely dissatisfied with the court and [its] process. (Woman or female, 55+ years, Qld)

Approximately 40% of participants who reported unmet need(s) in the corresponding survey items reported unmet needs in relation to legal assistance (37/93 participants). Of these, 21/37 (84%) were women. The survey responses discussed not having the legal assistance they required, sometimes because they did not qualify for the assistance and/or because it was unaffordable, as illustrated in the following examples:[17]

> If I could not find a service I acted for myself. I missed out on services because I was working (priority given to those with no income). (Woman or female, 55+ years, Vic)

> There is no support unless you pay a lawyer. (Man or male, 45–54 years, Vic)

A First Nations participant also highlighted in 2 of the (unmet) needs open-ended questions that she required:

> Court and financial support. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Vic)

Other survey responses discussed that the legal assistance they received was not sufficient to address their needs. These responses commonly discussed how legal services were not acting in their best interests, suggesting a lack of trust in these services. In responding to 'what are the needs of you and/or your family that have not been met by accessing family relationship services or family law services', the following response noted:

[17] Both are responses to the question: 'Was there any support that you or your family needed that you did not receive?'

> … Lawyers – incompetent. His lawyer abusive and breaching solicitors rules. Legal Services Commission Qld let them get away with it. I don't trust FCFCOA to be fair so would rather have nothing. I can't afford to proceed to FCFCOA. (Woman or female, 55+ years, Qld)

Survey participants also noted that services, including legal assistance, were insufficient in instances involving DFV and/or other complex separations. For example, the following participant recalled:

> No out of court directive for perp to comply with financial disclosure and victims treated with disbelief, misogyny, pressure and disrespect by own lawyers, profits by lawyers and barristers from domestic violence and inappropriate behaviour by family lawyer and assault by barrister. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, ACT)

The prohibitive cost of legal services and/or not being eligible for services (e.g. based on income or assets) also presented in some survey responses regarding why participants did not use the following legal services: Legal Aid Commission – lawyer, Legal Aid Commission – other, another lawyer (private solicitor/barrister), court, a private dispute resolution practitioner, and another family law service.

> I could not afford a lawyer on Newstart/Ausstudy income or find a lawyer that would help me do a financial settlement or divorce to help me be protected against more financial abuse from my husband, which I understand he could have, if I would have been working at the time of our separation. I also could not afford the court fees or any other fees if my husband would have retaliated in court, if I could have been able to get to court. Also, I am a migrant who is a naturalised citizen who also has autism and there was no way that I could 'self-represent' myself in court, if I had even been able to get that far, which I couldn't. (Woman or female, 55 years or older, reason for not using Federal Circuit and Family Court survey response)

Delays and waiting lists

Many of the interview participants reported waiting lists and long delays as barriers to accessing FRSP services when they needed them. These delays were experienced by participants located in major cities as well as regional and remote areas.

> There was a waitlist for [provider]. Minimum, I think, was 8 weeks … The only difficulty is the waiting list. So, once we were waiting for a counsellor, then I think we had to wait for a mediator. There was always a period of just nothing happening. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, SA)

> They didn't have capacity to take me on. They're fully booked. Again, [I] reached out to [another provider] and I never heard anything back. I couldn't even get anyone to answer the phone ... They definitely were swamped. And I think we had to wait 3 weeks to have an appointment. (Woman with male ex-partner, remote, NT)

> So wait times are a lot. Like even if I'm getting – want to get a general help, there are so much wait times. Like after two hours of call, you can get a booking for one

> or two weeks later. Most of the organisations. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, Qld)

> I'm just waiting for the next intake … [the provider] works part time, everyone's busy, it's no one's fault, it's just a long, slow process. (Woman with man ex-partner, outer regional, NT)

Wait times and delays were described as threatening some interview participants' wellbeing and as impeding the development of suitable parenting arrangements. Some participants were left with financial uncertainty such as delays in child support payments and delays selling their jointly owned house, while some were unable to see their children while they waited for FDR to help them negotiate a parenting arrangement.

> It was such a crisis for me, particularly financially, having to wait was a little bit tricky. Because … I needed proof of one thing to prove to Centrelink. (Woman with woman ex-partner, inner-regional, Vic)

> There was about a 9 week wait … I certainly would have preferred it to be a hell of a lot quicker because that was 9 weeks I didn't get to see the children. (Man with woman ex-partner with Aboriginal identifying child, major city, NSW)

Consequently, some interview participants who were unable to afford private services turned to private services as they needed help sooner than they would be able to receive from an FRSP provider.

> I initially tried to get appointments with [Provider] but their waitlist was so long, it was like – I couldn't speak to someone for 3 months or something, so I left it. I couldn't wait that long. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

The discussion of waitlists as a barrier to accessing separation services was also identified amongst responses to the (unmet) needs and support survey items. Of the 130 survey participants who answered at least some of these items, 25 participants drew attention to long wait times for various services and/or the ongoing nature of the family law process around the time of separation.

> … the courts have enabled child abuse due to inaction and not listening and long wait times. (Man or male, 35–44 years, Vic)

Cultural awareness and sensitivity

Some participants from specific communities felt that service providers did not really understand their unique circumstances or any specific challenges that impact their separation. This included a lesbian participant, an Aboriginal participant and 2 Defence/veteran participants. One lesbian participant discussed what she saw as a need for ongoing cultural awareness training on rainbow families to service providers:

> I think it's always important for continuous training [for all service providers], cultural awareness training on rainbow families ... [For example] more education that [family violence] is not just male-female couples. (Woman with woman ex-partner, inner regional, Vic)

One Aboriginal participant said that while FRSP services helped her, she also faced some challenges with cultural understanding and respect from the service providers:

> I think for Aboriginal families there needs to be a lot more of that cultural, what's the word? Understanding. Do you know what I mean? When I go in and talk about my nephew, they go, 'Oh, how come you're looking after him?' Do you know what I mean? And the way they speak, sometimes I feel like they talk down. For me, it's different because I'm educated in that sense. But if you've got a family that's going in and they don't understand it or articulate it the way I do, if they're talking down to them, that's why people don't get back to services because they feel like – it's that whole thing where they shame and all that other kind of stuff. (Aboriginal woman with Aboriginal man ex-partner, inner regional, NSW)

Similarly, one veteran had challenges with being understood by a counsellor with no experience in Defence and veteran issues:

> Sometimes I've had a counsellor who was actually an ex-RAF guy and he was really good because he understood some of the mannerisms or whatever, like the way I talk about certain things. He understood them. But there were times where I've seen a counsellor who has no experience and I'll say something and they're like, 'What does that mean?' I have to explain certain things a lot to people that don't understand. (Veteran, man with woman ex-partner, outer-regional, NT)

Another ADF member accessed a civilian FRSP mediation service but felt that the service provider did not understand the unique situation for Defence families.

> They did not [understand]. They did not care. They tried to use it as a point against me, that I was an absent father [due to service commitments]. (Veteran, man with woman ex-partner, inner-regional, NSW)

Several interview participants provided positive feedback on cultural sensitivity in service delivery:

> I was very happy with their services. First of all, I got emotional support. Because, you see, I felt like there is some prejudices against people with my cultural background. You understand what I mean? Regarding everything which is going on. And I found those [professionals], which I talked to, very supportive, like they showed a lot of compassion. So I was very happy. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, SA)

> Family services – [provider 2] is amazing, really …They helping me, they explain me because they are multicultural so they know. They told me 'no, you need to do' – explain me because I don't understand what happened to me. He say '[Interviewee], going back there so you need to realise you abusive relation.' I was thinking no, I don't know, maybe no. He say, 'yes, I think you are in abusive relation' and then they help me. … I don't need interpreters but I know they understand my background because they are multicultural too. (CALD Woman with man ex-partner, major city, Qld)

Location and geographic barriers

Where a participant lived sometimes played a role in their ability to access services. For some, acceptable workarounds were found, and their needs were met. Nevertheless, for others their location made it difficult to access the services they needed to improve their wellbeing and achieve acceptable property and parenting arrangements post separation.

For example, some interview participants indicated that the use of online tools had made things easier when there were geographic challenges, such as undertaking mediation with partners living in different towns.

> I would go into the office here in [remote location] and sit with a mediator here. And we would link up to [the outer regional office], where my ex was with a mediator … there's 1500 kms between us. (Woman with man ex-partner, remote, NT)

> Our mediation appointment was done online … because [ex-partner's] in [State/Territory 1] … [The mediation provider] they're based in [my city and state] … My intake interview was face-to-face, [ex-partner's] intake interview would have been online and then our mediation itself was online.
>
> Interviewer: Did that work for you?
>
> Participant: Yeah. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, NSW)

However, some interview participants in remote locations wanted face-to-face FRSP services and had difficulties accessing them due to limited face-to-face availability in their area.

> [Mediator] was only available on Monday. It was only one day a week that [mediation] was available. And she was in [another remote town >1000 kms away]. So, we did it through Zoom. (Woman with male ex-partner, Remote, NT)

> I guess more staffing. I know so well that that's a huge problem in [remote town]; that people just can't get staff. I don't know why they can't. I don't know if that's a funding thing? (Woman with male ex-partner, remote, NT)

Some outside of major cities worried that providers could leave at any time, resulting in long delays filling the role and forcing them to start the process again with a new person.

> We saw her for about three-quarters of the year but recently we found out that it's no longer available because she is moving on and they haven't filled that position yet. So we don't have that [service] available. (Man with woman ex-partner, inner regional, NSW)

Men in regional and remote areas described their challenges finding men's mental health services. One man in an outer regional location also discussed his concerns and experience with a lack of family violence services for men in his area:

> There's not even a men's shelter up here. A friend who [is a policeman] said if there's a man who they have to take out of a DV situation because he's a victim they have to take him to the homeless shelter or the police station. There's no men's shelter a man can go to [here]. I know there were definitely some in [major city]. (Man with woman ex-partner, outer-regional, NT)

Nevertheless, when there were available services in a remote location, some interview participants reported not wanting to access them as they knew the provider personally and/or out of fear for privacy in a small town.

> Everyone's related in [remote town] so I was then worried they were related and I wanted the privacy. (Woman with male ex-partner, remote, NT)

Accessibility issues were also commonly cited in the survey responses as a reason for not accessing services. Similar issues were described including not being able to find a particular service and/or it not being provided in a convenient location and long wait lists. Participants making these responses commonly resided in rural areas.

Mental health support and counselling barriers

Unmet mental health support and counselling needs was a common thread throughout the separation experiences shared by interview participants. Many found it difficult to access individual mental health supports and services to help them through their separation. Although some were informed by an FRSP service of the benefits of mental health services to their wellbeing and overall separation experience, when the participants went to access these services, many were unable to find what they needed or, if they did, they were out of reach to them due to distance, cost or delays and waiting lists.

> I wish that I had have had maybe more clinical psychology or family therapy support. (Woman with man ex-partner, inner-regional, Vic)

Some interview participants wanted access to couple counselling before separation (to potentially prevent separation) and/or during their separation (to help make the process more amicable) but were unable to find it when they needed. One participant mentioned that they had sought out couple counselling before they separated but by the time they got to the top of the waiting list it was too late and they had separated:

> [We wanted] couples counselling as well, that was a massive waitlist, and by the time we reached the top of the waitlist, we'd separated. (Woman with woman ex-partner, inner regional, Vic)

Another challenge for some parents was finding specialised mental health support for particular people (children, teenagers, men, neurodiverse children) or to deal with relationship issues (addiction, DFV).

Several interview participants discussed their difficulty accessing family violence counselling services for children and/or counsellors who worked with younger children in general.

> [My child under 5] was not coping and neither was I. It was a really difficult time. [Family violence counselling for children] was a real gap, and I think because of [my child's] young age, I think there's this assumption that little kids don't get impacted as much as maybe teenagers or older children but that's [unclear] not the case. Especially for neurodivergent children. I think that's a gap that needs to be addressed. (Woman with woman ex-partner, inner regional, Vic)

> I needed people specialised with family-violence children. I didn't have that … I feel they're pretty let down, the kids. I feel they're forgotten. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, Vic)

> You have to find the right people for the kids too, and I tell you, there's not many out there. They're all very busy. Seriously booked out. Half of them are booked out for the next 6 months. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, NSW)

Several men spoke of a lack of mental health professionals who were male, which meant they would not seek help as they preferred to talk with another man about their relationship and/or mental health issues.

> There's a big lack of mental health support for men, I've found. I was lucky, because I was still in the Army, so I got a lot of help there, but without that I think I would have struggled a lot more. (Veteran, man with woman ex-partner, outer regional, NT)

A number of interview participants mentioned accessing counselling through a Medicare-funded Mental Health Plan they received from their general practitioner. However, they reported long waiting lists to access psychologists and their inability to continue with the counselling once the Medicare sessions ran out.

> We got a mental health care plan for myself and the 2 kids so that gives us about half a dozen sessions at half price. And then the rest is up to us [to pay for] … it was very difficult to find someone and to find someone good was even harder. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, NSW)

Two interview participants mentioned they accessed counselling services through an organisation that also provided FRSP funded services like mediation. The convenience of being referred to someone in the same organisation and/or location appeared to overcome some of the barriers to accessing mental health support mentioned by other participants. One participant mentioned that they saw a free counselling service through the provider that offers FRSP services. However, it was not clear whether the counselling service itself was part of the FRSP or funded separately and the participant was unaware of how it came to be free to them:

> I've been seeing her ever since, and she's phenomenal. She just knocks it out of the park every time. I see her once or twice a month, and she's been great ... it's actually free counselling that [organisation] provide. Yeah, which is absolutely brilliant. (Woman with male ex-partner, remote, NT)

Mental health support and counselling was similarly raised as an unmet need across the 3 qualitative survey items regarding (unmet) needs and support (27/130 participants). Some survey responses described not being able to access mental health services, while others described the mental health services they accessed as ineffective, especially in circumstances involving DFV, as illustrated in the following examples:

> Mental health issues related to DV situation needed more time and care spent on improving mental health. (Woman or female, 55+ years, Qld)

> The counselling service seemed most interested in getting bums on seats in their group workshops to make money, than to carefully listen, collect the facts,

> understand the actual situation, and help avoid what has developed into a worst case scenario. (Man or male, 45–54 years, NSW)

Some survey responses also discussed the cost of mental health services as a barrier to addressing their needs when asked if there were any supports needed that they did not receive.

> [I] was left with no understanding of any financial or psychological support that was available to me aside from a paid lawyer and paid therapist. (Woman or female, 55+ years, Vic)

Additionally, a small number of survey participants discussed their child[ren] needing mental health support as a result of the abuse and maltreatment experienced in the relationship and/or as a result of service interaction. The following example[18] highlights the need for child counselling support:

> My son needs counselling by a person experienced in coercive control, brainwashing and abuse. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Vic)

Family violence barriers and needs

Most of the interview participants either specifically identified family violence in their former relationships or described events in their relationships and separation that meet the definition of family violence. The type of family violence varied – while some participants discussed physical violence towards themselves, their children or a family pet, most discussed experiences of non-physical forms of family violence such as coercive control, emotional abuse, financial abuse and/or verbal abuse.

Some (regardless of gender) were unaware that their experiences in their former relationship were classified as family violence and this lack of awareness had been a barrier to them getting help and advice from services. Several participants reported that they learnt that their experiences were family violence from their lawyers, mediators or counsellors.

> [My private lawyer] said with ‘what you have gone through, it’s family violence’. [That was the] First time I heard the name of what I went through … and I got the confidence, ‘okay, somebody is validating [my experience]’. (CALD Woman with CALD man ex-partner, major city, Vic)

Some interview participants indicated that having family violence within their relationship made it difficult to find an FRSP mediation service as their cases were deemed as being ‘too complex’ or ‘unable to be mediated’ despite the participants being willing to attempt mediation with their former partners.

> I would get turned away by a few organisations, too, because they had said to me that my case was too complex, and they didn't know how to help. 'We're sorry, you're too complex for us and we don't know how to help you.' And I'm like, 'What? Okay'. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, Vic)

This was reflected within the survey items whereby participants were prompted to elaborate why they did not access a particular service. Some remarked some services were inappropriate to

[18] Response to the question ‘Was there any support that you or your family needed that you did not receive?’

use, typically because of the presence of FDV and having concerns regarding their personal, or child's safety.

> Mediation was considered unsuitable because of family violence history (lawyer's advice). (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Vic, survey response for reason for not using FRC)

> Perp[etrator] manipulation of psych, use [of a CCS] would lead to unsafe unsupervised child contact after perp's attempted murder of children so didn't use even though pressured to do so by misogynistic family law system and private lawyer and civil court, to the national shame of Australia that forces this contact and then wonders why women and children are murdered by DV male perp[etrators], utter disgrace. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, ACT, survey response for reason for not using CCS)

One interview participant said that mandatory reporting of family violence (in some jurisdictions) created a barrier to accessing FRSP services out of a fear the provider would make a report of family violence even though the victim did not want the incident(s) followed up or to become the primary focus of their separation. In one case, a couple who were amicable and jointly organising their separation ended their mediation process because the provider had reported what the couple saw as a minor incident that had been resolved. They indicated that the reporting caused more challenges to their separation negotiation due to police involvement and the focus of mediation being drawn to one isolated event and not the rest of their needs.

> We tried to do with the [Provider 1] mediation and that didn't work out … she asked about the day that we separated and what happened and there [had been an act of aggression directed at a household object and so [the mediator] called the police on us and [State/Territory Child Protection Authority] … I said, 'That's really not helpful and not needed.' And she couldn't understand that … [Police] visited 3 times when I was at work. And then they called. And he was fine after I had the phone conversation. But then, they had to come back around to the house again, because the sergeant said, 'You need to see her face-to-face.' So, we did that. And then they were – they understood that I was safe. But it was really stressful. (Woman with male ex-partner, remote, NT)

A number of participants indicated that they had contacted one of the family violence phoneline services and these lines were often the first service they encountered in their separation journey. Some found the phone services very helpful:

> I remember ringing up the 24-hour ones and then just – even though sometimes they couldn't really help, they would just offer some sort of advice or comfort. I used to get into the habit of waking up really early just so I could have somebody to talk to that wasn't a friend or family member or in front of the kids. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

In contrast, one interview participant reported difficulty getting through to the operators as the services were often 'busy' and another felt that the phone services were rushed and did not have the time to provide them what they needed.

> I don't know how many times I called the Domestic Violence line. It was always the same answer. 'Our operators are busy. We are open from these to these hours.'

> And always your call is disconnected. And I gave up. This phone is everywhere on the TV, and you can't get through. (Woman with male ex-partner, major city, NSW)

> I called the 1800 number – what's that? The respect – 1800RESPECT. I called them, but I didn't find them useful. I felt like they had an allocated time, and then once that came up she got me off the line … I didn't feel any benefit from talking to them. (Woman with male ex-partner, remote, NT)

Men who had experienced family violence felt that there were limited or no phone services for them to reach out to. Some male interview participants mentioned calling 'MensLine' or 'Lifeline' but said that these services were more for counselling and not set up to take calls from victims of family violence. One participant said he called '1800RESPECT' after being told to call them – however, he said they turned him away and told him they were a service for women not men:

> I'm going to be honest with you, I reached out everywhere … 1800RESPECT, literally, the woman there that I spoke to, 'You're a male, I'm not even interested in the phone call. You need to ring someone else', was her response. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, NSW)

Several interview participants talked about the difficulty finding family violence services that would support their ongoing needs. One participant found themselves homeless and believed that services could only help them for 6 weeks at a time and then they would need to find another service.

> I'm not sure. I kept moving around just trying to find different services but I just constantly found myself linked in with a service for 6 weeks as far as domestic violence goes. They were [unclear] for 6 weeks and then they run out of funding, so they just let you go. Because I was homeless, it wasn't enough time to get the help that I needed, so I was constantly jumping around trying to find different services. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, Vic)

Some indicated they did not fit the 'stereotype' of someone who had experienced family violence and were either told their experiences were not real by the first responders (preventing them from accessing services) or were advised by lawyers to not report their experiences as they would not be believed. For example, a lesbian participant reported abuse from her female partner to police and was informed that it was 'not domestic violence'. Subsequently, the participant did not access any further support for the family violence (including withholding it from mediation discussions) as she believed that there was a lack of awareness and preparedness from services that family violence can occur within same-sex relationships:

> It's tricky being in a same-sex relationship with family violence … I went down to the police station. I was like, 'Look, I'm really worried about my safety and my child's safety. What can you do?' They were just like, 'That's not domestic violence' … I think it's always important for continuous training [for all service providers], cultural awareness training on rainbow families ... [For example] more education that [family violence] is not just male-female couples. (Woman with woman ex-partner, inner-regional, Vic)

Similarly, One man participating in the research who had experienced family violence said that his former partner (a woman) threatened to say he had abused her and his lawyer advised him to 'let go' of his children as the lawyer did not think he would be believed over her:

> Then [she said] 'I'm going report domestic violence,' that sort of thing … [My] legal advice was essentially that I should just let them go because essentially what [the lawyer's] seen previously wouldn't end well for [me] ... (Man with woman ex-partner, inner-regional, NSW)

Finally, a Defence member discussed not accessing services for their experiences of DFV due to concerns that there was shame associated asking for help (in particular, for DFV or mental health) and was worried it could negatively affect their career.

> I didn't really want to talk to my chain of command because I felt like if I said something I was going to get into trouble … like I said about the social sort of thing, it's a big shame factor [Defence communities]. (Veteran, man with woman ex-partner, inner-regional, NSW)

Similarly, responses in the survey indicated a some distrust in services (approximately 47% of the 130 participants who answered at least one open-ended unmet needs survey question). Survey responses of this nature often revealed a perception that services are biased in their decision making and/or their willingness to assist clients. Some voiced concerns regarding discriminatory practices and unfair treatment based on gender.

For example, male survey respondents tended to indicate that services were in favour of women, underpinned by the belief that services assumed DFV presence without cause and/or promoted false allegations. Some men also commented on the lack of knowledge and action regarding DFV perpetrated towards men within the survey responses.

> The services did not help at all. I suspect because they're oriented more towards women and I am a male. Although I was the one that was abused in the relationship I felt, because I was a man, that I was being judged. (Man or male, 35–44 years, Qld)

Conversely, many women opined that services unfairly supported men and/or abusive (ex)partners. Issues relating to parenting arrangements, property and financial settlements were raised as they reflected on bias, unfairness and an extension of abuse.

> No consequences from court. Other party completely non-compliant while I have followed every step. Yet there is no financial support for me, no emotional support for the extended litigation abuse. I'm told this is how it is. All the services are limited because the court does nothing except walk in circles and give abusers repeated opportunities. (Woman or female, 25–34 years, WA)

> Protection from further emotional abuse, recognition the entire system is set up to support abusive men and further victimise women. The process is ineffective and yet you are threatened with a non-participation certificate. You might as well have said to my ex here is another way post separation to continue the harm you were doing before you separated, please come back and do it to her anytime you feel like and threaten her with it anytime she doesn't agree with what you want. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, NSW)

Lack of safety in service delivery was commonly discussed in survey responses. Specifically, 40 of the 93 participants who reported unmet needs in their open-ended survey responses reported safety needs not being met (around 43%). Thirty-two of these 40 participants were women (around 80%) and 8 were men.

Survey responses described safety being an unmet need due to the limitations of services (e.g. not within the service scope) and/or processes being counterproductive to situations that involve safety issues. The following example is of undertaking mediation with an abusive and controlling partner (which is a response to the question 'Do you have any comment to make about the extent to which the services that you have accessed have been able to meet your needs?').

> All the services expect cooperation from both sides, they expect resolution. And when one side is using services to drag out abuse and refuses to cooperate then all the services are powerless and don't know what to do. It's systemic violence that everyone sees but does nothing about, except toss a sympathetic look at me as they send me back to court. (Woman or female, 24–34, WA)

Other survey responses highlighted that services failed to offer them support by ignoring existing and ongoing (e.g. post separation) safety concerns or not taking them into consideration. This is reflected in the following response to the question 'What are the needs of you and/or your family that have not been met by accessing family relationship services or family law services?':

> Safety was not taken into consideration my voice was not heard – financially ruined. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Vic)

These experiences of abuse (including systems abuse) impacted participants' service access and their experiences of FRSP and non-FRSP services. In response to the survey item asking about the extent to which services accessed had met participants' needs, some reflected on services not being equipped to protect victim-survivors from abuse.

> It was just another tool used by my emotionally abusive ex to force me to give him what he wants. The entire process is unable to protect you from further emotional abuse and any outcomes where I benefited were subsequently ignored by my ex and I have no recourse. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, NSW)

> Trying to resolve parenting and property matters with another person who is abusive and destructive is an ongoing process that no court, lawyer or FDRP can resolve. (Man or male, 55+, Vic)

A total of 51/130 (39%) (unmet) needs survey participants reported there was a lack of overall support for victim-survivors in the broader family law system. Nearly 67% of these identified as women. For example, when describing some of the supports that they and/or their family needed but did not receive, participants stated:

> Additional safety support. Support in making my home safe. It's not safe to file for a new FVRO without enraging my ex but without one, no one will come to my help and advise on security measures. (Woman or female, 25–34 years, WA)

> Family violence support through court process. Better access to legal funding for more people. Advice and information on different ways/avenues to ensure

> children's safety when they are made to spend time/live with/visit the perpetrator of family violence. (Woman or female, 35–44 years, Vic)

Some participants in the survey highlighted that services were not adequately attuned to the diverse ways in which family and domestic violence presented during and post separation. A total of 12/130 who provided an open-ended response to one of the three (unmet) needs and support questions described a general lack of understanding of DFV across different services. In response to 'What are the needs of you and/or your family that have not been met by accessing family relationship services or family law services?', the following participants noted concerns for child safety that they considered were not taken into account by services:

> Not enough trauma-informed practice. Much lip service to DVFV but not much actual practical understanding of how it impacts victims. Still concerned for child's safety. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Qld)

> No one understands parent to child emotional abuse. It is overlooked when one party has power over the other and the children. (Man or male, 45–54 years, Qld)

Ex-partner refusing mediation

A common barrier to accessing mediation services was when a former partner refused to participate in mediation by not agreeing to it at all or not showing up at the agreed session time, according to interview participants. Due to this, the FRSP objective to help clients settle matters outside of the court system was not met for some participants.

> I hoped very much that some mediation with some third party will help us to understand each other. To understand each other, that's all I want. And, obviously, returning of my belongings. To avoid this hostility. But my husband refused to participate in the mediation. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, SA)

> [Mediation] didn't eventuate … my ex-wife refused to participate ... It hit the time frame and they gave me the 60I certificate. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, NSW)

Some of the men in the interviews expressed a perception that FDR was biased towards women when discussing refusal to participate in mediation. They suggested that men were better off refusing to participate in mediation in order to get their 60I certificate and go to court where they believed a judge would be more likely to help fathers. One participant discussed how he believed the family law court system had made positive changes to 'get rid of that bias' and, as such, was a preferrable option to mediation:

> The family court system have done a lot to really get rid of that bias [against fathers] and become an impartial thing and that they're all about the kids … But I feel like if you don't get to that point [court], the services beforehand [such as mediation] are very biased, in my opinion. (Man with woman ex-partner, inner-regional, NSW)

Several participants discussed court-ordered mediation as a successful way to make couples mediate and settle matters outside of court.

> I think they need to be court ordered, or there needs to be some law to make them do that. Because they just get away with everything, and they know if they don't go, then they've walked away laughing.
> (Woman with man ex-partner, inner regional, Vic)

One participant had tried to attend mediation several times with their ex-partner but it never eventuated as the ex-partner refused. However, they overcame this barrier when the court required the pair to undertake court-ordered, lawyer-assisted mediation. This process successfully resolved their dispute (outside of court) and the 2 parties came to an agreement:

> They ordered him to go back to mediation. I had to waste all this money on lawyers. He got ordered back to mediation and then a lawyer-assisted mediation, an agreement got reached, and then orders [unclear]. And then, as far as the financial settlement, during this process, when I had a lawyer, the lawyers agreed on a financial settlement. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, ACT)

Similar to the results from the interviews, participants also remarked within survey responses that they did not use FDR (and other services) due to their spouse being unwilling to engage with the service, as highlighted in the following quote from an Aboriginal participant describing why they did not access a FRC, regional FDR, and family law counselling service:

> Spouse unwilling. (Man or male, 55 years or older)

Unmet child safety needs

Approximately 35% of participants who answered at least one (unmet) needs survey item remarked on the unmet needs and support for their child(ren) (45/130 participants). Unmet child safety needs were identified as an unmet need in 89% of responses (40/45 participants). These responses discussed child abuse and maltreatment that was (currently) or had (historically) occurred in the relationship. When child abuse and maltreatment was still occurring, participants remarked that their child needed ongoing protection due to ongoing risk. Responses of this nature identified that the child remained at risk due to the length of the separation process and the decisions made by services, as indicated in the following response:

> We underwent extensive assessments and interviews – only to be told our issues were too complex and the system could not provide assistance. My children still have contact with their mother – against their wishes. She continues to abuse alcohol and drugs, and the children are exposed to psychological and emotional abuse. My ex-partner will not agree with any proposed settlement – financial or parenting, and we are still negotiating through lawyers with no end in sight. (Man or male, 45–54 years, Qld)

Some survey responses suggested that the best interest of the child was not taken into consideration by the other party and/or service, or that they did not act in the child's best interests. Additionally, in some instances, survey responses highlighted how allegations of abuse and maltreatment involving children were not taken seriously, were ignored and/or were not acted on by services. For example, the following responses are answers to the question of whether participants have any comments on the extent to which services they accessed have been able to meet their needs:

> The courts failed to recognise the safety risk to the children and myself and made orders not in the children's best interest, putting them in constant danger. (Woman or female, 35–44 years, Qld)

When asked what needs had not been met by accessing family relationship or family law services, some survey responses reflected on experiences of systems abuse and the lack of prioritisation of children's safety.

> The extent of the domestic violence upon my children was indented [sic] as not a risk. He used a knife to try and stab my child's phone and tied them up with cable ties. Apparently, he is not a risk. (Woman or female, 55+ years, Qld)

Of the 45 participants that identified a form of unmet children's needs, 82% (37/45 participants) also drew attention to the tendency of failing to prioritise the child's needs by services and supports within the broader family law system. This theme overlapped considerably with unmet child safety needs but also included examples where parents raised concerns about their children's voices and/or preferences not being heard, as indicated by the following survey participant:

> The child's wishes were not met for over 3 years. As a result, the child was under significant stress and pressure, he attempted suicide twice whilst with the other parent … This is a 12-year-old child that should not have been through such emotional abuse and coercion by the other parent. But because the family relationship services and the family law states both parents should have 50/50 access to the child by default, the child suffered and the issue of inconsistency, coercion, undue pressuring and emotional abuse continues. (Man or male, 45–54 years, NSW)

Unmet parental contact needs

Around 43% of qualitative survey responses to the items discussing (unmet) needs and support (roughly equal numbers of men and women), raised concerns about unmet parental contact needs (43/93 participants). Survey responses of this nature often discussed how services have been unable to assist with the child access arrangements they desire (e.g. having more access and/or the other party having no, less or supervised access to the children). In many of these survey responses, it was the emotional burden experienced by insufficient parental contact arrangements that was especially difficult.

In the survey response to 'What are the needs of you and/or your family that have not been met by accessing family relationship services or family law services?', some participants expressed that their primary need was contact with their child(ren).

> I am getting nowhere so far. I just want to be able to see my children. This whole process is favouring their mother and I feel like I have no say in it. I need help and I am not getting it. (Man or male, 45–54 years, NSW)

Varying satisfaction with services

In participant interviews and open-ended responses to questions in the client survey, separated and separating families talked about their experience and satisfaction of the services that they

used. While many of these issues have been touched on above, this section summarises their positive and negative experiences of services.

Summary of participants' positive experiences

Some interview participants reported having had positive experiences of services that they used during or after separation. These focused mainly on mediation, counselling and legal services (in particular, non-FRSP community/women's legal services or private providers). Some interview participants also discussed positive experiences with parenting education programs and non-FRSP domestic and family violence services:

> [Name of Parenting Program], I found that really useful, learning about emotional coaching for the kids and the different ages, the different ways you can emotion-coach them, so teaching them to learn to deal with their own emotions rather than being dismissive or letting them get away with their tantrum. That's very positive. And then, same as the [Name of Program] that I'm doing now, I've learnt a fair bit about that, especially when it comes to communication with my ex. Overall, I think it's positively affected my relationship with the kids. I feel like I'm a better dad, more in tune with their emotional needs … it's helped with my communication and when I'm talking to my ex. (Man with woman ex-partner, outer regional, NT)

Many expressed immense gratitude, satisfaction and appreciation for the support they received and noted how services helped them cope with the emotional, legal and practical challenges of their situation. The benefits they described from these services included emotional support, compassion, understanding, guidance, clarity, validation of their experiences and a sense of empowerment.

> Just having someone who was prepared to listen, to be heard, on topics where I just simply had not been heard for the last decade and my opinion didn't matter. To go into it, you take quite a leap into the unknown because you're opening up about some very tough stuff to a complete stranger ultimately. And so being heard, and understanding that this person is taking you seriously and really listening to you, is invaluable. So that's one of the most important aspects of what the mediator did. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, SA)

Those who received support to escape from domestic and family violence were often extremely grateful for the support they received, including financial and practical support, and often the recognition for the first time that what they were experiencing constituted abuse. While FDV services are non-FRSP services, they were a pathway to FRSP services for several participants who had experienced FDV.

Many participants also had positive experiences of mediation and legal services, which we describe in detail below. Those that discuss mediation positively (including lawyer-assisted mediation) said they were impressed by the mediator's skill and capability at managing interactions between them and their former partner, providing essential information, helping them to communicate and agree on outcomes.

Those who were happy with these services tended to be happy with the parenting and financial agreements made, which they felt confident would be workable and sustainable. Other outcomes they described from mediation included increased psychological wellbeing (from

engagement in the service, associated with feelings of validation), which suggests a successful mediation process and/or professional–client relationship/rapport.

> In mediation we set some ground rules and he'd have [child] once a week. …They were very, very knowledgeable and they were very good at that. They would just explain things, how they are to a degree, and tried to bring it back to, I guess, patterns of things that happened and all that kind of thing. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

> Women's Legal Service were phenomenal, and very accommodating and very – it was very easy to make an appointment, and they were very caring and very warm and understanding, and they were great.
> (Woman with man ex-partner, remote, NT)

Of the 130 survey participants who provided a written response to the question regarding unmet needs, 25 participants (19%) expressed that their needs were satisfied and/or they received the support required, as illustrated in the following response from an Aboriginal participant:

> All my needs were met. (Woman or female, 45-54 years, ACT)

Most often this was focused on mediation but some responded about other services such as legal services and support groups. When survey participants described their satisfaction with mediation services, some emphasised their role in reducing conflict between parties.

> I loved the mediation service and am so grateful for the service they provided. This process completely de-escalated conflict between my ex-husband and myself and we now have a fabulous co-parenting relationship/friendship. (Woman or female, 45-54 years, ACT)

Summary of participants' negative experiences

Interview participants also reported a range of negative experiences of services used during or after a separation or divorce. Most of the negative comments focused on mediation and legal services but some reported negative experiences with other services including CCSs, counsellors and advice lines, or referrals to inappropriate services and a general lack of case management/coordination.

> They were just administratively incompetent, at least with us … we just weren't hearing back from them and at some point my ex-wife just said, 'No, I'm not going back there.' And I was a bit disappointed because then you have to go and find somewhere else, but I do kind of understand that they just weren't delivering on what they needed to deliver. So we didn't end up getting all the way through to a finalised parenting plan, and certainly we didn't even touch on the finances. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, SA)

Negative experiences of legal services tended to focus on high costs and limited access to free or affordable legal advice. Some interviewees said that they had difficulty finding clear and accessible information about their options and their rights. They said that the information was often too complex, vague or overwhelming, and that they did not know where to look for reliable sources. Some had the feeling that legal services did not understand their personal situation or were too general or impersonal, judgemental, unsympathetic or dismissive.

> It's not specific to my situation. So they can give information about, 'this is what happens', and 'this is what you expect', and this and this and this. But they can't say, 'so your property amounts to this amount. I would suggest that you ask for this'. They can't do that, which a family lawyer can. So I have to spend the money I'm going to get before I get it, to get the advice to say, 'I want' you know? (Woman with man ex-partner, remote, NT)

Interview participants' negative experiences with mediation included a belief that they failed to create a safe and neutral environment for clients, perceptions of bias and examples of being given incorrect, confusing or conflicting advice, leading to distrust of the process by one or both parties. Several participants also described feeling pressured into an agreement they were not happy with and frustration with administrative issues (including lengthy delays between sessions and lack of contact and follow up).

> Nine months I had to constantly contact them. I wrote off so many times. I ended up having to, basically get a hold of their [manager], he was head of operations there, to try and get some action out of these guys … Nine months and they still hadn't even given any updates, any details, or anything like that. That was really poor form, and [manager of service] ended up having to apologise completely so many times over the last 5 months of me trying to get some kind of action happening. (Woman with male ex-partner, remote, NT)

Three survey items regarding the (unmet) needs of adults provided insight into participants satisfaction with the services they accessed. Of the 130 survey participants who provided a written response to a question regarding unmet needs, the majority (98/130 participants, 75%) expressed key limitations with current services. Although these commonly centred around the topic of DFV, other shortcomings were highlighted by sentiments of frustration and disappointment regarding the perceived unhelpfulness of service providers and general dissatisfaction with their interaction with services. Identified shortfalls include systematic abuse, untrustworthiness, complexity of the service system and limited scope of services to assist families.

Just under half of the 130 participants who provided a response to the 'unmet needs' qualitative survey items revealed a prevailing sentiment of distrust in the service(s) (approximately 47%). Some of these expressed a distrust in the service's ability to assist, while others expressed scepticism towards a service's intentions to assist, citing perceived lack of transparency.

> All of these services have ruined my life. I never see my child even though there are court orders. I'm financially ruined. All of these services are corrupt in my opinion. From family centres, police, lawyers, barristers and judges. What a joke of a system. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, NSW)

A total of 52/130 participants who provided a written response to the survey questions on unmet needs reported that the services they accessed had not acted in their best interests or had exploited them in some way. Examples given included placing them and their families in unsafe situations and facilitating adversarial approaches to achieving financial or parenting arrangements. For example, when asked 'Do you have any comment to make about the extent to which services that you have accessed have been able to meet your needs?', one participant responded:

> The family courts placed process and procedure over the safety and wellbeing of my child and I, leaving us in ongoing unsafe and high-conflict parenting arrangements. (Woman or female, 25–34 years, NSW)

> They haven't, they have destroyed our lives. I've been financially ruined. My children are NOT the people they were born to be, they are forever damaged because of having to navigate an abusive parent every day of their short lives. We do not trust professionals anymore. There needs to be research conducted into the psychopathology of people who intentionally harm other people. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Vic)

Client suggestions for improvement

Interview participants provided some suggestions for improvements to the FRSP. Most of the suggestions were around providing greater access to free legal advice and/or legal representation (e.g. lawyers to help with mediation or guide clients through the legal processes). One participant suggested workshops to help people undertake legal matters on their own (such as self-representation):

> Government-funded legal workshops or weekly workshops happening at least for common matters, how to do self-representation or something, like, for people who – like, even if they do, like, free workshops so that they don't have to look into income of someone. If it's open for anyone who wants to come, that would be great. Because I still haven't got any legal help. (Man with woman ex-partner, major city, Qld)

Some interview participants wanted somewhere for separating people to go where they could be guided through the process in a personalised way or to have some kind of 'project manager' who could guide them through the entire separation process.

> I think, if I could have walked into an office and spoken to someone and had them guide me in a more personalised direction, that would have been good … it would be nice to have one contact person, or one agency that you just contact, and they can refer you. It's been very bits and piece-y for me. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

> You know, almost like on a building site, needing a project manager, I feel like I'm missing that … [like for medical stuff] I'll go to a GP and hope that they're the umbrella for all the other services. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

Similarly, many interview participants indicated that it should be easier for people to know what services are available for separating people and children and where to access them.

> Something more obvious so if there's some sort of 'here's an early-separated package, everything that's available for you in your area'. Something there that could just point people in the right direction. (Man with woman ex-partner, outer-regional, NT)

> There should be more awareness about this, the services. It should be advertised. (Woman with CALD man ex-partner, major city, Vic)

> Knowing that these services are around – I'm just lucky that I live near it and I walk past [the provider]. Not everybody's lucky enough to do that … maybe a list of everywhere in your local area that you can go to …
> Interviewer: There is a website.
> Participant: But nobody knows what that website is. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, NSW)

> If you don't know where to look for help, it's hard to find the help. Being aware of what is available is important … It's not readily available unless you know where to look. (Woman with woman ex-partner, inner regional, Vic)

One interview participant suggested better training for services (including family violence services) on rainbow families (those with an LGBTIQA+ person):

> I think it's always important for continuous training [for all service providers], cultural awareness training on rainbow families ... [For example] more education that [family violence] is not just male-female couples. (Woman with woman ex-partner, inner regional, Vic)

Interview participants also suggested the need for providers with lived experience. They believed that this was essential to getting the service and help they needed (e.g. providers with their own experience of separation or providers who are from a minority community themselves such as CALD, veterans or LGBTIQA+).

> Bringing in lived experience, training them up or what have you, doing what you do, and bringing on someone who just knows exactly the shit that they are going through and can empathise and the depth of the hardship that they're in and turmoil and just grief and all that. And with the kids and the complex [needs], if you've got someone there that's walked that pathway, I think that would be powerful. (Woman with man ex-partner, major city, Vic)

Some survey responses also suggested improvements to services. Around 23% of those who answered one of the unmet needs survey items provided a suggestion (30/130 participants). These included caseworkers and/or system navigation guides to assist with ascertaining the most convenient and/or applicable client pathway. As noted within the survey response to 'What are the needs of you and/or your family that have not been met by accessing family relationship or family law services?' one participant remarked how not all services are particularly necessary. This participant suggested that a case-by-case judgement by an assigned caseworker would be a valuable change to current practice:

> Huge needs for accountability, more FV specific services, more accountability and training for the police (it's not the first who comes in who's right, they should check the facts given to them), someone on my side guiding me through the huge amount of services (that are not necessarily available here or fitting my circumstances), lawyers to list all you can do in court (e.g. intervention orders, contravention applications) and the deadlines to make applications to courts, courses for self-represented parties (what is on the website of the courts is far from being a representation of what actually happens and what you have to do and say), lawyers to actually fight for you and your children not just be a mere face in court/mediation. (Woman or female, 35–44 years, Vic)

Simplified processes to reduce client confusion and improve ease of service access was highlighted in the following response to survey item 'Do you have any comment to make about the extent to which services that you have accessed have been able to meet your needs?'

> Improve the law (the purpose of the law should be promoting both parents in the children's lives), simplify family law system and procedure, improve the gov services provided, refer to the Israel family court social services to provide integrated and swift solution to separated families, promote co-parenting, prevent and intervent [sic] psychological harm to children induced by resident parents' alienating behaviour. (Man or male, 45–54 years. Vic)

More information about separation processes and family law, in general, was called for to allow for clients to feel more confident and/or informed about the progression of their separation, as highlighted in the following response to the survey item 'Was there any support that you or your family needed that you did not receive?':

> … more detailed information about family law. I had to read 3 books instead to understand how works Australian family law. Also read reports from several law firms. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Qld)

Improved access to financial support and court processes (especially in cases of DFV) to help reduce the burden of the separation process was highlighted in the response to the survey item 'Do you have any comment to make about the extent to which services that you have accessed have been able to meet your needs?'

> … There also needs to be funding allocated for family violence victims who are forced into adversarial proceedings, against their abuser … (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Vic)

Improved service knowledge of DFV, increased support for victim-survivors, and/or increased number of DFV specific services in order to ensure the needs of complex separations are being met in a trauma-informed manner were highlighted in the following responses to the survey item 'Was there any support that you or your family needed that you did not receive?':

> The services used by the courts (e.g. family report writers) need better education around DVFV so that they are more aware of how to identify it – and not brush it off as 'high conflict'. Reading affidavits and looking for inconsistencies might be a good start. (Woman or female, 45–54 years, Qld)

> Any support for domestic violence survivors to help finalise separations would have been welcome with open arms. (Man or male, 35–44 years, Qld)

Greater access to counselling and/or greater dedication to mental health support to help reduce the burden of the separation process was suggested in the following response to the survey item 'Was there any support that you or your family needed that you did not receive?'

> Mental health issues related to DV situation needed more time and care spent on improving mental health. (Woman or female, 55+ years, Qld)

Gender-specific supports and services to ensure services are across necessary nuance was raised in these responses to 'Do you have any comment to make about the extent to which services that you have accessed have been able to meet your needs?'

> … There is no support for men who have been subjected to domestic violence and their role as fathers does not appear to hold the same value as the mother. The system needs a complete overhaul and for men to be treated as equals ... (Man or male, 35–44 years, NSW)

> I believe there should be more support for women who find themselves in my position. They should not have to pay for the whole costs of the matter and the other parties remain untouched. If I didn't have my adult children, I would be homeless. The law is an arse. (Woman or female, 55+ years, Qld)

Tailored services and supports for LGBTIQA+ families to ensure services are operating in an inclusive manner and not contributing to vicarious trauma were also called for. For example, in response to the survey item 'Was there any support that you or your family needed that you did not receive?' the following participant suggested:

> Also needed same-sex specific DV support services. Also needed police to be better trained. (Woman or female, 35–44 years, Vic)

Summary

Drawing on findings from the survey of separating/separated adults and in-depth interviews with separating/separated adults, this chapter provided insights into families' experiences of FRSP and non-FRSP services access and use (or non-use).

Survey and interview participants reported on the numerous and complex challenges they faced before, during and after separation, including experiences of emotional abuse, mental health concerns and safety concerns for themselves and/or their child(ren). On average, adults reported 2 or more relationship issues.

Adults with relationship issues or safety concerns used more services for longer durations. The most frequently used FRSP activities were FRCs, followed by FDR and the FRAL. Commonly used non-FRSP services included private lawyers, therapeutic professionals and the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia. It was common for participants to use a mix of FRSP and non-FRSP services (54%).

However, in-depth insights from interviews indicated that some participants could not distinguish between FRSP and non-FRSP services, with participants reflecting on experiences of inefficient service provision due to duplicated or conflicting advice. Access delays also led some to switch between FRSP and non-FRSP services. In addition, interview participants reflected on the challenges associated with navigating the service system and understanding what was available without adequate information and support.

Common barriers to service access were delays, as well as financial, geographic and family violence related barriers. Some participants from specific communities (e.g. a lesbian participant, an Aboriginal participant, and 2 Defence/veteran participants) indicated that services lacked an understanding of their needs and were unable to accommodate them.

Participants used many different pathways to reach parenting arrangements; those using counselling, mediation or online dispute resolution reported higher satisfaction levels.

Despite key challenges, some participants commented on positive experiences, including the cultural sensitivity of some service providers as well as compassionate approaches to service provision.

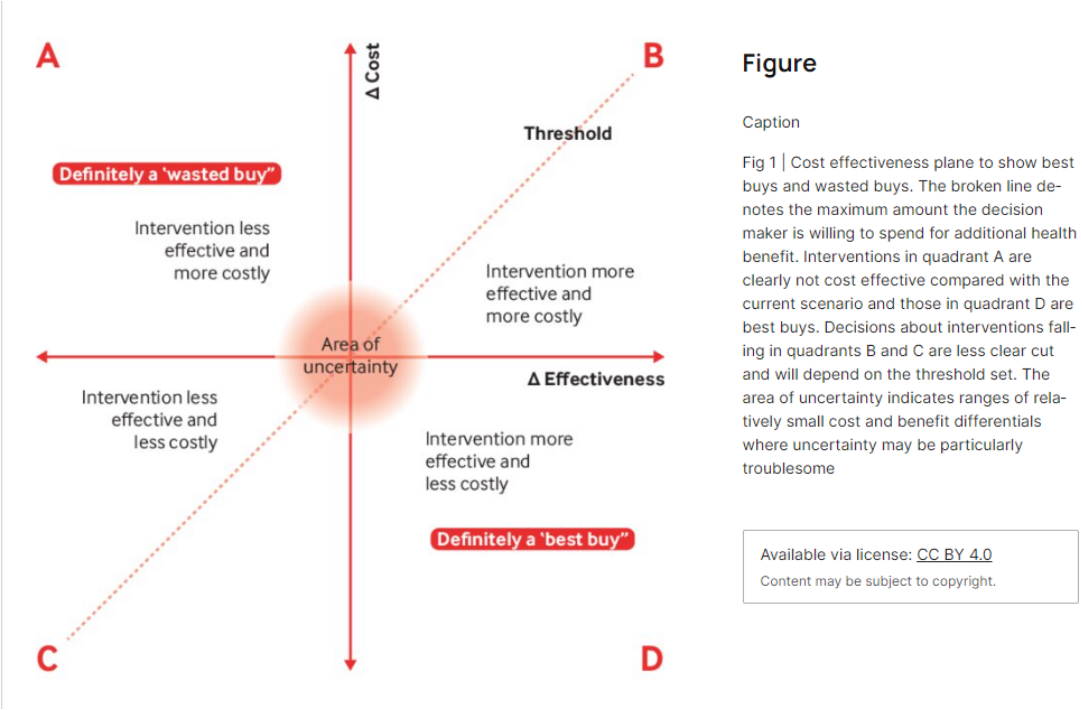
8. Cost-effective analysis

This section investigates whether the FRSP yields sufficient value to justify its cost. The incremental cost-effectiveness ratio (ICER) will be used for this evaluation. The ICER is a standard method for cost-effective analyses to assess the cost-effectiveness of health care interventions. The method can be extended to the analyses of services such as the FRSP. The ICER quantifies the average incremental cost associated with achieving an additional unit of a specific effect (such as improved health status or quality-adjusted life years). The ICER is defined as:

$ICER = \frac{Cost_1 - Cost_0}{Outcome_1 - Outcomet_0}$.

The ICER can then be placed inside a 2x2 plot (see Figure 8.1). This plots the incremental effect of the intervention on cost (Y axis) and its incremental effect on effectiveness (on the X axis). If the ICER falls in the area D (the second quadrant), then the intervention 'dominates' the control because it is more effective and less costly. That is, the dominant intervention achieves better outcomes (effect) at a lower cost (see details in [HERC: Cost-Effectiveness Analysis (va.gov)]).

Figure 8.1: Cost-effectiveness plane



Source: Prevention of non-communicable disease: best buys, wasted buys, and contestable buys (BMJ, 2020)

A previous evaluation of the FRSP conducted a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) of Family Relationship Services (FRSs) provided by the Australian Government (Centre for International Economics [CIE], 2023). Commissioned by Family and Relationship Services Australia, the CIE evaluated the financial feasibility of FRSs comparing the total costs to the total benefits from the provision of these services. The analysis converted the costs and the benefits into monetary terms (CIE, 2023). For this current evaluation of the FRSP, the research team is conducting a cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA) of the FRSP with the focus on achieving specific outcomes at

the lowest cost, measuring efficiency by calculating cost per unit of desired outcome. Rather than assessing the overall financial feasibility of the FRSP, this CEA focuses on assessing efficiency in achieving specific goals. The choice between these analyses depends on the evaluation goals (Cellini & Kee, 2015). A CEA was identified by the commissioning agency and the AIFS research team as the preferred methodology to support the FRSP Review.

Key messages

The cost-effectiveness of the FRSP was established by comparing FRSP activities with each other and applying the ICER to investigate whether the FRSP yields sufficient value to justify its cost.

The analysis demonstrates that the FRSP activities provide an improvement in client outcomes and a cost saving to government by supporting clients to resolve their post-separation arrangements without initiating or limiting their reliance on court proceedings.

- The base costs deliver a one-point SCORE improvement range from $682 for the FRAL up to $2,412 per point for FRCs. Including wider improvements, by including all SCORE domains, the cost-effectiveness ratios drop to $316 per point for FRAL and $1,121 per point for FRC. Incorporating avoided court costs sees the incremental cost-effectiveness ratio for all activities drop by between $150 and $280, while FRAL becomes ‘dominant’, in that it improves both outcomes and reduces costs.
- Despite delivering the lowest improvements in outcomes, FRAL is the most cost-effective activity due to its low average cost per client. The next most cost-effective are SCASP and FLC, which both deliver large improvements in client outcomes despite relatively high costs. FDR and RFDR deliver similar client improvements and have similar costs per client. They have a similar cost-effectiveness to CCS, which costs more per client but delivers larger improvements. FRC and POP broadly cost the same per client but deliver lower improvements, and so are the least cost-effective of the FRSP activities.
- The analysis indicates that the government investment in these FRSP activities delivers varying degrees of improvement for clients in the areas of post-separation family functioning and supporting the resolution of post-separation parenting arrangements and/or property and financial settlements. These activities may be more cost-effective than non-FRSP programs.

This analysis has considered only a narrow range of immediate outcomes in the form of measured domains and direct government court costs and, as such, is a conservative estimate of the cost-effectiveness of FRSP from a government perspective.

- Further benefits, including cost savings to individuals and their families as a result of avoiding court, have not been quantified.
- The analysis assumes that the cost savings per client are attributed equally across activity. If certain activities such as FRC or FDR delivery are more likely to reduce court proceedings, the results reported above would underestimate their relative cost-effectiveness.

The development of a standardised evaluation methodology, leveraging the SCORE data, would be a valuable next step to facilitate comparisons in the cost-effectiveness of both FRSP and non-FRSP programs. The results presented here provide a baseline for such comparisons.

Costs

Commonwealth funding

The costs of providing the FRSP were estimated from Commonwealth funding data obtained from the DSS and the AGD, including:

- Commonwealth Government baseline funding
- Commonwealth Social and Community Services (SACS) supplementation, which was a separate source of funding until 30 June 2021.

This provides a government funder perspective appropriate for this economic evaluation. It is noted that some providers do receive income from other sources, including charitable donations and fee-for-service income; however, our provider survey suggests these other sources of income typically account for less than 5% of total funding, consistent with previous research on family relationship services (CIE, 2023).

Commonwealth funding data were provided in nominal dollars by activity and financial year. These costs were then converted to equivalent 2022/23 dollars using the national, all groups Consumer Price Index series A2325846C from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.[19] Table 8.1 provides the combined baseline and SACS funding for each activity over the study period in 2022/23 dollars. Total funding for the FRSP grew from $215.9 million in 2015/16 to $247.2 million in 2022/23. FRCs ($114.3 million) and CCS ($48.1 million) received the largest funding in 2022/23.

Table 8.1: Commonwealth funding by activity, 2015/16–2022/23

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
2022/23 dollars ($ millions)								
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	$ 106.62	$ 99.64	$ 100.37	$ 101.55	$ 119.60	$ 121.01	$ 116.30	$ 114.34
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	$ 10.91	$ 10.04	$ 10.12	$ 12.53	$ 11.76	$ 11.90	$ 12.05	$ 11.79
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	$ 17.67	$ 16.60	$ 16.73	$ 16.92	$ 17.13	$ 17.32	$ 16.65	$ 16.30
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	$ 21.28	$ 20.01	$ 20.16	$ 20.39	$ 20.64	$ 20.87	$ 20.01	$ 19.68
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	$ 21.89	$ 20.36	$ 20.51	$ 20.86	$ 23.03	$ 23.31	$ 41.20	$ 48.14
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	$ 20.76	$ 19.39	$ 19.53	$ 19.76	$ 19.99	$ 20.22	$ 19.46	$ 19.11
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	$ 8.60	$ 7.95	$ 8.01	$ 8.10	$ 8.20	$ 8.29	$ 8.00	$ 7.85
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	$ 8.16	$ 7.67	$ 7.72	$ 7.81	$ 7.90	$ 8.00	$ 7.70	$ 7.59
Total*	**$ 215.89**	**$ 201.66**	**$ 203.14**	**$ 207.93**	**$ 228.24**	**$ 230.93**	**$ 241.37**	**$ 244.81**

Note: *Excludes First Nations FDR $2.4 million 2021/22 because there are no data for this component.

[19] See further: ABS, Table 3, Series A232584.www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/dec-quarter-2023#data-downloads

Average cost per client

Costs were then converted to average costs per client using client volume data. Given that year-to-year fluctuations are more likely to reflect changes in client volumes rather than real changes in costs per client, average costs per client were estimated across the entire study period from 2015/16 to 2022/23. Table 8.2 shows that the average cost per client varied from $366 for the FRAL clients to $1,855 for clients of the POP. The impact of COVID-19 on client volumes and average costs per client were evaluated in a sensitivity test by excluding 2021/22 from the calculations; however, the impact of this exclusion was minimal.

Table 8.2: Average cost per client, 2015/16–2022/23

	All years	Excluding 2021/22
2022/23 dollars		
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	$ 1,830.8	$ 1,819.2
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	$ 365.7	$ 368.0
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	$ 1,229.8	$ 1,204.4
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	$ 1,294.0	$ 1,297.3
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	$ 1,836.5	$ 1,839.4
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	$ 1,855.0	$ 1,842.1
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	$ 1,450.9	$ 1,440.0
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	$ 1,312.3	$ 1,322.1
First Nations FDR	N/A*	N/A*
Total	$ 1,404.9	$ 1,371.7

Note: Activity data for First Nations FDR were not available for this evaluation.

Outcomes

Improvement in client SCORE circumstances

The economic evaluation focuses on the circumstance outcomes delivered by the activities as recorded in the client SCORE data. As described in DEX insights in chapter 5 (Table 5.19 and Table 5.20), the DEX Data Exchange has developed a reporting tool called Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting (SCORE) to measure client and community outcomes. There are 4 different types of outcomes measured through SCORE, with 3 of these being for individual clients assessing their circumstances, goals and satisfaction with the service/s and one for a group or community. For this analysis, the focus is on the Client Circumstances SCORE, which captures 11 outcome domains for clients of funded programs.[20] Improvements in outcomes were measured as the difference between SCORE averages at the first and last visit. As not all clients are assessed for all domains, we use the SCORE improvement from the most commonly reported domain, which was typically family functioning (see Table 8.3a) to provide an estimate of outcomes in the base case of the evaluation.

To capture the impact of activities on other domains, improvements in other domains are then considered, weighted by the number of clients reporting that domain relative to the number of clients reporting family functioning. For example, if 500 clients were assessed for family functioning, and 100 clients for self and family safety, the mean SCORE improvement for self

[20] The 11 Client Circumstances SCORE domains are: physical health, wellbeing and self-care, personal and family safety, age-appropriate development, community participation and networks, family functioning, financial resilience, employment, education and skills training, material wellbeing and basic necessities, and housing: 1135-doc-score-glance-1.pdf (dss.gov.au)

and family safety would be weighted at 20% (100/500 clients). This is equivalent to assuming that there is zero impact in unassessed domains as per previous evaluations (CIE, 2023).

Table 8.3a: Number of clients assessed by activity and domain

	Family functioning	Mental health, wellbeing and self-care	Personal and family safety	Age-appropriate development	All other
Mean SCORE improvement					
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	115,507	60,181	72,271	25,701	48,078
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	4,768	4,787	4,435	4,586	3,613
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	27,732	15,444	17,774	3,425	12,964
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	30,753	24,183	17,528	3,225	17,199
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	14,195	8,335	9,200	3,506	4,239
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	15,747	11,878	10,062	5,419	11,464
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	6,979	3,318	1,941	2,033	2,780
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	10,557	6,116	6,937	2,189	6,737

Source: DEX data (DSS)

To sum improvements across domains, it is assumed that each domain is equally valued. For example, a one-point improvement in self and family safety is assumed to be equivalent to a one-point improvement in family functioning. Ideally this assumption would be based on research that has elicited client preferences about each domain, but in the absence of such research, it is assumed that improvements across domains can be summed, and that each domain is equally important.

Table 8.3b provides the mean SCORE improvements by key domain. Across all activities, the family functioning domain was typically the most commonly reported domain and accounted for the largest share of the overall improvement in SCORE results. However, the analysis of outcomes also showed that mental health, wellbeing and self-care, and personal and family safety domains also showed significant improvements. Overall, including all domains increases the impact of FRSP activities by about twofold.

Table 8.3b: Mean SCORE circumstance client improvement

	Family functioning	Mental health, wellbeing and self-care	Personal and family safety	Age-appropriate development	All other	Total
Mean SCORE improvement						
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	0.76	0.27	0.34	0.11	0.16	1.63
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	0.53	0.16	0.17	0.17	0.12	1.16
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	0.75	0.31	0.33	0.04	0.18	1.62
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	1.10	0.84	0.48	0.07	0.41	2.91
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	1.01	0.35	0.53	0.11	0.11	2.11
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	0.91	0.65	0.50	0.22	0.49	2.76
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	1.30	0.55	0.16	0.31	0.18	2.50

Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	0.77	0.26	0.29	0.05	0.16	1.53

Note: Activity data for First Nations FDR were not available for this evaluation.
Source: DEX data (DSS)

Improvement in client SCORE circumstances by priority cohort

Using the same methodology as above, the mean SCORE improvements across the study period are assessed by priority cohort: gender, First Nations status, CALD and clients living with disability.

Gender

The share of female clients is typically between 50% and 60% across all activities and domains (Table 8.4a).

Table 8.4a: Share of female clients by activity and domain

	Family functioning	Mental health, wellbeing and self-care	Personal and family safety	Age-appropriate development	All other
Mean SCORE improvement					
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	52%	53%	54%	53%	53%
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	53%	53%	54%	55%	53%
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	52%	52%	52%	52%	53%
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	58%	59%	60%	60%	58%
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	51%	52%	53%	52%	54%
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	53%	53%	54%	52%	54%
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	58%	58%	57%	57%	57%
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	53%	53%	54%	52%	52%

Source: DEX data (DSS)

On average, females record higher mean SCORE improvements across all activities, particularly for RFDR, FDR and FRCs (Table 8.4b).

Table 8.4b: Mean total SCORE circumstance client improvement by gender

	Male	Female	Difference	Difference (%)
Mean SCORE improvement				
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	1.54	1.71	0.17	11
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	1.11	1.17	0.06	5
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	1.52	1.71	0.19	12
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	2.82	2.96	0.14	5
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	2.07	2.16	0.09	4
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	2.67	2.84	0.18	7
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	2.51	2.52	0.00	0
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	1.38	1.65	0.27	20

Source: DEX data (DSS)

First Nations status

The share of Indigenous clients is typically less than 10% across all activities and domains (Table 8.5a).

Table 8.5a: Share of Indigenous clients by activity and domain

	Family functioning	Mental health, wellbeing and self-care	Personal and family safety	Age-appropriate development	All other
Mean SCORE improvement					
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	5%	6%	6%	6%	6%
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	6%	6%	7%	6%	6%
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	3%	4%	3%	4%	4%
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	4%	4%	5%	4%	6%
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	9%	10%	10%	11%	8%
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	6%	7%	7%	8%	7%
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	3%	4%	4%	3%	5%
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	7%	7%	6%	6%	5%

Source: DEX data (DSS)

On average, Indigenous clients record an improvement score 17% higher than non-Indigenous clients in FLC, but 10% lower improvements in both SCASP and RFDR activities. Improvements across all other activities are relatively similar (Table 8.5b).

Table 8.5b: Mean total SCORE circumstance client improvement by Indigenous status

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Difference	Difference (%)
Mean SCORE improvement				
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	1.66	1.63	0.04	2%
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	1.10	1.16	-0.06	-5%
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	1.65	1.60	0.04	3%
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	3.36	2.88	0.48	17%
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	2.22	2.09	0.13	6%
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	2.69	2.73	-0.04	-1%
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	2.27	2.51	-0.25	-10%
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	1.38	1.53	-0.16	-10%

Source: DEX data (DSS)

Culturally and linguistically diverse people

The share of CALD clients is typically less than 5% across all activities and domains (Table 8.6a).

Table 8.6a: Share of CALD clients by activity and domain

	Family functioning	Mental health, wellbeing and self-care	Personal and family safety	Age-appropriate development	All other
Mean SCORE improvement					
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	4%	4%	4%	2%	4%
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%

Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	4%	4%	4%	3%	3%
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	4%	4%	5%	3%	4%
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	4%	5%	4%	3%	3%
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	3%	3%	3%	2%	3%
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%

Source: DEX data (DSS)

On average, CALD clients record an improvement score 21% higher than non-CALD clients in POP, and 13% higher in both SCASP and FRCs, but 11% and 14% lower improvements in FRAL and RFDR activities respectively (Table 8.6b).

Table 8.6b: Mean total SCORE circumstance client improvement by CALD status

	CALD	Non-CALD	Difference	Difference (%)
Mean SCORE improvement				
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	1.86	1.62	0.24	13%
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	1.04	1.15	-0.11	-11%
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	1.56	1.62	-0.05	-3%
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	2.89	2.91	-0.01	0%
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	2.10	2.11	-0.01	-1%
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	3.47	2.74	0.73	21%
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	2.87	2.50	0.37	13%
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	1.34	1.52	-0.18	-14%

Source: DEX data (DSS)

Disability

The share of clients living with disability ranges from between 4% and 12% across all activities and domains (Table 8.7a).

Table 8.7a: Share of clients with a disability by activity and domain

	Family functioning	Mental health, wellbeing and self-care	Personal and family safety	Age-appropriate development	All other
Mean SCORE improvement					
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	5%	6%	5%	6%	6%
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	7%	7%	7%	6%	7%
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	5%	5%	4%	5%	4%
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	9%	11%	10%	10%	10%
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	11%	11%	10%	12%	9%
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	8%	8%	7%	8%	6%
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	8%	10%	5%	5%	5%
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	5%	5%	4%	4%	4%

Source: DEX data (DSS)

Clients with disability record improvement scores 12% and 13% higher than clients without disability in RFDR and FLC activities respectively but 10% and 21% lower in SCASP and FRAL respectively (Table 8.7b).

Table 8.7b: Mean total SCORE circumstance client improvement by disability status

	With disability	Without disability	Difference	Difference (%)
Mean SCORE improvement				
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	1.66	1.61	0.05	3%
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	0.96	1.16	-0.20	-21%
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	1.73	1.58	0.14	8%
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	3.27	2.84	0.43	13%
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	2.18	2.10	0.08	4%
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	2.63	2.79	-0.16	-6%
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	2.27	2.50	-0.24	-10%
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	1.72	1.51	0.21	12%

Source: DEX data (DSS)

Overall, while some differences in mean SCORE improvements are observed across different cohorts, all FRSP activities are effective at improving outcomes across all cohorts.

Cost savings from avoided court proceedings

Another outcome from the FRSP is avoided court costs that can accrue where clients are successfully diverted from litigation. To estimate these savings, it is necessary to estimate the share of clients who avoided court due to the FRSP. Data from the DSS shows that 29% of FRC clients and 26% of FDR and RFDR clients were issued with section 60I certificates suggesting that between 71% and 74% of clients may have avoided court proceedings. However, some of these clients may have also avoided court proceedings in the absence of the FRSP. Court administrative data indicate that there were 5,121 fewer interim order applications and 6,063 fewer final order applications in 2022/23 versus 2015/16.

We use these differences as an estimate of the cases diverted due to the FRSP. Using an average government cost savings per case of $4,748 per interim case and $6,331 per final case (PWC, 2018, p 45, inflated to 2022/23 dollars), this equates to an estimated annual cost saving of over $62.7 million. Attributing these savings to particular activities is challenging. Activities such as FDR and FRC are potentially more likely to be driving the reduction in cases as their clients are typically more likely to be involved in litigation; however, other activities may prevent disputes from escalating all together. We assume that the savings per client are shared equally across all activities, resulting in a reduction of $462 per client. Table 8.8 provides the base case and updated average cost per client after including cost savings associated with avoided court proceedings.

Table 8.8: Adjusted average cost per client, 2015/16–2022/23

	Base case	Cost savings from avoided court proceedings	Adjusted
2022/23 dollars			
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	$1,831	$462	$1,369
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	$366	$462	-$96
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	$1,230	$462	$768
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	$1,294	$462	$832
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	$1,837	$462	$1,375
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	$1,855	$462	$1,393
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	$1,451	$462	$989

Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	$1,312	$462	$850
First Nations FDR	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
Total	$1405	$422	$983

Notes: Activity data for First Nations FDR were not available for this evaluation. Total figures are not simple sums of activities as some people are clients in multiple activities.

Cost-effectiveness analysis

The cost-effectiveness of each FRSP activity is estimated by calculating the incremental cost to deliver a one-point improvement in SCORE outcomes. A conservative base case is calculated using just the SCORE improvements recorded in the most prominent outcome domain, family functioning, followed by 'stepped' evaluations that include SCORE improvements recorded across all domains, and potential cost savings from avoided court proceedings.

Table 8.9: Cost effectiveness steps

	Costs	Outcomes
Steps		
Base case	Average cost per client	SCORE improvement in family functioning
Step 1	Average cost per client	SCORE improvement across all domains
Step 2	Average cost per client minus cost savings for avoided court proceedings	SCORE improvement across all domains

Results

The incremental cost-effectiveness ratios are provided in Table 8.10 below. In the base case, these range from $682 to deliver a one-point SCORE improvement for the FRAL up to $2,412 per point for FRC. Including wider improvements by including all SCORE domains, the cost-effectiveness ratios drop to $316 per point for FRAL and $1,121 per point for FRC (Step 1). Incorporating avoided court costs sees the ICER for all activities drop by between $150 and $280, while FRAL becomes 'dominant', in that it improves both outcomes and reduces costs (Step 2).

Table 8.10: Incremental cost effectiveness ratios

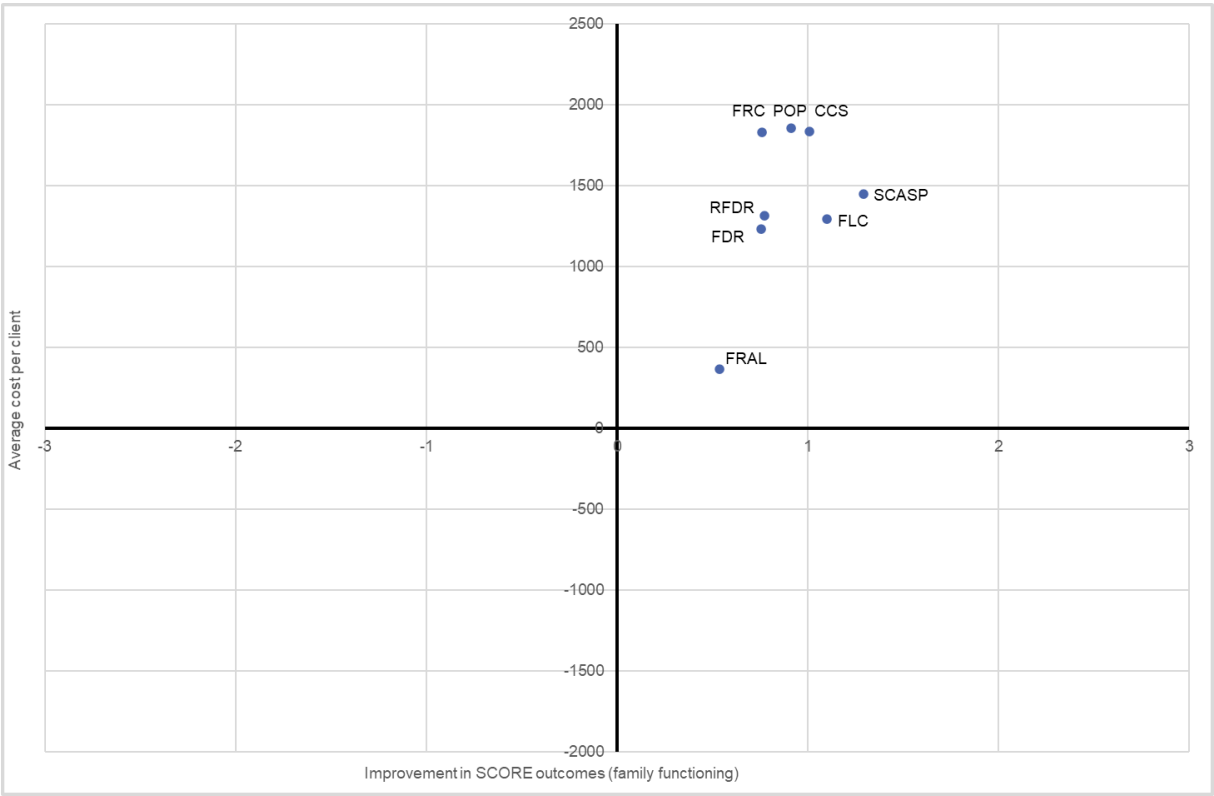
	Base case (family functioning)	Step 1 (all SCORE domains)	Step 2 (all SCORE domains and cost savings
$/SCORE point improvement			
Family Relationship Centres (FRC)	$2,412	$1,121	$838
Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL)	$682	$316	DOMINANT
Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)	$1,630	$761	$475
Family Law Counselling (FLC)	$1,175	$445	$286
Children's Contact Services (CCS)	$1,822	$869	$650
Parenting Orders Program (POP)	$2,034	$671	$504
Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)	$1,120	$581	$396
Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)	$1,701	$858	$556

Notes: Activity data for First Nations FDR were not available for this evaluation.

When comparing 2 interventions, one intervention is considered dominant over the other if it is both more effective and less costly. In other words, the dominant intervention achieves better outcomes (effect) at a lower cost.

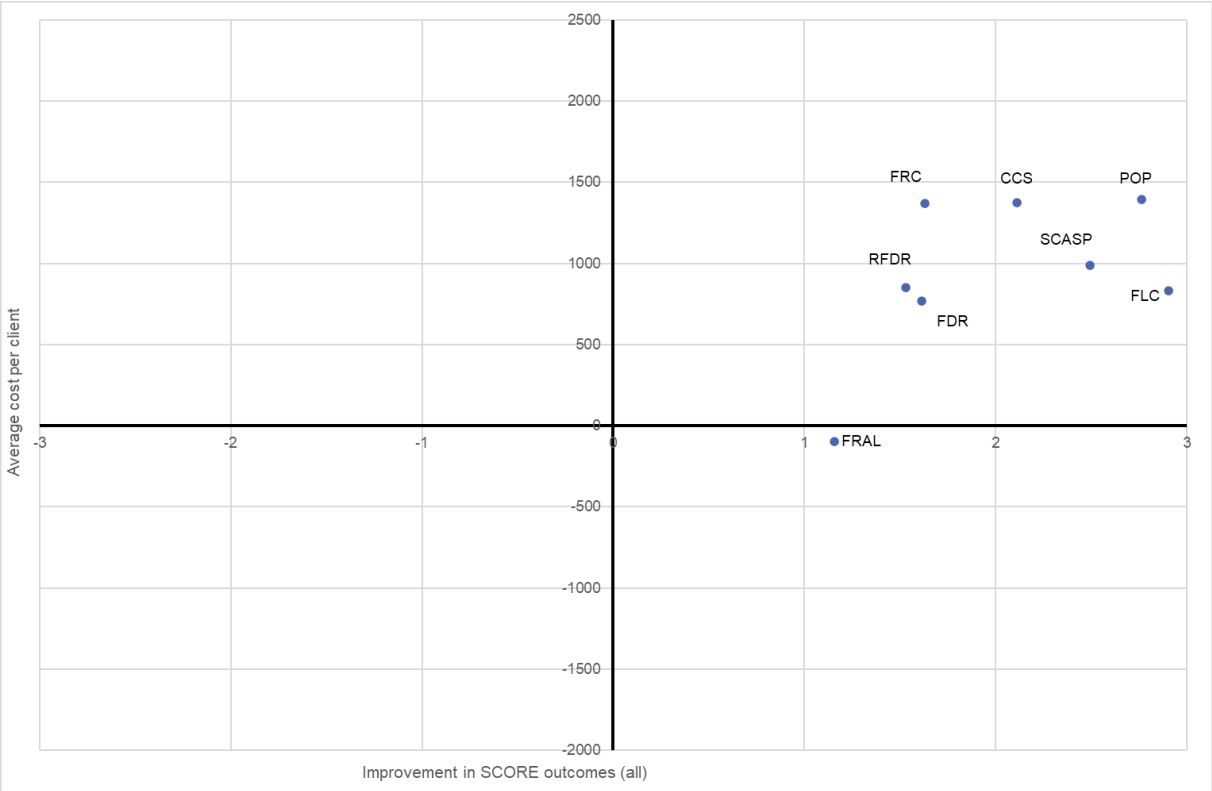
The cost-effectiveness of each activity is visualised on the cost-effectiveness plane in Figure 8.2 below. Despite delivering the lowest improvements in outcomes, FRAL is the most cost-effective activity due to its low average cost per client. Next most cost-effective are SCASP and FLC, which both deliver large improvements in client outcomes despite relatively high costs. FDR and RFDR deliver similar client improvements and have similar costs per client. They have a similar cost-effectiveness to CCS, which costs more per client but delivers larger improvements. FRC and POP broadly cost the same per client but deliver lower improvements, and so are the least cost-effective activities.

Figure 8.2: Cost effectiveness plane: base case FRSP activities, base case



Including wider improvements across all SCORE domains and the cost savings from reduced court proceedings improves the cost effectiveness of all activities. In particular, FLC and POP become relatively more cost-effective activities. FRAL improves client outcomes at no net cost to government.

Figure 8.3: Cost effectiveness plane: base case FRSP activities, step 2 (all SCORE domains and cost savings)



Summary

The above results consider the cost-effectiveness of the FRSP by comparing activities with each other. The analysis demonstrates that FRSP activities provide an improvement in client outcomes. It also demonstrates a cost saving to government by supporting clients to resolve their post-separation arrangements without initiating or limiting their reliance on court proceedings. It shows that FRAL is particularly cost-effective, generating positive client improvement for little or no cost. FLC delivers larger improvement at relatively low cost, while CCS, POP, SCASP, RFDR and FDR are all at similar levels of cost-effectiveness.

The analysis indicates that the government investment in these FRSP activities delivers varying degrees of improvement for clients in the areas of post-separation family functioning and supporting the resolution of post-separation parenting arrangements and/or property and financial settlements. These activities may be more cost-effective than non-FRSP programs.

The consistent use of SCORE data to assess improvement in clients across a range of government-funded programs provides an opportunity to compare the cost-effectiveness of both FRSP and non-FRSP programs. The development of a standardised evaluation methodology, leveraging the SCORE data, would be a valuable next step to facilitate this. The results presented here provide a baseline for such comparisons.

It is also noted that this economic evaluation has considered only a narrow range of immediate outcomes in the form of measured domains and direct government court costs. Further benefits, including cost savings to individuals and their families as a result of avoiding court, have not been quantified. As a result, the economic evaluation presented here is a conservative estimate

of the cost-effectiveness of the FRSP from a government perspective. Finally, we have assumed the cost savings per client are attributed equally across activity. If certain activities such as FRC or FDR delivery are more likely to reduce court proceedings, the results reported above would underestimate their relative cost-effectiveness.

9. Demand projection model

FRSP client projections

This section sets out projections of FRSP clients for SA3 areas in Australia over the next decade. The projections show how the number of FRSP clients will change and grow over the projection period, given future population growth and FRSP usage levels. This section presents the projection results for 8 types of FRSP activities and all combined activities at the national level, by state/territory, and in remote areas.

Key messages

- The projected number of FRSP clients, irrespective of different assumptions and projection methodologies, is expected to increase by 14.1% across Australia during the projection period 2022–34. Victoria and major cities in 8 states/territories will experience the largest increase in client numbers over the projection period.
- The growth of the population, particularly in Victoria and major cities, including the growth of the core age group of 25–49 is critical for future projected growth in client numbers.
- A strong positive correlation is also anticipated between population (including core age group) client growth rates across SA3 areas.
- The FRAL appears to be the largest activity during the projection period and will have provided services to 19.2% of FRSP clients in the next decade.
- Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR) will represent a relatively small proportion (8.9%) of FRSP activity throughout the projection period.

Different sets of assumptions and projection methodologies are considered, according to the trends in FRSP clients and client demographic characteristics. Considering the trends in the FRSP clients, the client projections are created using four scenarios (Box 9.1) based on different assumptions regarding changes in the number of FRSP clients. The growth rate of the population size or the client ratio in the total population at the SA3 level over the projection period determines these changes.

The first and second scenarios (i.e. Scenarios A and B) are developed as the major projection results, while the third and fourth scenarios (i.e. Scenarios C and D) are designed to assess the robustness of the results. The results in this chapter are presented based on scenario A in this section, which is the preferred estimate here for 3 reasons: (a) it considers the average client rate due to a non-linear trend in FRSP clients; (b) it considers client demographics; and (c) it is a lower bound estimate since the client number is lowest in 2022/23 (see Appendix F for Scenario B) .

All scenarios provide projection estimates for 8 types of FRSP activities and all combined activities at the national level, by state/territory, and in remote areas.[21] This new model for FRSP client projections uses client and estimated resident population by the ABS, population projections for 2022–71 by the ABS and the projections at the SA3 level by Wilson, Grossman &

[21] Scenario B is considered a higher bound. The higher bound data will be provided in Appendix F. Appendix F provides projections of different activity groupings based on Scenarios A and B.

Temple (2022) and DEX (see Appendix F for details on the construction of the 4 scenarios and data sources).[22]

Box 9.1: Four scenarios of projections

Scenario A

This scenario assumes that over the projection period, the changes in FRSP client numbers for a SA3 will follow the age-gender-specific population growth rate. This means that the change in client numbers is influenced by the change in the population and its composition in relation to age and gender. This scenario is based on the following 3 steps.

1. This step captures the age-gender-specific population size at the SA3 level over 2022–34. ABS' state-level population projections for 2022–71 were used, calibrated with Wilson and colleagues' (2022) SA3-level projections of annual total population size over 2020–35.

2. This step captures the SA3-level age-gender-activity-specific distribution of the FRSP client population size. We used the national-level age-gender-activity-specific distribution of FRSP clients averaged over 2015/16–2022/23 to represent the corresponding distribution at the SA3 level in 2022/23. This step is based on the data of national-level age-group-specific FRSP client number by activity over 2015/16–2022/23 and the national-level gender-specific FRSP client number by activity over the same period, both sourced from DEX.

3. This step computes the SA3-level FRSP client number by activity over the projection period. The averaged national-level age-gender-activity-specific distribution of FRSP clients (obtained from the second step) is applied to the SA3 level in 2022 to estimate the SA3-level age-gender-specific distribution of FRSP clients that year. The SA3-level FRSP client number by activity over the projection period is then projected by applying the estimated SA3-level age-gender-specific growth of the population in 2022–34 to the age-gender-activity-specific distribution of FRSP clients in 2022 at the same geographic level.

Scenario B

This scenario assumes that over the projection period, the changes in FRSP client numbers at the SA3 level are based on the age-specific FRSP client rate (i.e. the proportion of clients in the total population) observed in 2018/19, which was when the number of clients reached its peak during 2015/16–2022/23. It assumes that over the projection period, the client growth rate would be at the same level as the age-specific FRSP client rate in 2018/19. This scenario is achieved using the data of FRSP clients' age profile and SA3-level population size, along with the information on the estimated resident population (ERP) size by age group at the national level in 2018/19–2019/20 and SA3-level age-specific population size.

Scenario C

This scenario assumes that over the projection period, the growth rate of the FRSP client numbers will be equal to that of the total population size at the SA3 level.

[22] Where appropriate, the projection model used the ABS estimated resident data for 2022, the ABS population projection series and the DEX client data for 2022/23 by 8 FRSP activities and by any activity at the SA3 level and in remote areas. The projection excludes migratory and SA3 areas with no usual address, resulting in 333 SA3 areas.

Scenario D

This scenario assumes that over the projection period, the changes in FRSP client numbers at the SA3 level are based on the population aged 25–49 observed in 2022/23. This group is specifically chosen due to their higher propensity to use FRSP activities than other individuals in other age groups. Therefore, the changes in client numbers over the projection period will be equal to the ratio of FRSP client numbers to the population aged 25–49 observed in 2022/23.

Source: Appendix F

FRSP client projections by activities at the national level

Table 9.1 shows the number of clients by eight activities served by the FRSP in 2022/23 and the projected number of clients in 2029 and 2034 at the national level. In 2022/23, the FRSP provided support to 127,345 clients across Australia. Over the next six years to 2029, the number of individual clients is estimated to increase by 9.1% and 14.1% in 2034. The FRCs are the largest activity with 52,623 clients in 2022/23 and will remain the largest activity over the next decade, with 60,464 clients. The FRAL will be the second largest FRSP activity over the next decade, with 32,974 clients. CCS occupies third place, with 15,745 FRSP clients in 2034. Regional family dispute resolution (RFDR) represents a relatively small proportion of FRSP activity throughout the projection period, with only 5,400 clients in 2034. It is interesting to note that in terms of client growth over the next decade, FRAL is projected to grow the fastest (19.2%), followed by FDR (17.1%) and FRCs (14.9%).

Table 9.1: Future projected clients by activities at the national level

	FRSP individual clients 2022/23	Projected FRSP clients 2029	% growth in clients between 2022/23 and 2029	Projected FRSP clients 2034	% growth in clients between 2022/23 and 2034
Family Relationship Centres	52,623	57,634	9.5	60,464	14.9
Family Relationship Advice Line	27,660	30,847	11.5	32,971	19.2
Family Dispute Resolution	10,636	11,796	10.9	12,460	17.1
Family Law Counselling	11,397	12,425	9.0	12,991	14.0
Children's Contact Services	14,412	15,295	6.1	15,745	9.2
Parenting Orders Program	8,794	9,524	8.3	9,920	12.8
Supporting Children after Separation Program	5,114	5,547	8.5	5,744	12.3
Regional Family Dispute Resolution	4,958	5,228	5.4	5,400	8.9
Any activity	**127,345**	**138,957**	**9.1**	**145,350**	**14.1**

Notes: The number of clients in 2022/23 refers to registered individual clients. A client may attend more than one activity and be counted in each; thus, the sum of clients across all activities may exceed the number of all clients. Projected clients are based on age-gender-specific client rates in 2022/23 (Scenario A).
Source: Dex, ABS and Wilson et al. (2022)

FRSP client projections by state/territory and in remote areas

Table 9.2 presents the estimated resident population (ERP) in 2022 and projected ERP in 2029 and 2034, along with the corresponding changes in FRSP client numbers by state/territory and remote areas. Over the 2022–34 projection period, the resident population is expected to increase by 4.6 million, reflecting a growth rate of 17.5%. However, the resident population in the core age group 25–49 is expected to increase by 1.4 million, reflecting a growth rate of 15.3%; the slower growth of this population is a reflection of the continuing ageing of Australia's population.

A significant increase in the resident population over the projection period, especially in the core age group, indicates a likely rise in FRSP clients across Australia in the next decade. Indeed, over the next 6 years to 2029, the number of individual clients is estimated to increase by 138,957 and reach 145,350 clients in 2034.

Table 9.2 also shows that the number of projected clients between 2022 and 2034 varies across jurisdictions. FRSP service providers in Victoria, for example, are likely to see a significant increase of 18.4% in FRSP clients, which is much higher than the Australian average of 14.1%, over the next decade, followed by the Northern Territory at 16.1%, Queensland at 15.8% and the Australian Capital Territory at 15.6%. This is due to the predicted rise of over 8 million residents in Victoria by 2034.

The lower panel of Table 9.2 indicates that major cities will experience the largest increase in FRSP clients of around 17.4%. This growth is due to the expected increase in population in major cities from 2022 to 2034. The inner and outer regions will experience client growth that is much lower than the national average.

Table 9.2: Future projected population and clients of any FRSP activity by state/territory and in remote areas

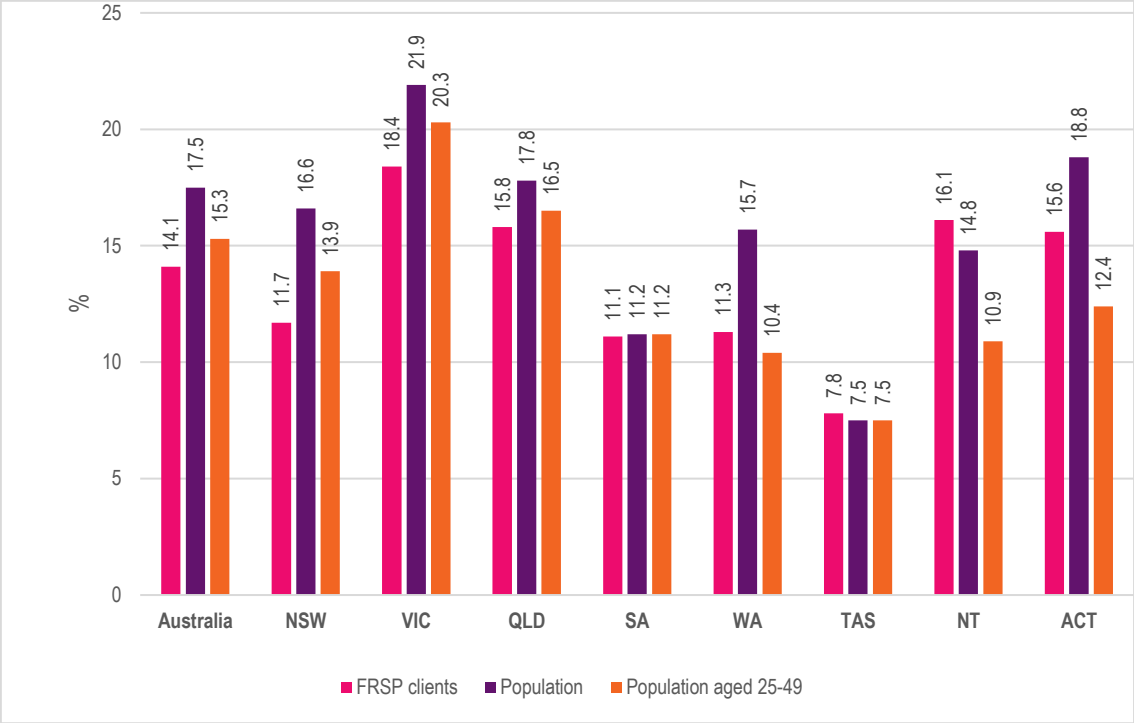
	Resident population (June 2022)	Projected residential population 2029 ('000)	Projected residential population 2034 ('000)	Residential population age 25-49, 2022/23 ('000)	Projected residential population age 25-49, 2029 ('000)	Projected residential population age 25-49, 2034 (`000)	FRSP individual clients 2022/23	Projected FRSP clients 2029	% growth in clients between 2022/23 and 2029	Projected FRSP clients 2034	% growth in clients between 2022/23 and 2034
State/Territory											
New South Wales	8,165,326	9,041,392	9,517,265	2,791,050	3,035,560	3,179,694	29,419	31,621	7.5	32,862	11.7
Victoria	6,625,964	7,528,500	8,074,543	2,362,538	2,654,478	2,841,713	30,022	33,410	11.3	35,543	18.4
Queensland	5,320,496	5,943,517	6,269,048	1,785,089	1,970,172	2,078,772	31,076	34,216	10.1	35,999	15.8
South Australia	1,821,200	1,968,295	2,024,766	586,532	635,738	652,148	12,045	13,046	8.3	13,376	11.1
Western Australia	2,789,148	3,071,412	3,226,234	971,664	1,035,141	1,072,582	16,257	17,459	7.4	18,091	11.3
Tasmania	571,013	603,419	613,817	181,008	190,442	194,520	4,648	4,928	6.0	4,987	7.3
Northern Territory	250,219	275,082	287,180	101,469	108,734	112,571	1,902	2,108	10.8	2,208	16.1
Australian Capital Territory	456,889	509,312	542,966	178,712	192,318	200,920	1,976	2,169	9.8	2,284	15.6
Australia	**26,000,153**	**28,940,929**	**30,555,819**	**8,958,062**	**9,822,583**	**10,332,920**	**127,345**	**138,957**	**9.1**	**145,350**	**14.1**
Remoteness											
Major cities	19,100,000	21,524,160	22,861,487	6,942,926	7,692,667	8,124,640	79,605	88,525	11.2	93,484	17.4
Inner regions	4,509,694	4,927,224	5,151,962	1,275,134	1,360,450	1,420,602	31,094	33,082	6.4	34,223	10.1
Outer regions	1,970,968	2,090,145	2,139,943	597,586	625,580	642,683	14,268	14,906	4.5	15,199	6.5
Remote/very remote areas	387,654	399,400	402,427	142,417	143,885	144,996	1621	1644	1.4	1643	1.4

Notes: The number of clients in 2022/23 refers to registered individual clients. Projected clients are based on age-specific client rates in 2022/23 (Scenario A). The projected populations are from the ABS projection series.
Source: DEX, ABS and Wilson et al. (2022)

Figure 9.1 compares the growth in population and FRSP clients over the 2022–34 period by state/territory. The resident population is projected to grow by 17.5% over the projection period (15.3% in the core age group 25–49). Note that the core age group is a significant demographic for FRSP clients, which distinguishes them from the general Australian population in terms of age and household composition. Therefore, areas with a higher concentration of this age group may indicate potential growth within this demographic. Victoria is expected to have the highest population growth rate of 20.3% in the core age group, followed by Queensland at 16.5%, New South Wales at 13.9%, South Australia at 11.2% and the Northern Territory at 10.9%.

Figure 9.2 shows that population growth in the core age group between 2022 and 2034 is expected to be strongest in major cities with a rate of 17%, followed by the inner region at 11.4% and the outer area at 7.5%. Overall, changes in population, including those in the core age group, can significantly contribute to the demand for FRSP activities, especially in Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales, and in major cities in the next decade.

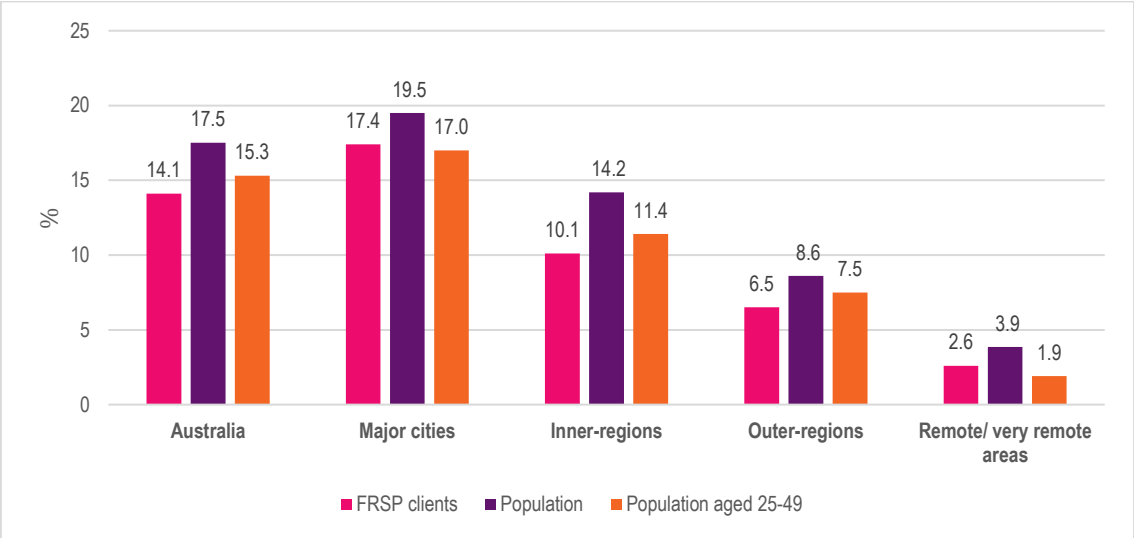
Figure 9.1: Growth in population and FRSP clients between 2022 and 2034 by state/territory



Notes: Projected clients are based on age-specific client rates in 2022/23 (Scenario A). The projected populations are from the ABS projection series.

Source: DEX, ABS and Wilson et al. (2022)

Figure 9.2: Growth in population and FRSP clients between 2022 and 2034 in remote areas



Notes: Projected clients are based on age-specific client rates in 2022/23 (Scenario A). The projected populations are from the ABS projection B series.

Source: Dex, ABS and Wilson et al. (2022)

FRSP client projections by geographical areas

This section presents a list of SA3 areas where the highest number of clients is expected to benefit from FRSP activities between 2022 and 2034. Table 9.3 lists the top 20 SA3 areas with the highest FRSP clients in 2034. Over the projection period, at least 10 of these SA3 areas are anticipated to experience growth in their clients, with an average increase of 20%, driven by a net increase in the resident population by 25%–50%. Most of these areas are located in major cities of Victoria and Queensland, indicating a likely impact on FRSP activities usage in these states by 2034.

Table 9.3: Top 20 SA3s with the highest number of projected FRSP clients[a]

State	SA3 name	Resident population (June 2022)	Projected residential population 2034	% growth in resident population between 2022 and 2034	FRSP individual clients 2022/23	Projected FRSP clients 2034	% growth in FRSP clients between 2022/23 and 2034	Remoteness areas
WA	Wanneroo	227,669	341,728	50.1	1498	2199	46.8	Major cities
Qld	Mt Gravatt	83,274	91,702	10.1	1887	2056	9.0	Major cities
Vic	Melton - Bacchus Marsh	196,036	296,164	51.1	1284	1913	49.0	Major cities
Vic	Wyndham	298,883	423,197	41.6	1312	1830	39.5	Major cities
Qld	Townsville	199,955	227,917	14.0	1496	1688	12.8	Outer region
Vic	Geelong	206,701	247,656	19.8	1376	1629	18.4	Major cities
SA	Onkaparinga	180,657	197,454	9.3	1509	1598	5.9	Major cities
Qld	Mackay	118,501	127,723	7.8	1528	1596	4.5	Inner region
Vic	Casey - South	229,342	329,365	43.6	1055	1495	41.7	Major cities
WA	Swan	159,020	226,102	42.2	1033	1451	40.5	Major cities
Qld	Ipswich Inner	121,248	206,011	69.9	804	1441	79.2	Major cities
Qld	Toowoomba	163,195	186,233	14.1	1266	1441	13.8	Inner region
SA	Playford	101,690	129,040	26.9	1065	1392	30.7	Major cities
Qld	Rockhampton	122,387	136,401	11.5	1214	1345	10.8	Inner region
Vic	Whittlesea - Wallan	262,872	378,580	44.0	919	1310	42.5	Major cities
Qld	Ormeau - Oxenford	169,282	236,273	39.6	939	1267	34.9	Major cities
Vic	Ballarat	112,036	133,780	19.4	997	1163	16.6	Inner region
WA	Mandurah	112,500	143,071	27.2	961	1139	18.5	Major cities
WA	Rockingham	147,787	183,354	24.1	933	1102	18.1	Major cities
Vic	Bendigo	101,111	120,705	19.4	915	1071	17.0	Inner region

Notes: The number of clients in 2022/23 refers to registered individual clients. Projected clients are based on age-specific client rates in 2022/23 (Scenario A). The projected populations are from the ABS projection series.
[a] The order of SA3s in this table is based on the projected clients 2034.
Source: DEX, ABS and Wilson et al. (2022)

Purpose of the Power BI dashboard

In accordance with Term of Reference B, the Power BI Dashboard has been developed as a dynamic user interface. Its purpose is to visually support the consideration of options for the delivery of FRSP activities in the future, having regard to the demand projections for the FRSP, the population profile and changes, and the client demographic profiles at the SA2 and SA3 geographical levels.

The demand projections are presented below and the FRSP Power BI Dashboard (including instructional video) and accompanying user guide have been submitted to the AGD, together with this *Draft Final Input Technical Report*.

The Power BI dashboard provides a basis for projecting service needs and also supports consideration of better service provision in terms of geographic distribution of services to meet demand in light of population growth and population compositions. It also supports consideration of accessibility issues and the provision of different FRSP activities with potentially different delivery models.

Data coverage in the Power BI dashboard

The data captured in the Power BI dashboard is set out in Table 9.4 below:

Table 9.4: Data and sources used in the Dashboard

Data source	Variables included in Dashboard	Description/notes
Data Exchange (DEX) data, Australian Department of Social Services (DSS)	FRSP activities 2022/23	▪ Family Relationship Centres (FRC) ▪ Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) ▪ Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR) ▪ Family Law Counselling (FLC) ▪ Parenting Orders Program (POP) ▪ Supporting Children After Separation Program (SCASP) ▪ Children's Contact Centre (CCS) ▪ Legally assisted and Culturally Appropriate FDR
	Clients	An individual who has received a service funded within the FRSP
	Outlets	The physical location from where a service is primarily being delivered
	Sessions	A logged instance of service from an FRSP to a client/case
2021 Census data	SEIFA score	SEIFA: Index of Relation Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSED) (lower score = most disadvantaged) Notes: The ABS produces SEIFA scores for SA2, LGA, Postcode, etc. However, ABS does not produce SEIFA for SA3s. For this reason, AIFS have derived SEIFA for SA3s (i.e. pop. weighted average of constituent SA2 scores.
	First Nations	Residents who identify as being of Aboriginal and or Torres Strait cultural heritage
	CALD	Residents born in a country outside of Australia and speak a language other than English at home
	Separated families w/dependents	Persons who were divorced or separated and persons living in one-parent/step/blended families with dependent children
	One-parent families w/dependents	Persons living in one-parent families with dependent children
ASGS 2021		
ASGS-RA[23]	Remoteness	

[23] Available at www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/australian-statistical-geography-standard-asgs-edition-3/jul2021-jun2026/access-and-downloads

Estimated Resident Populations (ERP), ABS, 2022.	Resident population	Estimated resident population (ERP) size (SA3-level) in 2022[24]
	Resident population aged 25–49 years	
AIFS derived: FRSP client projections	Projected FRSP clients, 2029 & 2034	Estimated number of FRSP clients,[25] calculated using: ▪ ABS ERP data for 2022 ▪ Projection of total population size at the Statistical Area (SA3-level), for each individual year of 2020–2035[26] ▪ Projection of age-gender-specific population size in 4 selected years: 2020, 2025, 2030 and 2035[27] ▪ DEX client data for 2022/23 at the SA3 level
AIFS derived: Service Mapping data	Non-FRSP services (NFRSP)	Service activities identified in the service mapping process, coded as either 'Relationship / family counselling and support services' or 'Family law focused services'. These activities generally align with the activities funded under the FRSP.
	Other services (Other)	All other services identified in the service mapping process

Capabilities of the Dashboard

The Power BI Dashboard brings different data points together and forms a useful tool to support the assessment of whether existing services are well positioned in light of population growth and composition changes. It can also be used to plan future service delivery to areas with greater service needs and to support balance in the geographic distribution of services. This dashboard allows the end-users to develop and assess various scenarios (by expanding or narrowing variables) to assist decision making for further service delivery, including:

- sorting data tables by different demographic characteristics
- filtering maps to display specific activities
- expanding or narrowing the number of selected Indicators.

Further, users have the ability to ‘drill-through’ from any SA3 location to generate additional report pages that provide further details about the selected area, namely:

- SA3 profiles – detailed infographics of key demographic characteristics and population projections data for that location
- Non-FRSP organisations – a (non-exhaustive) list of some of the relevant non-FRSP funded services available in that location, as well as the particular support services they offer and the ability to filter the list for culturally appropriate services.

Additional features are outlined in further detail in the Dashboard user guide.

[24] Available at www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/data-region-methodology/2011-23#data-downloads
[25] We acknowledge the contribution of Dr Guogui Huang, Centre for Health Systems and Safety Research, Macquarie University.
[26] Available at figshare.com/articles/dataset/SA3_area_2020-based_total_population_projections/19744798/1.
[27] Available at figshare.com/articles/dataset/SA3_area_population_projections_by_age_sex/19769560/1

Summary

This chapter analysed the projected number of FRSP clients at SA3, state/territory and national levels throughout Australia between 2022 and 2034. The starting year for the client projection was set as 2022, aligning with the latest coverage of DEX client data. Given the different assumptions regarding changes in the number of FRSP clients, the projection is based on 4 scenarios. Results of the 4 scenarios indicate a notable increase in FRSP client numbers over 2022–34, albeit with significant geographic variations. This chapter only presents the findings based on the first scenario. This preferred estimate assumes that the client growth rate will mirror the age-gender-specific population growth rate at SA3, state/territory and national levels during the projection period.

According to the ABS projections, the total Australian population is projected to grow by 17.5% (15.3% in the core age group 25–49) during the projection period. Victoria and major cities are expected to have the highest population growth (including the core age group). The population growth in regional and remote areas is relatively slower than in major cities over the projection period. In line with the first scenario, population growth, especially the age-specific population growth rate, is critical for the FRSP client projections as it provides a clear understanding of the future demand for FRSP service usage.

Victoria will likely experience the most significant impact on client growth. However, overall, the usage of FRSP activities in major cities over the projection period will be considerably affected. A strong positive correlation is also anticipated between population (including core age group) and client growth rates across SA3 areas, reflecting an increased need for service provision, particularly in major cities.

The FRAL is expected to experience the most significant growth in client numbers among FRSP activities. This could be due to the representation of more clients in the core age group 25–49 than individuals in other age groups, the type of services (e.g. information/advice/referral) that the FRAL provides, or a combination of both factors. As noted in chapter 5, the FRAL activity also received the highest score in the client satisfaction domain for its service delivery.

In contrast, RFDR is anticipated to have the least significant growth in client numbers among all the activities under the FRSP. It has been observed that the improvement of client circumstances has subsided somewhat for RFDR activity in recent years, and these outcomes might be attributed to low client growth for this activity over the projection period.

Additionally, the Power BI Dashboard provides a useful tool to support an assessment of whether existing services are positioned well in light of the population growth and composition changes. It also supports planning for future service delivery to areas with greater service needs and to support balance in the geographic distribution of services. This dashboard enables end-users to develop and assess various scenarios to assist decision making for further service delivery.

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