

Mobile Child Protection Unit: Early analysis of a new approach to child protection

This FACSAR Brief presents the findings of an analysis of the performance of the Western NSW Mobile Child Protection Unit (MCPU) in its first year of establishment. The analysis used Family and Community Services (FACS) administrative data to explore factors such as the timeliness of FACS' response to reports of children at Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH), frequency of home visiting, and staffing levels.

Key messages

- The Mobile Child Protection Unit (MCPU) in Western NSW is an example of an innovative response to meeting the needs of at-risk children and young people in remote communities.
- With the introduction of the MCPU in February 2015, investigations of reports of risk of significant harm to a child or young person were conducted more quickly, including high priority reports and reports relating to children under five years old.
- The proportion of high priority reports of risk of significant harm that received a response on the same or next day almost doubled, from 9% to 17%.
- Caseworkers' face-to-face contact with families increased, with the total number of home visits conducted in the area rising more than two-fold, from 459 in 2014 to 1,250 in 2015.
- This initial analysis of administrative data presents some encouraging findings. One limitation is that it is not clear how much of the improvement in responsiveness to reports was due to features of the MCPU model itself, or to other factors. These include an overall increase in the number of caseworkers in the local area and other local and state-wide changes to policies and management practices.
- A more detailed evaluation would provide greater insight into the effectiveness of the MCPU as an approach to child protection in remote NSW.

Introduction

In February 2015, the FACS Western NSW District established a MCPU to address the need for more reliable and consistent child protection responses in remote parts of Western NSW.

The existing child protection service model had not been conducive to supporting families in some remote communities. A number of reports of children and young people at ROSH were not being responded to within the required timeframe, and too few families were receiving home visits from caseworkers. The MCPU aimed to address these issues in the Local Government Areas of Bogan, Bourke, Brewarrina, Cobar, Coonamble and Walgett.

This FACSAR Brief presents the findings of an analysis of the performance of the MCPU in its first year of establishment. The analysis used FACS administrative data to explore factors such as the timeliness of FACS' response to reports of children at ROSH, frequency of home visiting, and staffing levels.

Background

Working with remote communities: FACS Western NSW District

FACS' Western NSW District covers an area that represents around half the land mass of NSW, with one of the smallest district populations. Caseworkers in this district support families in small, remote communities, many of which rank among the 40 most disadvantaged in the state, such as Brewarrina, Lightning Ridge, Walgett and Bourke (Vinson et al, 2015).

Research literature suggests that providing human services in rural settings is associated with some specific challenges, including:

- staff recruitment and retention
- maintaining client confidentiality in small communities
- the blurring of personal and professional boundaries when lives in small, close communities overlap (see Dellemain & Warburton, 2013; Gregory, Green & McLaren, 2008).

A lack of anonymity, for both workers and clients, can lead to workers' concerns for personal safety (Green, Gregory & Mason, 2003) and deter families from seeking help (see Dellemain & Warburton, 2013).

The Western NSW District of FACS has long faced some of these challenges. The district was aware of the difficulties local caseworkers faced balancing the need to be both an enforcer of statutory child protection and a support to families, while living in the same small community. Staff recruitment and retention was a constant challenge. A number of child concern reports were not being responded to within the required timeframes, and too few families were receiving home visits from caseworkers.

To address these issues, FACS developed a new model of service delivery to benefit families in parts of remote NSW. In February 2015 the trial of the MCPU began, with the ultimate goal of increasing children's safety and wellbeing in those areas.

Western NSW Mobile Child Protection Unit

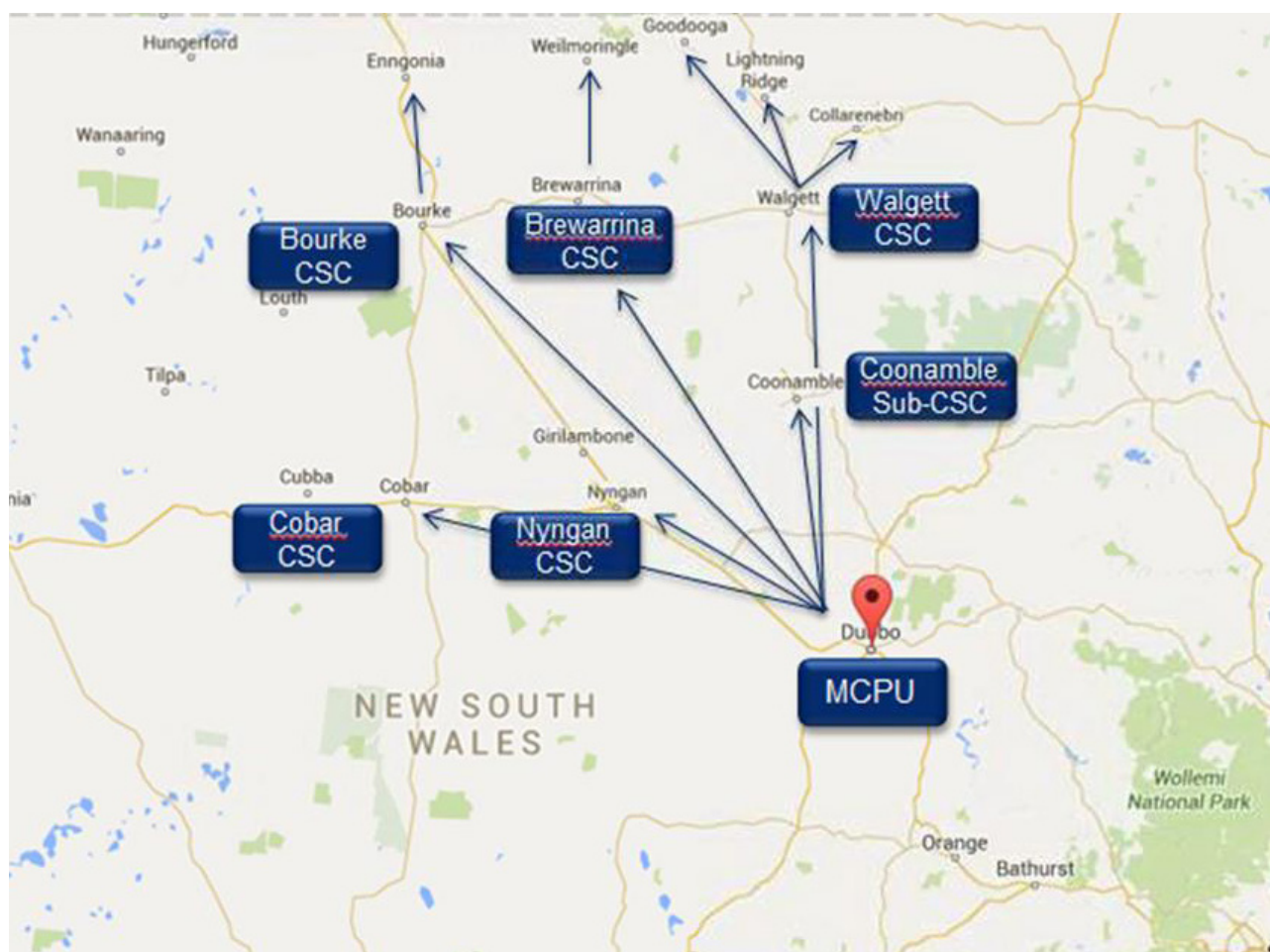
The MCPU aims to:

- Provide a reliable, responsive and consistent child protection service system for the more remote communities of Western NSW.

- Enable a greater number of children reported at risk of significant harm, and their families, to be seen by a caseworker.
- Strengthen working relationships with children, families and communities to achieve better outcomes for children and young people.
- Engage with community to build trust in recognition of the important role that communities play in keeping children safe.

The MCPU is an additional team consisting of six full time caseworkers (at the time of the analysis) and one Manager, supported by casework specialists from FACS' Office of the Senior Practitioner. Based in Dubbo, the MCPU provides a hub-and-spoke model of service to remote communities around the Community Service Centres (CSCs) in Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett, Coonamble, Cobar and Nyngan (referred to in this report as the catchment area) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Mobile Child Protection Unit coverage chart



MCPU caseworkers are dedicated to undertaking initial child protection assessments, enabling local caseworkers to focus on building relationships with children and families.

MCPU caseworkers travel to communities to undertake the initial casework tasks, such as identifying and assessing risk issues, developing strategies to address these, and formulating a case plan with the family. Whilst they continue to work with local caseworkers and interact with the family throughout the assessment phase, they only remain in communities for the time needed to undertake the allocated assessments, case planning and follow up with the local CSC caseworker.

Local caseworkers continue to engage with the families and children to build effective working relationships, and retain the day to day responsibility of supporting the family to reach their identified goals.

Regular joint meetings with MCPU and CSC managers ensure that caseworkers receive practice support and supervision. Casework Specialists also provide ongoing support to both MCPU and local CSC caseworkers in the catchment area through casework assistance, consultation, training and coaching.

Methodology

The purpose of this analysis was to assess the extent to which the MCPU met two of its aims:

- To provide a reliable, responsive and consistent child protection service system for the more remote communities of Western NSW.
- To enable a greater number of children reported at risk of significant harm, and their families, to be seen by a caseworker.

It was beyond the scope of this analysis to explore stakeholder, staff or client views, or client outcomes.

Specifically, the analysis aimed to answer the following questions:

- Did the MCPU improve responsiveness to reports of risk of significant harm, where responsiveness is defined as:
 - proportion of face-to-face investigations (known as Safety and Risk Assessments, or SARA) conducted overall, and completed within two months
 - proportion of <24 hour ROSH reports seen within 24 hours, overall and for children under five years old particularly
 - frequency of home visiting.
- Did the MCPU improve staffing levels?
- Did the MCPU affect levels of reporting of child protection concerns?

The analysis was undertaken using FACS client and staffing datasets. Client data was extracted from the Key Information and Directory System (KiDS) Minimum Dataset for the period 1 April to 31 December in 2014 and 2015. Staff data are a combination of Human Resources (HR) establishment data, staff tenure and leave data, and information about time spent on non-casework activities (1 April to 31 December in 2014 and 2015), obtained from the staff HR system SAP by management in the Western NSW District.

The analysis compared the data in two ways:

- over two time periods: 1 April to 31 December 2014 and 1 April to 31 December 2015 (the MCPU was implemented in February 2015)
- across two casework groups: the catchment and non-catchment areas. The non-catchment area consisted of all CSCs in the Western District that were not supported by the MCPU (see Table 1).

Table 1: Community Services Centres in catchment and non-catchment areas

Catchment area (supported by the MCPU)	Non-catchment area
Bourke CSC	Bathurst CSC
Brewarrina CSC	Condobolin Sub CSC
Cobar CSC	Coonabarabran CSC
Coonamble Sub CSC	Cowra Sub CSC
Nyngan CSC	Dubbo CSC
Nyngan Sub CSC	Mudgee CSC
Walgett CSC	Orange CSC
	Parkes CSC

Limitations of this analysis include:

- The client data may have potential limitations due to missing data, time of completion of data entries, ageing of data, and the availability and reliability of certain fields in the database. Detailed process mapping, with validation by management, was conducted to minimise these issues.
- There may be differences between the catchment and non-catchment areas that impact on their comparability, such as the non-catchment area including the more urbanised centres of Dubbo and Orange.
- The comparison time periods of nine months were relatively short, which means that longer term outcomes could not be assessed.
- The lack of a control group means that results may be impacted by factors other than the MCPU, including changes in policies or management practices in the catchment or non-catchment areas or state-wide.

Findings

Summary of results

Following the establishment of the MCPU in 2015 the timeliness of investigations of ROSH reports improved, including high priority ROSH reports. Caseworkers' face-to-face and at-home contact with families also increased. These results need to be interpreted in the context that there was a drop in the overall number of ROSH reports received between 2014 and 2015 (from 691 to 560 reports), which may also have contributed to improved responsiveness.

The results show:

- The overall proportion of ROSH reports that received a Safety and Risk Assessment remained relatively stable, from 30% of ROSH reports in 2014 to 36% in 2015.
- There was an 83% increase in the proportion of ROSH reports with a Safety and Risk Assessment completed within the required two month timeframe in the catchment area (from 30% to 55%).

- The proportion of high priority ROSH reports (requiring a response within 24 hours) that received a Safety and Risk Assessment in the catchment area increased (from 38% to 47%), with the proportion that were seen within 24 hours nearly doubling (from 9% to 17%).
- The proportion of high priority ROSH reports involving children less than five years old that received a Safety and Risk Assessment in the catchment area increased by 40% (from 50% in 2014 to 70% in 2015). In line with the broader pattern, the proportion of reports for this age group that were seen within 24 hours nearly doubled (from 13% to 23%).
- The total number of home visits in the catchment area increased by 172% following the implementation of the MCPU.
- There was an overall increase in the number of caseworker positions, and available data shows a decrease in the number of children with multiple reports over the analysis period (from 328 to 255).

In interpreting these results, note it is not possible from this analysis to determine the extent to which changes in responsiveness to reports were due to the MCPU model itself, or simply the overall increase in the number of caseworkers in the catchment area.

ROSH reports received in Western NSW

Table 2 shows the number of ROSH reports received in the catchment and non-catchment areas during the analysis periods. The overall number of ROSH reports received in both the catchment and non-catchment areas decreased from 2014 to 2015.

Table 2: Number of ROSH reports received for catchment and non-catchment area by response priority

Response priority	Catchment area			Non-catchment area		
	2014	2015	% change	2014	2015	% change
< 24 hours	178	145	-19%	758	819	8%
< 72 hours	224	174	-22%	1,097	1,044	-5%
< 10 days	289	241	-17%	1,359	1,247	-8%
Total	691	560	-19%	3,214	3,110	-3%

Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

The following sections present the findings for each of the three questions presented in the Methodology. Detailed data tables are provided in Appendix 1.

Did the MCPU improve responsiveness to ROSH reports?

One of the main aims of the MCPU was to improve FACS' initial response to reports of risk of significant harm. The two main components of this were to increase the timeliness and completion of assessments of ROSH reports received.

When a CSC receives a ROSH report they gather more information before contacting the family, to determine whether assessment and investigation is required. This stage is referred to

as report triaging. A report may be closed following triaging for a number of reasons, including:

- no further assessment is required
- further assessment is not possible due to competing priorities
- the matter is referred to another organisation.

After the triage process, it may be decided that further action is needed to assess the child or young person's safety. Caseworkers then carry out a face-to-face investigation of the situation using tools collectively known as the SARA (Safety and Risk Assessment).

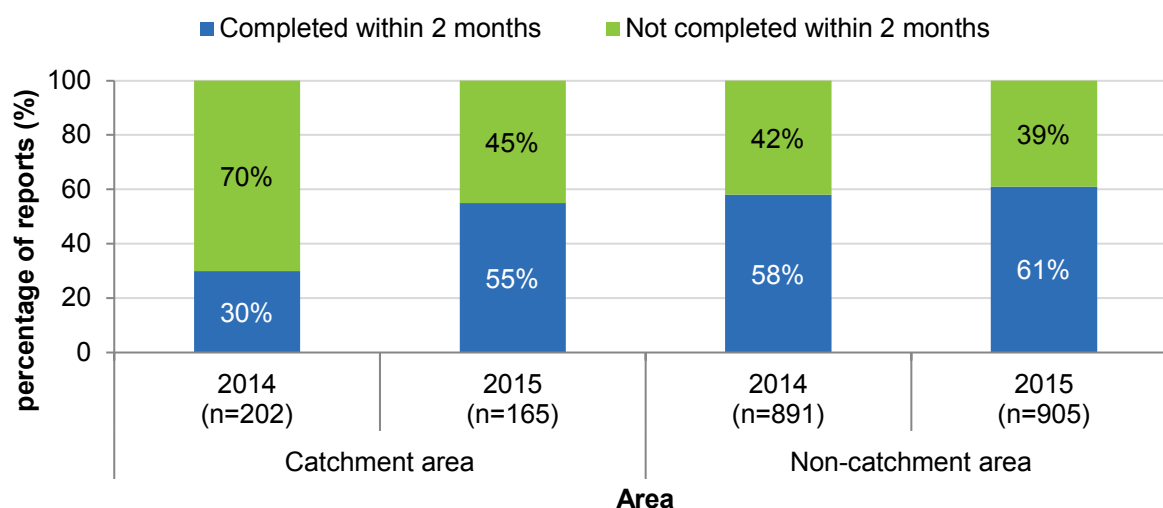
The analysis found the proportion of reports in the catchment area that moved into a Safety and Risk Assessment (completed or ongoing), increased from 30% (212 reports) in 2014 to 36% (207 reports) in 2015, although the overall number of reports was relatively unchanged (Appendix 1 Table 4). There was little change in the proportion of Safety and Risk Assessments that commenced within 30 days of allocation (from 70% or 131 reports to 69% or 118 reports) (Appendix 1 Table 5). More differences were found in the timeliness of investigations being conducted.

Completion of investigations within two months

The MCPU aimed to increase the proportion of Safety and Risk Assessments completed within two months of a report having been allocated for further investigation.

Following the establishment of the MCPU, the proportion of reports with a Safety and Risk Assessment completed within the two month timeframe in the catchment area increased by 83% (from 30% or 61 reports to 55% or 91 reports). The increase in the non-catchment area was 5% (although from a higher base of 58%). As a result, the gap between the two areas reduced to just six percentage points in 2015 (see Figure 2).

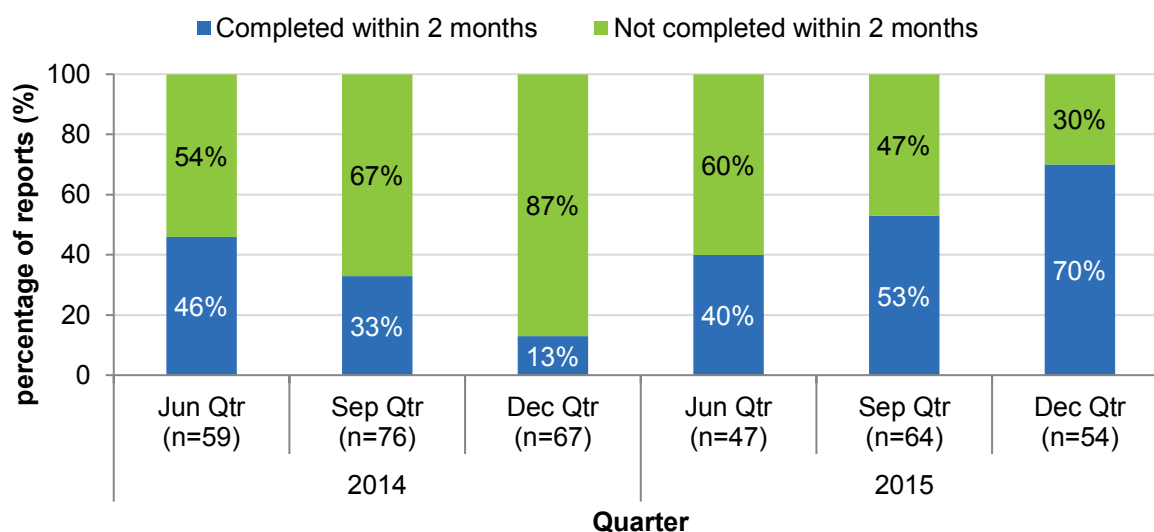
Figure 2: Proportion of reports with a Safety and Risk Assessment completed within two months, in the catchment and non-catchment area



Source: FACS KiDS Data, CIW

Figure 3 below shows there was a steady decline in the proportion of reports with a Safety and Risk Assessment completed within two months in the catchment area in the period before the MCPU. With the MCPU in operation from February 2015 this was reversed, and the proportion of Safety and Risk Assessments completed on time steadily increased.

Figure 3: Proportion of reports with a Safety and Risk Assessment completed in two months, in the catchment area by quarter



Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

ROSH reports requiring a 24 hour response

Some ROSH reports are prioritised for the CSC to conduct an investigation within 24 hours of receiving the report. The MCPU aimed to increase the number of Safety and Risk Assessments conducted in response to these reports, and to increase the speed of response.

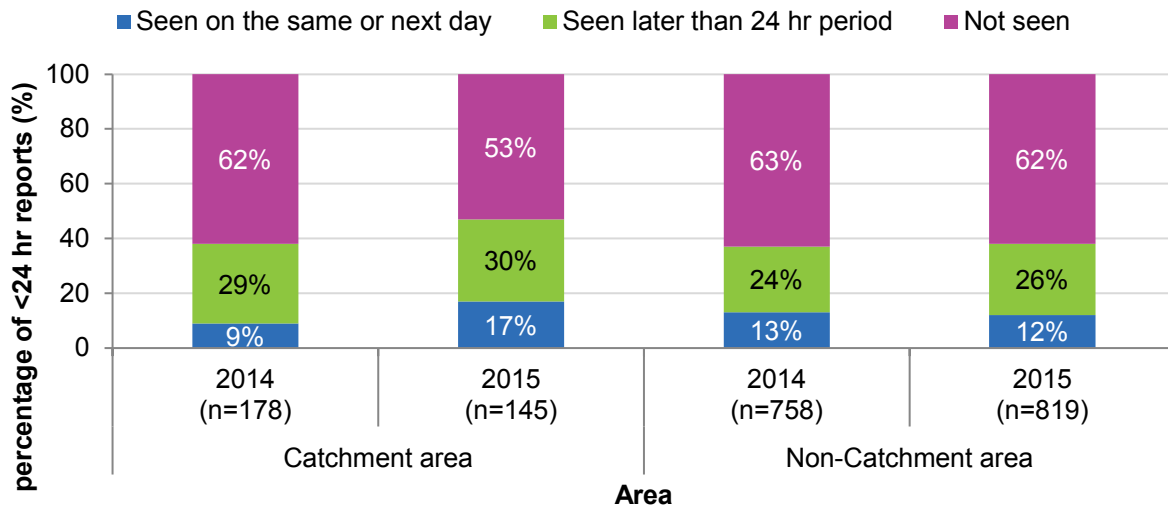
This analysis found, with the MCPU in operation:

- the proportion of <24 hour reports that received a Safety and Risk Assessment on the same or next day in the catchment area increased, from 9% (16 reports) in 2014 to 17% (25 reports) in 2015
- there was a decrease in the proportion of <24 hour reports with no Safety and Risk Assessment in the catchment area, from 62% (111 reports) to 53% (77 reports) (see Figure 4).

There was relatively little change in the response to <24 hour ROSH reports in the non-catchment area, where:

- the proportion of <24 hour reports with a Safety and Risk Assessment conducted on the same or next day was 13% in 2014 (98 reports) and 12% in 2015 (102 reports),
- the proportion of <24 hour reports with no Safety and Risk Assessment was 63% (479 reports) and 62% (504 reports) respectively (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Proportion of <24 hour ROSH reports seen on the same or next day in the catchment and non-catchment area



Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

The MCPU aimed to improve the response to high priority reports of risk of significant harm to children aged below five years old.

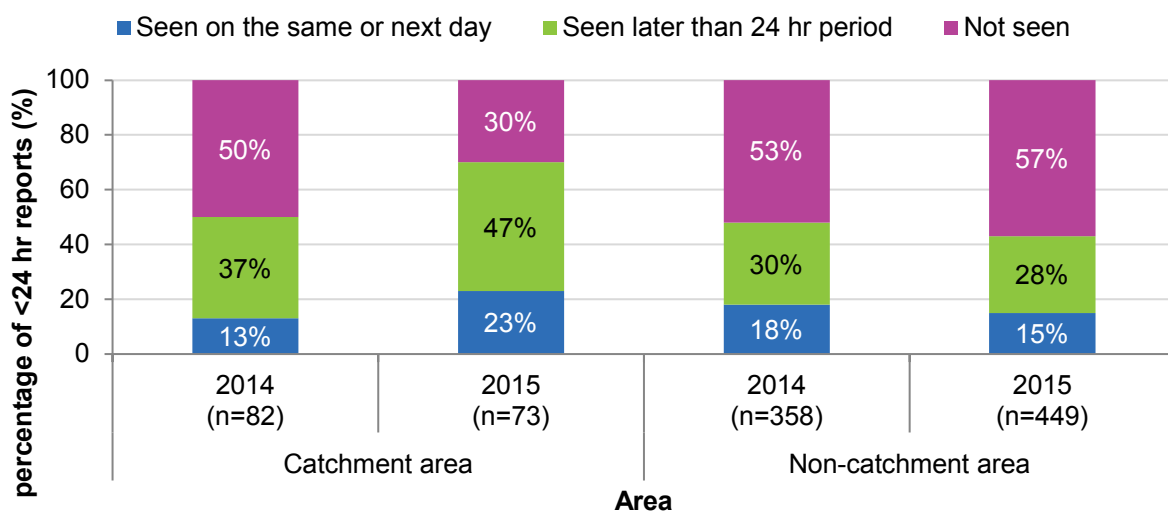
This analysis found that for children under five years old, with the MCPU in operation:

- the proportion of <24 hour reports in the catchment area that were seen on the same or next day increased from 13% (11 reports) in 2014 to 23% (17 reports) in 2015
- there was a decrease in the proportion of <24 hour reports with no Safety and Risk Assessment in the catchment area, from 50% (41 reports) to 30% (22 reports)(see Figure 5).

In the non-catchment area, there was relatively little change in the response to <24 hour ROSH reports for children under five years old:

- the proportion of <24 hour reports for children under five years old that were seen on the same or next day, was 18% (63 reports) in 2014 and 15% (69 reports) in 2015
- the proportion of reports with no Safety and Risk Assessment, was 53% in 2014 and 57% in 2015 (189 reports respectively) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Proportion of <24 hour ROSH reports with children below five years, seen on the same or next day in the catchment and non-catchment area



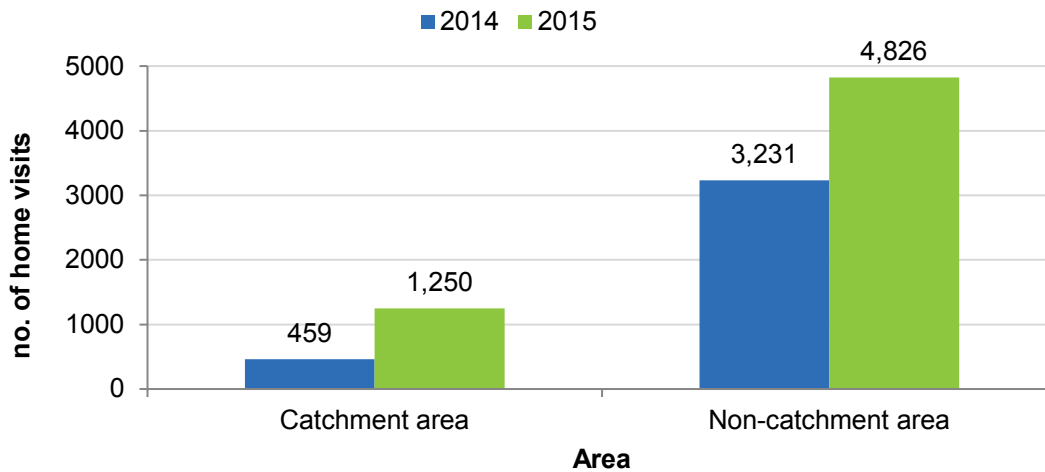
Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Rates of home visiting

The MCPU aimed to increase the extent to which caseworkers visit families at home.

Across the analysis period, the total number of home visits increased in both the catchment and non-catchment areas. With the introduction of the MCPU, the number of home visits completed in the catchment area more than doubled, from 459 in 2014 to 1,250 in 2015 (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Number of home visits, in the catchment and non-catchment area

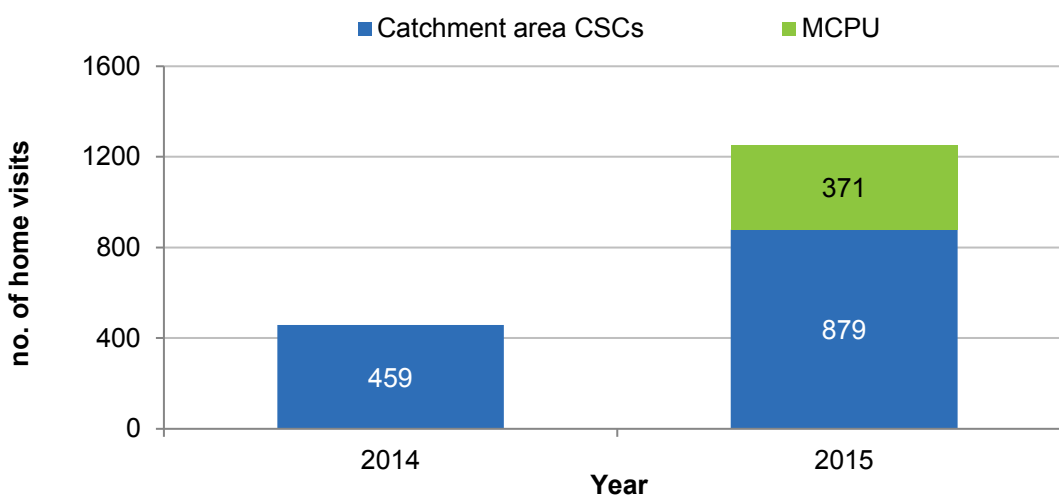


Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

The increase in both areas is possibly due to a strong management focus on home visits throughout the district, and the introduction of a quarterly caseworker performance dashboard that increased the visibility of home visits. However, the higher increase in the catchment area compared to the non-catchment area (172% increase compared to 49% increase) is likely to be due at least in part to the creation of the MCPU, and extra staffing.

The increase in home visits in the catchment area consisted of an increase in the number of home visits made by local caseworkers, as well as the additional home visits made by the MCPU. As shown in Figure 7, the number of home visits by local caseworkers alone (without MCPU) almost doubled, from 459 to 879.

Figure 7: Number of home visits by catchment area CSCs and MCPU

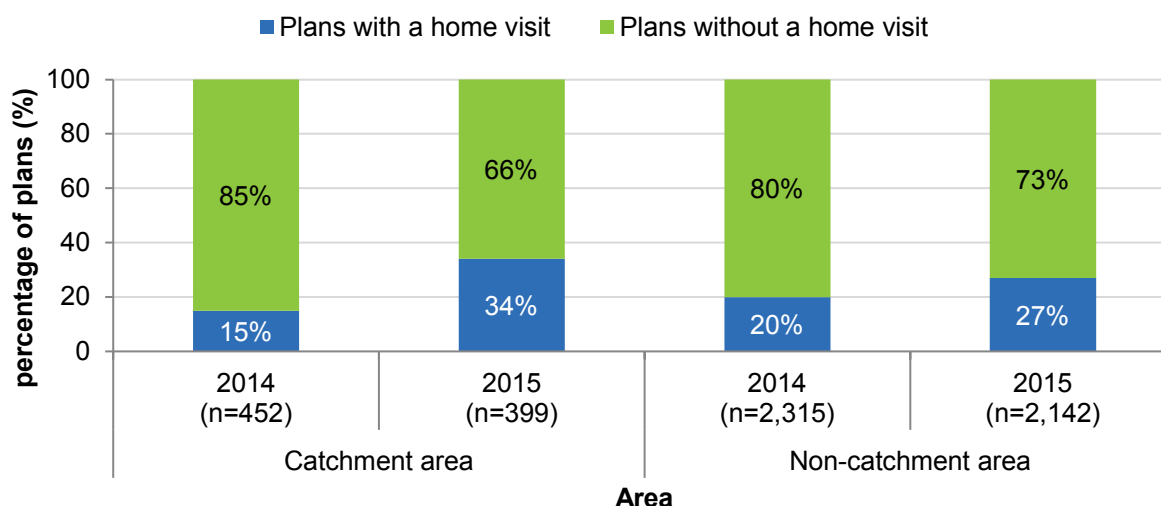


Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

There was an increase in the number of case plans with at least one home visit following the implementation of the MCPU. In 2014, 15% of the case plans in the catchment area involved a home visit, below the rate for the non-catchment area (20%) (see Figure 8). Following the implementation of the MCPU, the rate of home visits in the catchment area increased to 34%, higher than the rate in the non-catchment area (27%).

For case plans that received a home visit, the average number of home visits per plan also increased in both the catchment and non-catchment areas. Between 2014 and 2015, the average number of home visits per plan grew from 7 to 9 visits per plan in the catchment area and from 7 to 8 visits per plan in the non-catchment area (Appendix 1 Table 11).

Figure 8: Proportion of plans with a home visit, for catchment and non catchment area



Source: FACS KiDS Data, CIW

Did the MCPU improve staffing levels?

The total average number of occupied caseworker positions across the MCPU and CSCs in the catchment area increased over the analysis period, from 18 to 26. This increase consisted of:

- six new caseworker positions created in the MCPU
- one new local caseworker position created in a CSC
- one additional vacant caseworker position filled in a CSC.

Table 3: Average no. of occupied and vacant position in the catchment area

Positions	2014	2015		
		Local CSCs	MCPU	Total
Occupied	18	20	6	26
Vacant	4	3	6	9
Total	22	23	12	35

Source: FACS HR SAP data

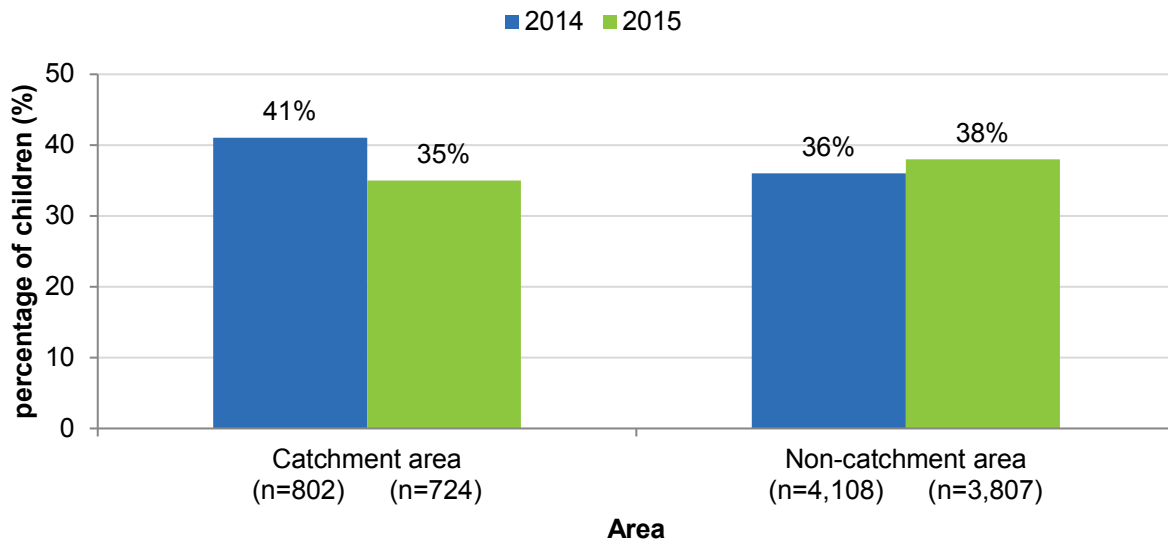
Did the MCPU affect levels of reporting of child protection concerns?

The period of analysis (nine months) did not allow for re-reporting to be used as a measure of effectiveness of services, as this is defined by a minimum 12 month period between reports. The alternative was to explore the number of children with multiple reports in the period of

analysis. This measure should be treated with caution as reports can be raised multiple times for the same incident.

The proportion of children reported multiple times in the catchment area during the period of analysis dropped from 41% (328 children) in 2014 to 35% (255 children) in 2015 (Figure 9). The proportion of children with multiple reports in the non-catchment area remained relatively stable at 36% (1,486 children) in 2014 and 38% (1,439 children) in 2015.

Figure 9: Proportion of children with multiple reports, catchment and non-catchment area



Source: FACS KiDS Data, CIW

Conclusion

The MCPU in Western NSW District is an example of an innovative response to meeting the needs of at-risk children and young people in remote communities. This initial analysis of administrative data suggests it shows promise as an approach to child protection in remote NSW. The introduction of the MCPU saw improved timeliness of assessments of ROSH reports and an increase in caseworkers' face-to-face contact with families.

A more detailed evaluation, conducted over a longer period of time and using mixed evaluation methods, would give greater insight into the impact of the MCPU on child protection and staffing outcomes in the area. Future evaluation options may include exploring client engagement, staff outcomes, and a comparison group that consists of remote areas with similar demographic profiles to the catchment area.

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Produced by:

Rojith De Silva, Daniel Neylan and Kate Spalding

FACS Analysis and Research

223-239 Liverpool Rd, Ashfield NSW 2131

www.facs.nsw.gov.au

Email: facsar@facs.nsw.gov.au

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Appendix 1: Detailed data tables

Table 4: Reports by outcome status in the catchment and non-catchment area

Outcome status	Catchment area				Non-catchment area			
	2014		2015		2014		2015	
	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)
Safety and Risk Assessment - Completed	210	30%	172	30%	954	29%	946	29%
Safety and Risk Assessment - Ongoing	2	0%	35	6%	9	0%	67	2%
Closed without completing Safety and Risk Assessment	493	70%	371	64%	2,359	71%	2,204	69%
Total	705	100%	578	100%	3,322	100%	3,217	100%

Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Table 5: Reports with a Safety and Risk Assessment by commencement timeframes in the catchment and non-catchment area

Safety and Risk Assessment commenced within 30 days	Catchment area				Non-catchment area			
	2014		2015		2014		2015	
	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)
Commenced within 30 days	131	70%	118	69%	643	80%	668	81%
Commenced after 30 days	56	30%	54	31%	158	20%	158	19%
Total	187	100%	172	100%	801	100%	826	100%

Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Table 6: Reports with a Safety and Risk Assessment completed and completion timeframes in the catchment and non-catchment area

Safety and Risk Assessment completed within 2 months	Catchment area				Non-catchment area			
	2014		2015		2014		2015	
	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)
Completed within 2 months	61	30%	91	55%	518	58%	548	61%
Not completed within 2 months	141	70%	74	45%	373	42%	357	39%
Total	202	100%	165	100%	891	100%	905	100%

Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Table 7: <24 hour ROSH reports seen on the same or next day in the catchment and non-catchment area

<24 hour ROSH reports	Catchment area				Non-catchment area			
	2014		2015		2014		2015	
	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)
Seen on the same or next day	16	9%	25	17%	98	13%	102	12%
Not seen on the same or next day	51	29%	43	30%	181	24%	213	26%
No Safety and Risk Assessment	111	62%	77	53%	479	63%	504	62%
Total	178	100%	145	100%	758	100%	819	100%

Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Table 8: <24 hour ROSH reports with children below 5 years seen on the same or next day in the catchment and non-catchment area

<24 hour ROSH reports below 5 years	Catchment area				Non-catchment area			
	2014		2015		2014		2015	
	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)
Seen on the same or next day	11	13%	17	23%	63	18%	69	15%
Not seen on the same or next day	30	37%	34	47%	106	30%	125	28%
No Safety and Risk Assessment	41	50%	22	30%	189	53%	255	57%
Total	82	100%	73	100%	358	100%	449	100%

Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Table 9: Number of home visits in the catchment and non-catchment area

Area	2014	2015	% Change
Catchment area	459	1,250	172%
Non-catchment area	3,231	4,826	49%
Total Home Visits	3,690	6,076	65%

Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Table 10: Case plans with a home visit in the catchment and non-catchment area

Case plans	Catchment area				Non-catchment area			
	2014		2015		2014		2015	
	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)	Number (#)	Per cent (%)
Plans with a home visit	68	15%	136	34%	463	20%	576	27%
Plans without a home visit	384	85%	263	66%	1,852	80%	1,566	73%
Total	452	100%	399	100%	2,315	100%	2,142	100%

Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Table 11: Average number of home visits per case plan with a home visit in the catchment and non-catchment area

Area	2014	2015
Catchment area	7	9
Non-catchment area	7	8

Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW

Table 12: Proportion of children with multiple reports, in the catchment and non-catchment area

Proportion of Children with multiple reports	2014			2015		
	Children with multiple reports	Children in reports	% of Children with multiple reports	Children with multiple reports	Children in reports	% of Children with multiple reports
Catchment area	328	802	41%	255	724	35%
Non-catchment area	1,486	4,108	36%	1,439	3,807	38%

Source: FACS KIDS Data, CIW