Are you an individual or making a submission on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

Organisation name

Autism Spectrum Australia

Position

Director Individual and Community Services

Is your organisation....?

- A peak-body
- A provider currently funded under one or more of the 5 programs in scope for this consultation

What type of service or support do you mostly provide?

- Prevention or early intervention services

What state or territory does your organisation deliver services and supports in?

- New South Wales
- Victoria
- Queensland
- South Australia
- Tasmania
- Northern Territory
- Australian Capital Territory

Where does your organisation deliver most of their services and supports?

Major city

1. Does the new vision reflect what we all want for children and families?

Yes, the vision to create a simpler and more co-ordinated program that allows for flexibility to meet local needs and to react to specific challenges, with less

bureaucracy and longer-term funding agreements is welcome and will support "every child and every family having access to the tools they need to lead healthier, happier lives".

We believe it is important that the vision and outcomes also fit well with vision of National Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 - "All children in Australia thrive in their early years" and have the opportunity to reach their full potential "when nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities".

The vision also aligns well with the recently released (DSS commissioned) National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention. The goal articulated in that important piece of work is the make sure "All children with developmental concerns, delay or disability, and their families thrive in their early years".

2. Are the two main outcomes what we should be working towards for children and families? Why/Why not? - Outcome 1: Parents and caregivers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children - Outcome 2: Children are supported to grow into healthy, resilient adults.

Yes, the two main outcomes are simply worded but capture the outcomes that we should be working towards, while allowing for flexibility of design and delivery.

Again, the links to the National Best Practice Framework for Early Intervention are clear and well aligned and this is important as we strive to create connected and coordinated supports.

Goals of the National Best Practice Framework for Early Intervention

For children
We aim to build on what children are good at and what they enjoy. We want to help them learn, grow, and join in daily activities.

For parents, carers and families
We aim to respect different cultures and family values. We want to help families feel confident and skilled in supporting their children.

For communities
We aim to create places that are safe, friendly, and welcoming. We want communities to support all children and families.

For services and practitioners
We aim to build strong networks that work together. We want services to be easy to access, well organised, and part of everyday life. The clear linkages ensure that the resources developed for the framework will be useful for providers delivering programs under the new approach.

3. Will a single national program provide more flexibility for your organisation?

Yes, a single national program will provide more flexibility for our organisation and allow us to replicate our successful Building Capabilities program and tailor it to new communities. It will ensure that we can utilise resources efficiently and reduce the level of management by more efficient reporting processes.

It will also ensure that we are able to adjust our service delivery model over time to meet changing needs in a community while still working towards clear outcomes.

4. Does the service or activity you deliver fit within one of the three funding streams? Do these streams reflect what children and families in your community need now – and what they might need in the future?

Yes, the current service we offer fits within funding stream 2 but has potential to develop into services across the other activity streams, or for us to develop relationships with others providing those supports.

5. Are there other changes we could make to the program to help your organisation or community overcome current challenges?

Aspect believes that the flexibility outlined in the program changes would overcome most of the current challenges in the program. We were providing supports in a region impacted by significant flooding events, and while we had support of the program manager to make some changes, it would have been good to make further adjustments to the timing of our supports and the geographical region to ensure that we could be as responsive as possible to the community. It is always difficult to predict the challenges a specific community will face during a funding period, so flexibility will ensure that funding is utilised to have maximum impact.

6. Do you agree that the four priorities listed on Page 4 are right areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families?

Yes, we agree with the four priorities listed. We do believe that connected, co-located and integrated services can take time to develop, and sometimes these

relationships and the trust required to work well together, do take time. We believe that organisations should be committed to working collaboratively and in connected ways, but do not think that is always possible before a program begins. During the course of a program, new relationships and connections develop which may not even be foreseen before programs start.

7. Are there any other priorities or issues you think the department should be focusing on?

It would be good to understand if there is an aim to have supports delivered in all communities or in communities where there is the most need. It can be easy for programs to be established in metropolitan areas, but it is important that our most vulnerable and disadvantaged families receive the support that they need, no matter where they live.

It will be important to map where there may be few supports due to workforce shortages or other challenges which might encourage providers to develop programs to meet needs for those communities. In these situations, it will be essential that providers are able to demonstrate how they would develop strong and sustainable connections within the community.

8. Do the proposed focus areas – like supporting families at risk of child protection involvement and young parents match the needs or priorities of your service?

We support some young parents and those at risk of child protection issues but also support families where both parents are working and are struggling to access, or fund, appropriate care, or where they really require support to understand how to support their young children to develop and thrive. This may be due to a variety of factors including lack of positive parenting models themselves, lack of understanding of how they can support their child, lack of resources and lack of community connections.

9. Are there other groups in your community, or different approaches, that you think the department should consider to better support family wellbeing?

We believe it is important to also meet the needs of children where parents are working and we have had success supporting family day-care providers and long-day care providers to identify and support young children who need additional support to develop play, communication and social engagement. By offering supports to both the families and the care providers we have seen very positive outcomes and help connect the family with the service in positive ways.

There is also a growing need to support grandparents who may be taking on key caring roles for their grandchildren and who require additional supports to maximise their grandchild's development.

We believe that inclusion in mainstream supports should be available to all young children and families, we are aware that not all supports are welcoming or inclusive and this is often because providers are not confident and supported to understand the needs of particular children or populations. With additional supports, we believe that communities can be supported to include all children and families.

10. What are other effective ways, beyond co-location, that you've seen work well to connect and coordinate services for families?

Sometimes co-location is not always a viable option. Many of our staff are itinerant and do not have an office base and this allows them the flexibility of working across a range of home and community settings which can be much more appropriate than asking families to travel to a central point. It may not be the best use of funding for a provider to invest in a physical location or office. The impact of supporting children and families in everyday settings is being increasingly recognised as best practice. Visibility and connection in the community is important as is investing time to develop and maintain relationships across the sector.

Supports can also be provided by staff with experience and skill who do not live in the community but in these situations, it is important to have a commitment to regularly visit and to develop networks within the community. For regional and remote areas, it is not financially viable to always have physical location, but regular and consistent face-to-face engagement is important. It is also important to map the connections of each family and look at gaps and key community groups where key relationships can be developed. It is also vital to be able to map and understand all the different types of supports offered in the community.

11. What would you highlight in a grant application to demonstrate a service is connected to the community it serves? What should applicants be assessed on?

It will be important to be able to assess the organisation's ability and willingness to develop connections in the community – not that they are already have in place, if it will be a new program as this will limit opportunities in communities that do not have many existing services. It will be important for organisations to have a track

record of working in ways that develop the skills of others and fill gaps where there are no supports or limited workforce.

12. Beyond locational disadvantage, what other factors should the department consider to make sure funding reflects the needs of communities?

Workforce shortages and programs that develop local capacity are also important factors to consider. Even with 5 years of funding, it is important that programs are designed in ways that build in sustainability or reduce need over time. Needs can change dramatically over time especially with natural disasters, economic pressures and changing demographics. Flexibility of program design and programs that can evolve and adapt should be favourably considered.

13. What's the best way for organisations to show in grant applications, that their service is genuinely meeting the needs of the community?

It is hoped that organisations should be able to demonstrate the steps that they will take to meet the needs of the community and not necessarily that they have done so in this particular community as this will mean that some regional and remote areas will continue to not be able to access supports. As an organisation that has built relationships in regional areas, we believe that there are some models that work well where local staff are supported by visiting team members. This allows expertise and resources to be shared effectively, while maintaining a strong local presence and understanding of community priorities.

14. How could the grant process be designed to support and increase the number of ACCOs delivering services to children and families?

We believe sharing examples/case studies of successful programs delivered by ACCOs or other providers in ways that could be replicated by ACCOs will be a good way of supporting an increase in the number of ACCOs delivering services. It will be important to help them understand that they will have support from Funding Managers and great if they can access this from First Nations staff. Support to pull together applications and work plans will also be important especially for new providers.

15. What else should be built into the program design to help improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?

There can be some reluctance for individuals to have their data on DSS Data Exchange so it will be important to provide information about how this data is used and perhaps allow for individual data to be added in ways that relates to an

individual but does not directly identify them.

Being able to look at outcomes that are at the community level will also be important. When we understand that there can be generations of disadvantage and trauma for some communities, it helps put into perspective that some changes will take a long time to become evident. While we can see some short-term positive outcomes, we need to ensure that some outcomes will be long-term.

16. What types of data would help your organisation better understand its impact and continuously improve its services?

A range of data will help us understand the impact of the programs we provide. It will be important to look at outcomes for children, families, and the local community as well as reviewing feedback from practitioners and understanding the impact on the organisation.

While measures of child outcomes will be important, we will want to capture the "voice" of the child and their family and support network. We are interested in short- and longer-term outcomes. A focus on creating resilient children and resilient adults ensures that gains can be sustained and built on over time. We are wanting to review not only what we are achieving but how we are doing it – and building the capacity in communities is key.

While individual outcome data will continue to be an important element, being able to share the information, celebrate achievements and learn from the work we do, will all contribute to ongoing development of best-practice supports.

17. What kinds of data or information would be most valuable for you to share, to show how your service is positively impacting children and families?

Case-studies or photovoice examples can be very powerful to share and celebrate success – not only for the people involved but also with the community, funders and other providers. The voices of those who have benefitted from the program provide powerful messages of positive growth, changing trajectories and the impact of connected supports.

Tracking data over time, being able to check in on people after they have moved on from the program and capturing and sharing satisfaction results will all be important elements to build into program evaluation.

It is important that young children and families have a voice and agency when both

developing, implementing and evaluating programs. Providers need to be able to demonstrate how they are doing this, how they are accessing lived experience in their program design and review and how they are utilising reflective practice to continually shape their programs.

It is important to be monitoring outcomes for children, families, communities and providers. This will ensure not only that children and families benefit but that programs are sustainable and lead to societal changes. There needs to be an understanding that some data and trends will not be visible in annual reporting but will show positive trajectory over time.

18. If your organisation currently reports in the Data Exchange (DEX), what SCORE Circumstances domain is most relevant to the service you deliver?

For our service, the most relevant SCORE Circumstances domain depends on who is being supported. 'Age-appropriate development' is most relevant for children, as our focus is on fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment that builds on each child's strengths and interests, supporting growth in their social, emotional, and cognitive development, which in turn promotes their overall wellbeing.

'Education and skills training' are most relevant for educators as our service strengthens their knowledge, confidence, and skills to support children's foundational capabilities and overall development. Together, these domains reflect how inclusive, evidence-informed practices benefit both children and the adults who support them.

19. What kinds of templates or guidance would help you prepare strong case studies that show the impact of your service?

It would be great to have access to a range of templates, including prompts or guiding questions, that help providers clearly and consistently demonstrate the impact of their services. It will be important to understand how the Department of Social Services may want to use outcome data to ensure this was captured and shared in the most appropriate way and with the right consents. Guidelines around confidentiality and the use of case-studies/photovoice will be important as specific consents would be needed depending on the potential audience.

It is important to provide opportunities to share case-studies in a variety of ways. We believe that photovoice examples can be powerful as the voice of the people is supported by visual supports. There are also examples of Talking Mats being used

in planning and review of supports to ensure that the "voice" of those involved can be captured.

Video and auditory recordings may be more accessible for some than reading reports or written case studies.

20. What does a relational contracting approach mean to you in practice? What criteria would you like to see included in a relational contract?

We are excited to see the option of relational contracting which would build on the positive support we have experienced when interacting with our funding manager. We have always appreciated being able to discuss our program, but it has been frustrating at times to not have flexibility to adapt the program design to achieve the stated goals and outcomes.

It will be important to have clear outcomes documented and the expectation that changes to program design will also be documented and rationale provided for changes to ensure that the program and activities are still evidence-based and meet the identified needs of the participants and community.

We would welcome any further guidance on what the contract itself would look like and how the "relational" part would work. We would continue to value input and discussion from the Department through regular contract management discussion and see this as a crucial part of the successful relational contracting.

It is unclear if the intensity of activities could be varied throughout the contract as we could see this as beneficial – some programs can take time to develop, including building relationships, referral pathways etc, with more intensive service delivery and then a transition phase towards the end of a funding period. Some supports also develop and change over time as capacity is built in the community, other gaps can be exposed, and it will be important to understand the amount of flexibility that could be approved and the mechanisms for ensuring that the changes are approved by the funder.

21. What's the best way for the department to decide which organisations should be offered a relational contract?

It may be appropriate to only offer relational contracting to an organisation that has a track record of successful delivery of outcomes for DSS or other funders, bringing on new providers with the traditions contracting for at least an agreed initial period.

22. Is your organisation interested in a relational contracting approach? Why/why not?

Yes, we see this as a positive step forward that will benefit children, families, communities, funders, and providers alike. Our organisation maintains strong relationships within the local community and actively fosters connections. This close engagement also enables us to stay informed and to further best support the families and communities we serve. It ensures we remain aware of local needs, can respond to emerging gaps, and can adapt our programs to achieve meaningful, lasting outcomes.

23. Is there anything else you think the department should understand or consider about this proposed approach?

One consideration is that some participants may not be comfortable having their personal information, such as names and addresses, included in this system. We have found this to be a fairly common concern. While it is important for the Department to understand a program's reach and the outcomes achieved— particularly in supporting children who have a disability, are from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, are disadvantaged, and across different age groups—this could be captured using de-identified or aggregated information, such as age, suburb, or status. Collecting data in this way would allow the Department to monitor program reach, equity, and outcomes while respecting participant privacy and consent.