



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

A new approach to programs for families and children

Consultation Summary



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Consultation Summary

The Australian Government is asking for feedback on proposed changes to programs for families and children.

We propose creating a single national program to support children and families. It will replace these five existing Australian Government programs:

- Children and Parenting Support (CaPS)
- Communities for Children Facilitating Partners (CfC FP)
- Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS)
- Family and Relationship Services (FaRS)
- Specialised Family Violence Services (SFVS)

This reform is about making sure every child and every family has access to the tools they need to lead healthier, more resilient lives.

More details are available on [DSS Engage](#).

The proposal has been shaped by feedback from previous consultations. This document summarises what we heard and is divided into two parts:

- [Part 1](#) – key findings from the most recent consultation (late 2024 to early 2025) on programs for children, young people and families.
- [Part 2](#) – key findings from earlier consultations conducted since 2022 on the community sector and government priorities.



What we heard across the two processes

- Programs need to respond to local communities.
- Local needs should be determined through shared decision making.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations need greater resourcing.
- Programs should be adaptable, integrated, and funded over longer periods.
- Workforce development is critical to reliable and broad service delivery.
- Resources should be balanced towards prevention and early intervention.
- Service offerings should be integrated, and provide referral pathways to appropriate supports.
- Grants administration is time consuming and fragmented.



Part 1: Consultation conducted in late 2024 on Children, Young People and Parents Programs

Between late 2024 and early 2025, the Department of Social Services (the department) ran a three-month consultation on three programs that support children, young people, and parents: Children and Parenting Support (CaPS), Communities for Children Facilitating Partners (CfC FP), and Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS). The consultation explored what's working well in these programs, as well as the challenges services face in delivering them.

The department heard from a wide range of people across the community:

- 477 representatives from community organisations and experts shared their views through surveys and interviews.
- 3,545 parents and carers took part in surveys, interviews, and focus groups.
- 277 people joined 18 information sessions, held both in person and online.
- 112 individuals responded to a public [discussion paper](#).

Below is a summary of the key findings.

Key findings

Inclusive, flexible and accessible program design and service delivery

Across all responses there was a clear message: services offered under the three programs need to be more inclusive, flexible, and accessible, to better meet community needs. Respondents highlighted that some families – such as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families, First Nations families, and families and children with disability – may require more tailored support to access and safely participate in services and programs.

Many responses told us that the way programs are designed needs to change so that service providers can better support families – especially CALD and First Nations families.

They called for services to be more trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and responsive to different needs. Suggestions included:

- Building a more diverse and skilled workforce.
- Developing a better understanding of different parenting styles and cultural practices.
- Providing resources and services in multiple languages.

There was also strong support for designing and delivering programs with communities through community-led approaches and co-design.



*“Parents and carers say they want to know that no matter their needs, there is support available.”
– Current service provider (VIC)*

“Cultural safety must be embedded across all programs – one-off training or single points of professional development [are] not sufficient.” – Current service provider (NSW)

Many people highlighted the important role that fathers play in supporting their children’s wellbeing when they are actively involved and empowered. To help more fathers take part in parenting programs, respondents suggested making programs more flexible and accessible – for example, by offering sessions on weekends or after hours, and creating welcoming, low-pressure ways for fathers to get involved.

There was also strong support for public awareness campaigns to challenge outdated gender roles and reduce the stigma around fathers seeking support. Respondents emphasised that staff need the right training and resources to confidently engage with male caregivers, and that building a more diverse and culturally competent workforce would help make services more inclusive.

“To strengthen the community sector further, [...] children, youth, and parenting programs should consider additional changes that enhance inclusivity, collaboration, and engagement, with a particular emphasis on involving fathers as equal partners in parenting. Fathers play a critical role in family cohesion and child development, and their inclusion can amplify the effectiveness of community-based programs.” – Current service provider (National)

Some people shared that LGBTIQ+ families often don’t feel comfortable accessing services. They said services need to be more welcoming and inclusive of different family structures, and that families should feel safe, supported, and respected when seeking help.

Suggestions included creating targeted programs specifically designed for LGBTIQ+ families and making sure these programs are delivered in ways that reflect their lived experiences. Respondents also emphasised the importance of involving LGBTIQ+ people in co-design so services are shaped by the communities they’re meant to support.

Some respondents shared that certain vulnerable groups, such as Care Leavers and victim survivors, may need more tailored and individualised support. They also stressed the importance of collecting data in ways that make people feel safe, respected, and supported.



Many responses highlighted that children, young people, and families with disability are not getting enough support to access and participate in programs. People suggested making physical spaces more accessible, partnering more closely with Disability Representative Organisations, and providing staff with training to better understand and meet the needs of people with disability.

There were also calls for stigma-reducing campaigns and for services to include Auslan as part of their delivery. Specific ideas for supporting children and young people with disability included offering whole-of-family and sibling supports, peer-led outreach programs, and structured play-based programs that are inclusive and engaging.

Better outcomes for First Nations families, children and young people

The discussion paper pointed out that only a small number of services funded under the three programs are currently delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ACCOs)¹. Many respondents said this needs to change.

They emphasised the importance of increasing the role of ACCOs to improve outcomes for First Nations children, young people, and families. This aligns with the government's commitment to Priority Reform 2: Building the Community Controlled Sector, under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Respondents suggested increasing funding for ACCOs to deliver services, transitioning services from mainstream providers to ACCOs, and supporting ACCOs through co-design, training opportunities, and ACCO-led research.

They also noted that shifting services to ACCOs may require additional support – such as help to set up new programs and manage changes to staffing and workloads – to ensure a smooth and sustainable transition.

“It would be essential to provide co-designed resources for non-Aboriginal organisations to collaborate authentically, ensuring that the cultural burden does not fall solely on ACCOs and First Nations people.” – Current service provider (SA)

Many submissions commented that First Nations families often find current services inaccessible or not inclusive. A strong theme across responses was the need for genuine shared decision-making – embedding First Nations voices at every stage of the program lifecycle.

¹ The National Agreement on Closing the Gap defines an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisation as one that delivers services, including land and resource management, that builds the strength and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people and is: a) incorporated under relevant legislation and not-for-profit; b) controlled and operated by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people; c) connected to the community, or communities, in which they deliver the services; and d) governed by a majority Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander governing body.



People said this is essential for improving outcomes for First Nations children, young people and families, and for supporting progress on Closing the Gap reforms.

Respondents explained that shared decision-making would also help improve accountability, by allowing better scrutiny of how both ACCO and non-ACCO providers are performing. This would make it easier to see whether programs are meeting the needs of First Nations families, and where providers might need extra support.

To help non-ACCO providers improve, submissions suggested creating more roles offering cultural competency training and building holistic, wraparound systems that combine targeted programs, strong partnerships and effective referral pathways.

While shared decision-making was most strongly recommended for First Nations communities, many respondents also supported using this approach to strengthen outcomes for non-First Nations families.

“For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, support services delivered by ACCOs are most effective, as these organisations employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, are accountable to their local communities and deliver culturally safe services that address families’ holistic needs.” – Peak body ACCO (National)

“While all organisations should improve their cultural awareness and culturally trauma-informed understandings, the Aboriginal community needs access to more organisations run by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people, as this will always provide the highest quality and culturally appropriate service.” – Current service provider ACCO

Program design driven by evidence and the voices of families, children and young people

Many people said that services should be available to all children and young people aged 0 to 18, and should focus on early intervention and prevention, using approaches that are backed by evidence.

Service providers shared that they’re seeing more clients in crisis or with complex needs, which has made it harder to focus on early support. Despite this, most agreed that prioritising early intervention is essential to help break the cycle of disadvantage.

To make this happen, respondents suggested removing barriers that prevent different community members from accessing services, promoting programs more widely, and improving referral pathways so families who need more intensive support can get it quickly and easily.



Responses also noted the value of proportionate universalism²– making services available to everyone, while also ensuring that extra support is provided to families, children and young people who need it most, and at the right time.

“We believe every community should have access to proportionate universal and evidenced-based services ...” – Current service provider (National)

Many responses pointed out that current programs don’t always meet the unique needs of different communities. People stressed how important it is to include the voices of families, children, and young people in both the design and delivery of services.

For example, while most programs are meant to support children up to 18 years old, many tend to focus on younger children aged 0 to 5. This creates a gap in support for those aged 6 to 18. To address this, respondents suggested introducing parenting programs tailored to adolescents, offering mental health checks during middle childhood and teenage years, and ensuring services are relevant and accessible for older children and young people.

“For many mothers, challenges relating to parenting can arise or escalate as children grow older, ... particularly during the adolescent period.”– Current service provider (National)

*“[We recommend] the department encourages and funds organisations to develop programs focussed on parenting of older children and parenting across age ranges to fill a crucial support gap.”
– Current service provider (National)*

Respondents recommended making programs more responsive to community needs by using co-design, adapting services based on local evidence, and updating operational guidelines to allow for greater flexibility.

They highlighted several key considerations. Programs should be able to respond to local needs and circumstances, with clear actions and outcomes defined from the start. Activities should be clearly linked to the program’s logic to show they are based on evidence. Reporting should include both quantitative and qualitative measures to give a fuller picture of impact.

² “Proportionate universalism is the resourcing and delivering of universal services at a scale and intensity proportionate to the degree of need. Services are therefore universally available, not only for the most disadvantaged, and are able to respond to the level of presenting need.” (Marmot, M (2010), ‘Fair Society, Healthy Lives’ (the Marmot Review), *Institute of Health Equity*, <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review>, accessed 16 October 2025).



Families' feedback should be actively considered in service design, and long-term community outcomes should be tracked, including how programs connect to national wellbeing indicators.

To strengthen program outcomes, some respondents recommended aligning changes with existing national frameworks and strategies – such as the *Early Years Strategy 2024-2034*, the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032*, and *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031*. They emphasised the importance of building and maintaining strong, secure relationships – not just between children and their caregivers, but also between families and their broader communities. These connections were seen as essential for supporting healthy child development and creating a strong foundation for wellbeing.

Integration and coordination between programs and systems

Most responses shared that families often struggle to get the support they need because they have to navigate complex and disconnected systems. To make services easier to access and more effective, many respondents suggested using 'hub' models – where multiple services are offered in one place.

They explained that building trust takes time, especially for vulnerable families. When that trust is built within an integrated service hub, families can more easily access other supports without having to start over with new providers. These hubs also create opportunities for families to connect with others and build peer networks, which many described as a valuable source of support.

"A centralised, easily accessible information hub is needed to increase awareness and improve navigation of available supports for families." – Current service provider (NSW)

Many responses acknowledged the broader social and economic pressures families are facing – especially around cost-of-living and housing affordability. These challenges are increasing demand for services and making support needs more complex, which in turn puts extra pressure on service providers.

To help families get the right support, some submissions suggested offering soft referrals to crisis services and other programs outside the Families and Children (FaC) programs. This would ensure families can still access qualified help when needed. More broadly, respondents called for better referral processes and stressed that these should be delivered in a trauma-informed and respectful way.

"Integrated service offerings help to overcome the challenge of a disparate hard to navigate service system." – Current service provider (NSW)



“There needs to be greater referral systems within our local networks and communities to allow families and children to have access to and increased awareness of the services available so that they are able to have choice and control over who they engage with and ensure that they are able to seek the most appropriate services to support their needs rather than being isolated due to lack of collaboration between services that exist for the benefit of families and children.”

– Service provider (QLD)

Improved grant processes, delivery and outcomes

Many responses raised concerns about how grants are currently managed – especially around reporting requirements, which they said take up too much time and resources and make it harder to deliver high-quality services. Respondents recommended simplifying the reporting process to ease the administrative burden on providers.

There were also concerns about the way client data is collected through the Data Exchange (DEX). Some said the definitions used in DEX are too narrow and can lead to inaccurate reporting of client demographics. Others noted that DEX reflects a Western approach to data, which can be limiting for providers and clients who value other forms of knowledge – such as yarning, which is an important practice in First Nations cultures.

“[M]any of our clients do not meet the narrow criteria prescribed by DEX, which defines CALD as being born outside of Australia and having a first language other than English. [The department should broaden the] definition of CALD in DEX (by measuring) cultural and racial marginalisation, which better reflects the lived realities of many people we work with. This shift in measurement could lead to more inclusive program eligibility and data collection practices.”

– Current service provider (QLD)

Some respondents recommended regular program evaluations to ensure families receive the best support. They also called for more flexible grant arrangements, such as allowing services to shift locations based on community needs, and introducing longer-term funding to give providers more stability. Additional suggestions included broader system reforms like integrated service delivery and whole-of-government approaches to better connect services and respond to families' needs.

“Flexibility regarding time of day, location, and low demand for engagement if a family is overwhelmed.” – Individual respondent (NT)

“We would like to offer greater flexibility in relation to hours of operation, but that kind of flexibility needs to be enabled by funding that supports shift and penalty rates.”

– Current service provider (NSW)



Part 2: Consultation undertaken from 2022 to 2025

2025: Productivity Roundtables

In August 2025, the Minister for Social Services, the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, co-hosted the *Boosting Social and Economic Outcomes by Expanding our Focus on Place* roundtable with the Minister for Early Childhood Education and Youth, Senator the Hon Jess Walsh.

Minister Plibersek also co-hosted another roundtable with the Assistant Minister for Productivity, Competition, Charities and Treasury, the Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP on *Boosting Productivity in the Not-for-Profit sector*.

These roundtables were an opportunity to hear from a broad range of voices ahead of the larger Economic Reform Roundtable convened by the Treasurer. The Economic Reform Roundtable brought together leaders from the community and civil society to work on making the Australian economy stronger, fairer, more productive and more resilient into the future.

Through these roundtables, we heard:

- Adopting place-based approaches more widely can boost productivity, by making better use of government funding.
- To make government investment work better, place-based approaches need local and joint decision-making, guided by a locally developed and data-driven plan.
- Reporting requirements should be simpler, and local data should be shared with communities – to support decision-making and track progress.

2023: Community Sector Grants Engagement Framework

In March 2025, the Government released the [Community Sector Grants Engagement Framework](#) (the Framework) as part of its election commitment to build a stronger, more diverse, and independent community sector.

The Framework was shaped by a public consultation process led by the department in late 2023. As part of this, the department released a discussion paper, [A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector](#), which received 237 submissions. These came from a wide range of individuals and organisations, including community sector organisations, peak bodies, intermediaries, research institutions, for-profit providers, and local governments.



For a summary of public consultation that informed the Framework, see [A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector – Consultation summary report](#). Key issues raised included the need for greater transparency in grant processes, especially around indexation rates and timing of payments. Many respondents called for longer-term grant agreements, with five years being the most common suggestion, though some proposed up to 19 years. There were also calls for more flexible funding arrangements, such as allowing funds to be moved across financial years or used in response to emerging needs. Respondents emphasised the importance of focusing on outcomes and impact, rather than just inputs and outputs, and improving data access and sharing.

2023: Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint

In November 2024, the Australian Government delivered the [Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint](#). Developed independently by the Not-for-profit (NFP) Sector – through the [Blueprint Expert Reference Group](#) (BERG) with support from the department. It outlines reform options to strengthen social capital and build a vibrant, resilient NFP sector.

As part of the consultation process, the BERG released the [NFP Sector Development Blueprint Issues Paper](#) for public feedback. A total of 163 written submissions were received.

Consultation also involved key sector groups, including the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) Virtual Adviser and Sector Forum, the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) NFP Stewardship Group, Blueprint engagement allies, and the NFP Blueprint Interjurisdictional Committee.

Consultation and engagement processes, supported by evidence from previous inquiries, revealed several key areas where the NFP sector needs support and reform:

- strengthen relationships between governments and the NFP sector
- make the NFP sector's work more visible to governments and the public
- ensure NFP sector commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and community control
- create a more enabling regulatory and legal environment. This includes harmonising NFP and industry standards across all levels of government and broadening and simplifying the deductible gift recipient (DGR) system
- reform funding and procurement processes from the NFP sector – to provide full funding and use methods that maximise community benefit and support collaboration
- invest in the development and wellbeing of the NFP workforce and volunteers



- strengthen governance and operations in the NFP sector to support diverse leadership, and ensure communities and the people organisations represent are central to sector design and decision-making
- protect the NFP sector's rights to advocacy
- rapidly uplift the NFP sector's digital and data capabilities.

2023: Early Years Strategy

The Australian Government undertook a comprehensive seven-month consultation process in 2023 to inform the development of its [Early Years Strategy](#). This included:

- A [National Early Years summit](#) on 17 February 2023, attended by over 100 delegates.
- An online pulse survey, which received 2,243 responses.
- A [discussion paper](#), which received 352 submissions.
- 39 roundtables held both in-person and online across Australia, with more than 750 participants.
- Consultations with children aged 3 to 5 years, with 115 participants.

The [Early Years Strategy Consultation Report 2023](#) summarises stakeholder views gathered throughout the consultation process to inform the draft Strategy. Stakeholders emphasised that services should be:

- accessible, inclusive and flexible
- readily available and easy to access, with minimal gatekeeping and reduced complexity
- trusted, safe places that welcome children and families no matter their circumstances
- responsive to local and family/child priorities, circumstances and characteristics
- universal but not uniform
- evidence-based and outcomes-focused
- investment should be prevention-focused
- accountable and adaptive.

Stakeholders also stressed the importance of policy and services being responsive to local contexts. They recommended that services be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled or led wherever possible, grounded in cultural knowledge, and designed in active partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. Flexible funding models were also suggested to support community self-determination.



2022–2024: Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families (SASF)

The department led the Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families (SASF) initiative as part of the Australian Government's Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap. The initiative aimed to assess the needs of ACCOs and increase their involvement in the child and family sector.

In 2022, the department engaged SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC), the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, to identify the strengths, needs, barriers and opportunities of ACCOs currently delivering – or with the potential to deliver – programs for children and families, including those funded by the department.

To inform this work, SNAICC undertook several engagement activities:

- An online survey which received 304 responses, including 135 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participants and 107 respondents currently employed by an ACCO.
- Five in-depth, semi-structured focus group discussions with ACCOs from across Australia, held in May 2022.

SNAICC published the [Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families Final Report](#) in 2023. A summary of the report is provided below:

Strengths	• ACCOs are inextricably connected to the communities they serve. • ACCOs use a holistic model of care to deliver integrated and culturally safe services.
Barriers	• Lack of community control in program design and funding allocation processes. • Funding processes. • Funding didn't match the model of care. • Poor partnerships. • Reporting burdens.
Needs	• Resources for core operational functions and infrastructure. • Data, evaluation, and research. • Stability in funding agreements.
Opportunities	• Improving navigation and support resources. • Building government capacity to support ACCOs and undertake funding reform.