



BUSHkids Feedback on Discussion Paper:

A new approach to programs for families and children

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ABOUT BUSHkids

BUSHkids has been transforming the lives of children living in regional, rural and remote Queensland for 90 years. Our organisation has adapted and evolved its high-quality specialist services to respond to the changing needs of families and children, some of whom are among the most disadvantaged in Queensland.

Established in 1935, we are a not-for-profit organisation with a vision that “All Queensland children achieve their potential regardless of where they live”. Our approach to supporting the wellbeing needs of children is holistic, inclusive of families, and is delivered in collaboration with communities and local organisations.

When it comes to children, a post code should not define their development trajectory. Nor should socioeconomic circumstances.

More than 30 communities across Queensland are experiencing the benefits of free evidence-based programs that support the early childhood development needs of children, and their families, while building community capacity.

This is done through our BUSHkids Service Centres, co-location with our partners, visits by Allied Health Professionals, Child and Family Practitioners, as well as high-quality family-centred telepractice services.

Our growing workforce is passionate, highly-skilled, and represents the complete transdisciplinary and interprofessional range of childhood development, parent and carer support and early education services needed to make a difference. Working as a team, not only do we build on the individual strengths of our clients, but being part of BUSHkids means also striving to strengthen the capacity of the regional, rural and remote communities in which our staff live and work.

Our enterprising academic partnerships are responding to our critical research and knowledge translation priorities, helping to secure the next generation of outback early childhood healthcare and community practitioners.

Through continuous learning and adaptability, our state-of-the-art telepractice service and infrastructure has placed BUSHkids at the forefront of technological innovation, removed barriers to accessing care, and improved the digital literacy of families.

Partnerships have always been important to us. Our Reconciliation Action Plan, RAP, emphasises our commitment to deepen relationships with our First Nations families and their organisations.

Our experienced leadership, together with BUSHkids values, have laid the foundations for success. Our connections with Queensland’s bush communities remain our true north as we work to make early years count.

1. Vision and Outcomes

The proposed vision – *“that all children and young people are supported by strong families who have the skill and confidence to nurture them”* – reflects what we collectively strive for in supporting children and families. It aligns with BUSHkids’ core belief that families play the most vital role in a child’s development and that children flourish when the adults around them are capable, confident and supported. The vision captures our shared aspiration for families to have the knowledge, tools and confidence they need to guide their children’s growth, wellbeing and future potential, and reinforces our commitment to working alongside families to build strength and create the conditions that allow children and young people to thrive.

The two proposed outcomes – *parents and carers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children, and children are supported to grow into healthy, resilient adults* – are sound goals for our work with families. They provide a clear and logical pathway: strengthening parents and carers today leads to healthier, more resilient young people tomorrow. These outcomes emphasise both the immediate and longer-term benefits of building family capability and align with BUSHkids’ focus on prevention, early support and creating environments where children and families can thrive.

2. Program Structure

A single national program would provide greater flexibility for organisations. It would streamline administrative processes, reduce duplication, and allow organisations to focus more effort on delivering responsive support to children and families.

The services and activities we deliver align well with the proposed funding streams, in particular stream 2 – Prevention and Early Intervention.

Importantly, the streams are clearly connected to the outcomes and vision of the proposal. By differentiating between universal, targeted and more intensive supports, they create a coherent framework that will enable us to deliver the right level of assistance at the right time. This structure strengthens our capacity to respond early, build family capability, and contribute to sustainable improvements in children’s wellbeing and development.

3. Prioritising Investment

The four priorities identified in the proposal represent appropriate areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families. They align well with what we know about the types of support that create the greatest impact. The program has been clearly shaped by evidence—strengthening families, enabling early support, fostering community connection, and addressing vulnerabilities before they escalate. These areas provide a strong foundation for improving children’s wellbeing and ensuring families receive timely, culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate assistance.

There are, however, additional considerations that warrant ongoing focus, particularly for regional, rural and remote communities. Location-based disadvantage continues to influence access, service intensity, workforce availability and the consistency of support families can expect across different parts of Australia. Priorities such as flexible delivery models, sustained investment in digital infrastructure, workforce development, and stronger cross-sector collaboration remain critical to ensuring equity of access. These elements will ensure that

children and families living outside metropolitan areas can benefit from the same quality and breadth of support as those in larger centres.

Maintaining a strong emphasis on reducing geographic inequities, supporting locally tailored responses, and strengthening the capability of the regional workforce will support achievement of the proposed outcomes.

4. Improving Family Wellbeing

The proposed focus areas, including supporting families at risk of child protection involvement, align closely with the needs and priorities identified by our service. Intervening early is key to ensuring better outcomes for children, families and communities. When families are supported before concerns escalate, there is a greater opportunity to strengthen relationships, build parenting confidence and address the underlying factors contributing to stress and vulnerability.

BUSHkids works in many communities where families experience vulnerability linked to factors such as isolation, financial stress, limited access to services, intergenerational disadvantage and complex health or developmental needs. A program that prioritises early support for families experiencing vulnerability, and that explicitly aims to reduce the need for child protection involvement, is strongly aligned with our vision. By providing timely, proportionate and family-centred support, these focus areas will help keep children safe, connected and thriving within their families and communities.

5. Connected, Co-located, and Integrated Services

Beyond co-location, there are several effective ways to strengthen the connection and coordination of services for families. One of the most important is taking the time to build and maintain strong, genuine relationships within communities and across sectors.

True co-design with communities is another critical factor. By engaging directly with local families, community leaders and frontline workers, organisations gain deeper insight into community strengths, priorities and challenges. This ensures services are built with, rather than for, communities and are better aligned with local needs. Effective co-design strengthens trust, increases engagement, and results in supports that are culturally relevant and sustainable.

Establishing a dedicated coordination function also works well to ensure services remain aligned, accountable and on track for families. Co-ordination helps reduce duplication, clarifies responsibilities, and ensures families experience warm, well-managed transitions between services rather than fragmented or disconnected support.

Local governance structures/reference groups play an important role in integration, particularly when they include representation from councils, community organisations, parents and other key stakeholders. These governance groups help maintain shared direction, identify emerging needs early, and hold services collectively responsible for outcomes.

In regional, rural and remote communities, effective partnerships extend beyond mainstream services. Working alongside Traditional Owners, Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations, PHNs, schools, HHS, early childhood services and other place-based partners

is essential to creating a coordinated network of support. These relationships strengthen cultural safety, build trust, reduce access barriers and ensure services reflect the priorities and knowledge of the local community.

The Healthy Outback Kids initiatives in Cunnamulla and Boulia are strong examples of these principles in practice—using co-design, coordination roles, and cross-sector collaboration to deliver services that are trusted, effective and tailored to local needs.

When considering how a service demonstrates meaningful connection to the community it serves, a grant agreement should require applicants to show evidence of genuine, established relationships rather than relying solely on general demographic information. Applications should reflect a clear understanding of local strengths, priorities and challenges—knowledge gained through active engagement with families, community leaders and frontline services, not just through quoting publicly available statistics.

Assessment should also focus on the applicant's ability to identify and collaborate with key stakeholders in the community. This includes the capacity to name specific organisations, groups and individuals they work with—such as councils and mayors, Traditional Owners, Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations, schools, PHNs, HHS, early education services and other local partners. In rural and remote contexts, it may also be appropriate for references or letters of support to come from neighbouring communities, particularly where services operate across a broader catchment or are expanding into new areas.

Letters of support should go beyond generic endorsements and instead demonstrate plans for collaboration, including examples of partnership activity already underway. This helps differentiate organisations with genuine community presence and established trust from those with only aspirational connections. Requiring this level of detail in a grant agreement provides assurance that funded services are well integrated, locally informed and positioned to deliver supports that are practical, culturally appropriate and responsive to community needs.

6. Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families requires programs that are culturally informed, community-led, and structured to strengthen Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS). Longer-term and flexible funding arrangements support workforce stability and enable ACCOs to develop and deliver services that genuinely reflect local priorities and cultural expectations.

Supporting workforce capability is central to improving outcomes. Programs need explicit mechanisms that build practitioner skills in culturally safe practice and strengthen the capacity of ACCO-employed staff. Models where mainstream organisations, such as BUSHkids, provide specialist consultation, supervision, and mentoring help develop confidence and capability in areas such as child development and family support, while preserving ACCOs' cultural leadership and authority. These arrangements promote shared learning and ensure children and families receive support that honours cultural strengths and local knowledge.

Co-location offers a powerful platform for integrated practice and capability development. When BUSHkids clinicians work alongside ACCO teams, practitioners benefit from real-time

learning, strengthened relationships, and enhanced cultural safety in service delivery. Investment in shared spaces, digital platforms, and mobile hubs further improves access for families in rural and remote communities and supports ACCOs to lead place-based service design aligned with community aspirations.

Strengthening practitioner capability in culturally safe practice is essential. Program design should include sustained cultural capability development—far beyond one-off training—to incorporate ongoing mentoring, reflective practice, joint learning with ACCO teams, and access to cultural consultants or Elders who guide service delivery. BUSHkids' partnership with QATSICPP, supporting their development and trial of a cultural parenting framework, provides an example of how collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders can deepen practitioner understanding of cultural parenting strengths, family systems, and community priorities.

Additional design features such as dedicated funding for cultural supervision, involvement of local cultural advisors, and governance structures that centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices further reinforce program integrity and community trust. These elements ensure services are culturally safe, relational, and reflective of the strengths, expectations, and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities.

7. Measuring Outcomes

Understanding impact and supporting continuous improvement requires a robust, culturally responsive outcomes framework. Our organisation relies on data that captures both measurable change and the lived experiences of children, families, practitioners and community partners.

To demonstrate how our service positively impacts children and families, the most valuable information includes case studies and outcomes data. Case studies allow us to show the real-world application of our work, highlight key moments of change, and give voice to families' experiences. Outcomes data demonstrates the impact of our services..

The SCORE Circumstances domain most relevant to our organisation is Age-Appropriate Development for Parents. This aligns with our focus on supporting families to build capability, confidence and understanding of child development, ensuring parents have the knowledge, skills and support required to nurture their children's learning, behaviour and wellbeing.

To ensure case studies consistently communicate impact, it would be useful to have templates and guidance that support structured, ethical and culturally safe storytelling. Useful tools could include a standardised case study template; prompts for integrating quantitative and qualitative data; guidance on representing family voice and cultural identity.

8. Working Together

BUSHkids has experience of delivering across a range of contract types, including relational contracting. Relational contracting involves a shared commitment to achieving outcomes by working collaboratively. Clear governance is needed to maintain trust, accountability and stability to support flexibility and innovation.

Relational contracts work best with organisations capable of operating in a genuine partnership model, where trust, shared goals and continuous learning can drive improved outcomes. Suitable organisations clearly demonstrate alignment with the program's purpose, including a strong vision focusing on child development, family wellbeing and culturally safe practice. A proven history of working collaboratively with government and community partners, showing transparency, constructive engagement and a commitment to co-designed approaches.

Organisations with established trust, cultural legitimacy and strong local presence are better positioned to deliver outcomes that reflect community strengths and expectations.

Workforce capability is another key factor. Organisations should have stable, skilled teams supported by effective supervision, clear practice frameworks and strong recruitment and retention strategies. Organisational maturity is also essential, including sound governance, robust risk management, financial sustainability and digital systems capable of sharing data, monitoring progress and supporting joint analysis.

BUSHkids has a strong interest in a relational contracting approach. Relational contracting aligns closely with our organisational culture and preference for collaborative partnerships to achieve better outcomes for children, families and communities. We have experience working within many regional, rural and remote communities and have first-hand understanding of greater impact being achieved through the ability to work collaboratively and flexibly, in response to differing community needs.

9. Other

BUSHkids has delivered children and parenting services through DSS funding for a decade. During this time, we have welcomed the growth in expectation that services are evidence based or evidence informed. We are strongly aligned with this approach, and our services are all provided according to the best available evidence, tailored for local requirements. The new approach to programs for families and children, as outlined in the discussion paper reflects the current evidence base.

As DSS moves to the next stage in programs for children and families, it would be timely to consider longitudinal research to measure the impact of this approach and contribute actively to the evidence in the field. Funding organisations to embed research within service design, delivery and impact analysis would be welcomed.