



Thursday 4 December 2025

Barang Regional Alliance (Barang) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Social Services' (DSS) Families and Children Activity Reform and acknowledges the leadership of Minister Plibersek in driving this important national agenda. Following our meeting in July this year with the Minister and Empowered Communities Regional Leaders, Barang are pleased to see these reforms coming to fruition.

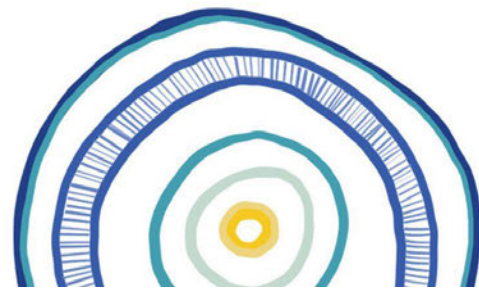
The July discussion reinforced the national momentum toward community-led decision-making, improved partnership between government and Aboriginal communities, and a more coherent approach to supporting children and families. The direction set in that meeting is reflected in DSS's reform agenda, and Barang is encouraged by the Minister's clear commitment to accelerating structural change.

Barang is the recognised Aboriginal governance structure for the Aboriginal community on the Central Coast of NSW. We are a founding Empowered Communities (EC) region, in operation since 2014 and our authority is derived from the community, we represent. Our role is to ensure their identified priorities are reflected and form the basis of partnership with governments, ensuring decisions are grounded in local realities. For over a decade, Barang has worked to strengthen accountability, build cultural authority into regional planning, and drive system reform through shared decision-making.

The vision and intent of this DSS reform resonates deeply with our own: services co-designed in partnership with community, systems aligned to local priorities, and families supported through culturally grounded pathways from pregnancy to school and beyond.

### **The Value of Place: Productivity Begins with Understanding Communities**

Policy becomes effective, and investment becomes productive when it reflects the distinct social, cultural, demographic and historical context of place. The Central Coast is home to one of the fastest-growing Aboriginal populations in NSW, a young and culturally resilient community, with established leadership and clear priorities defined by community. Despite this, our service systems are characterised by fragmentation, duplication, and inconsistent practice, resulting in families navigating complex pathways, services operating in silos, and inconsistent investment that hinders progress, erodes trust and escalates issues. Place based, regionally determined understandings of community are not simply "nice to have", they are the core tenant leading to meaningful outcomes. Barang's mandate offering local, culturally informed governance shapes decisions and programs that reflect the lived reality of families. When funding aligns to community-defined priorities, duplication reduces and system performance improves and when Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations lead service delivery, our families engage earlier and remain connected for longer.



This is why the Empowered Communities principle of subsidiarity - ensuring decisions are made at the closest possible level to the people affected - must underpin these reforms. Productivity increases when communities lead.

### **Shared Decision-Making: A Practical Model for National Reform**

Barang's expertise in Joint Decision Making (JDM) processes, through the Empowered Communities initiative, offers a tangible blueprint demonstrating that shared decision-making can be successfully embedded into mainstream government systems, increasing accountability, transparency and value on investment. Across seven JDM rounds, over ten years, more than \$18.8 million in Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) investment has been shaped by Aboriginal led community panels on the Central Coast.

This is not merely symbolic. JDM has reshaped service quality and accountability, strengthened trust between providers and community, and ensured that investment is genuinely reflective of local needs. Community panel members consistently report feeling empowered, Service providers are appreciative and responsive to feedback, and Government partners have observed improved relationships and demonstrated alignment between funding decisions and regional priorities.

The success of JDM is tied to a number of critical dynamics:

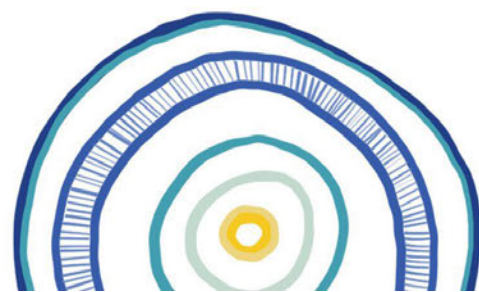
- Aboriginal families can influence decisions that directly affect them.
- Services are reviewed through lived experience, not bureaucracy.
- Cultural governance provides continuity as actors in government and NGO sectors change.

These lessons are directly transferable to the Families and Children Activity reform. Barang strongly encourages the focus on prioritising ACCO-led service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities and are open to continue to collaborate on implementation, including co-design that incorporates a shared understanding of local community needs and aspirations.

### **Building a Service System Grounded in Partnership**

For DSS reforms to succeed, Indigenous specific expenditure must have local Aboriginal governance. This must be seen as the foundation of system architecture, not an adjunct to it. On the Central Coast, the Barang Regional Development Agenda (RDA) serves as the primary mechanism through which community voice shapes priority-setting. It guides our approach to early years reform, youth transitions, education partnerships, data sovereignty, cultural strengthening and community development.

This mechanism has led to the introduction of the Connected Beginnings program, funded through the Commonwealth Department of Education, serving to provide a strong example of the ways in which systemic integration, underpinned by Aboriginal leadership can serve as a means to reshape and lead family and community engagement. Through Barang's involvement, early childhood services, maternal health providers, educators and ACCOs come together around shared priorities and culturally anchored practice demonstrating that when families experience the service system as consistent, connected and culturally safe, engagement dramatically increases.



Critical needs such as healthy pregnancy support, developmental screening, parent empowerment, cultural identity building, early literacy, and transition-to-school pathways all benefit from this integrated, community-led approach. These successes provide a practical pathway for DSS to elevate early intervention as a national priority.

### **Strengthening Families Through Early, Integrated and Culturally Grounded Support**

The wellbeing of children is inseparable from the wellbeing of families. The first 2,000 days of a child's life are critical and coordinated support during this period shapes lifelong outcomes. The DSS reform's recognition of early intervention and family strengthening as key levers for improved outcomes aligns with Barang's long-held priorities. Families in our region often face intersecting pressures - housing instability, mental health challenges, experiences of trauma, and limited access to culturally safe support. Without early and sustained engagement, risk escalates and families are drawn into statutory systems that are costly, traumatic and disruptive.

An effective system on the Central Coast must allow families to move seamlessly through the early years, supported by culturally grounded engagement from pregnancy, through early childhood and into school. This requires integrated pathways between health, education, family support and ACCOs; consistent screening and referral processes; culturally informed workforce development; and families who understand the system and feel welcomed within it. Coordinated early health and family supports and culturally informed educational practice provide a strong foundation for wellbeing, engagement and positive lifelong outcomes for children, families and communities. The Connected Beginnings approach, grounded in Aboriginal governance, community voice and cross-sector collaboration - illustrates exactly how this can work in practice.

DSS reforms could actively build upon these models.

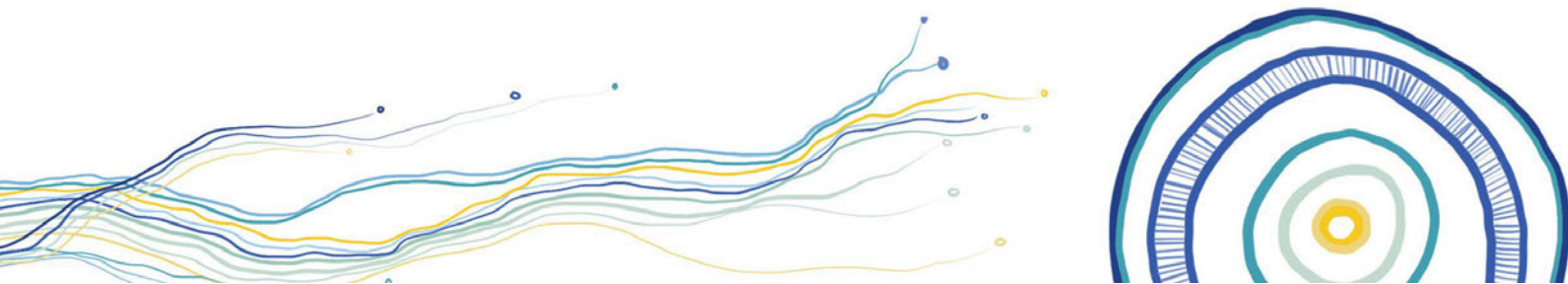
### **ACCO Leadership and Relational Contracting: Essential to System Transformation**

Sustainable reform requires a shift from short-term, transactional funding to long-term relational contracting that values trust, cultural authority and local leadership. ACCOs must be positioned as preferred providers within the service system. Their legitimacy, cultural expertise and deep community relationships position them uniquely to drive early intervention and improve outcomes for our own communities. When ACCOs lead, families engage earlier, remain connected, and experience continuity of care.

To support this, DSS should move toward streamlined processes that reduce administrative burden, strengthen transparency of funding flows into Aboriginal communities, and allow for regional priority-setting to directly inform funding decisions.

The 2025 Empowered Communities Review findings reinforce that relational, place-based partnerships produce better outcomes than competitive tendering models. The Families and Children reform is the ideal opportunity to embed this approach nationally.

Noting more work is required to develop and agree on the definition and terms in this specific context, Barang strongly encourages DSS to work with providers to co-design and embed relational contracting as a core mechanism in the new program.



## Measurement, Data Sovereignty and Learning Together

Successful reform requires more than monitoring outputs, it requires a shared commitment to learning, adaption and transparent local data. Barang advocates for an approach to data and evaluation that is grounded in:

- community-designed measures of success
- clear indicators of cultural safety and quality
- narrative-based reporting that captures family experience
- regional data dashboards enabling transparency

Access to meaningful, localised data supports better decision-making, greater accountability and stronger partnerships. The empowerment of local communities to interpret and act upon their data is essential to Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4. Barang stands ready to partner with DSS to co-design evaluation tools that measure what matters in the early years and family wellbeing space.

In addition, Barang encourages DSS to consider how they are best placed to support providers through the grant application process with access to and provision of data to better support providers to design and propose services that will have the greatest impact.

## Conclusion

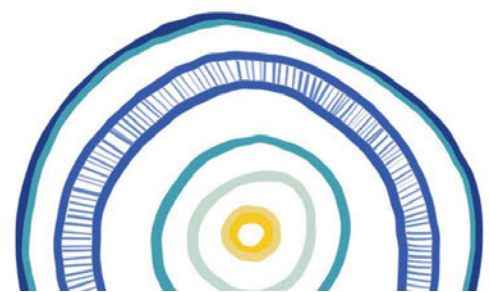
The Families and Children Activity Reform marks an important step toward a more equitable, culturally grounded and effective national service system. Its success will depend on how deeply it embraces the same principles that have guided Barang's work for a decade: understanding the value of place, respecting Aboriginal cultural governance, embedding shared decision-making, and prioritising early, integrated, community-led support.

A productive and high-performing service system is one that centres Aboriginal families, strengthens ACCOs, and invests in partnerships built on trust. Barang is committed to working alongside DSS and Minister Plibersek to ensure that this reform not only transforms systems but transforms lives. Outlined below are a series of questions/comments in response to the discussion paper for your consideration.

Barang would welcome further discussion with DSS and/or Minister Plibersek to support iteration of the program.

Regards

  
Barang Regional Alliance





## Discussion Paper Responses

### Vision & Outcomes

Barang is supportive of the vision and outcomes.

### Program Structure

Agree a national program will provide more flexibility to organisations and communities. Consideration is required with regards to the expectations/requirements of providers when funding covers multiple streams and how this is measured (success criteria/metrics) and reported. While a reduction in administrative burden and a holistic approach to service design and delivery is welcomed, the ability for providers and community to measure the impact of the differing services is key.

### Prioritising Investment

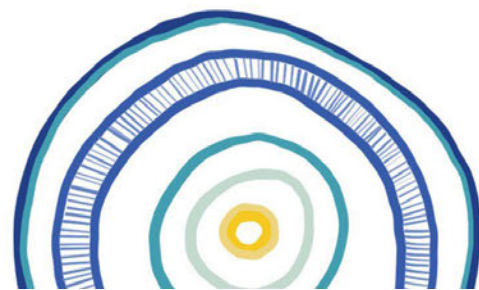
Longer-term investment that prioritises population groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is fundamentally a process of equity building. To be effective, this investment must be coupled with dedicated support for capability and capacity development. These are not competing priorities, nor an either-or proposition. Instead, they operate in synergy. Equity-centred investment and capability strengthening must progress together to ensure meaningful outcomes are achieved and the workforce is sustained concurrently. This balanced approach enables both community-driven impact and the long-term stability required to maintain momentum across programs and reforms.

### Connected, co-located and integrated services/Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

The grant application process would benefit from taking a strength-based language approach, rather than the deficit-based approach, with emphasis on the inherent strengths, abilities and positive outcomes of the proposal, ultimately making the assessment process easier.

Prioritisation and support for ACCOs is critical to the success to delivering services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Providers would benefit from increased access to data held by DSS and other government organisations to assist in building the evidence-based for a proposal (as well as measurement/reporting).

The process specifically references *'funding will prioritise ACCO-led service delivery in communities with **significant First Nations populations***. Barang would recommend careful consideration as to the intent of the terminology ('significant') and how this is determined as the results could differ significantly. For example, a percentage in relation to total population of the area/region vs the percentage in relation to total First Nations population by state etc. Barang would discourage the use of a single quantitative measure and strongly encourages an approach that balances equity with population, best reflects the diversity of community and encourages inclusivity, rather than exclusivity.



Where non-Indigenous organisations seek to deliver services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, it is essential that commissioning processes include an explicit capability-building and transition framework aligned with Priority Reform 2 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Applicants must demonstrate clear and measurable strategies for strengthening ACCO sector capability, transferring program functions, and transitioning control of service delivery to an ACCO as soon as one is ready and appropriately positioned.

Policy levers such as weighted assessment criteria, mandatory partnership agreements, staged transition milestones, and embedded governance expectations should be activated to ensure that non-ACCO providers operate only as interim stewards.

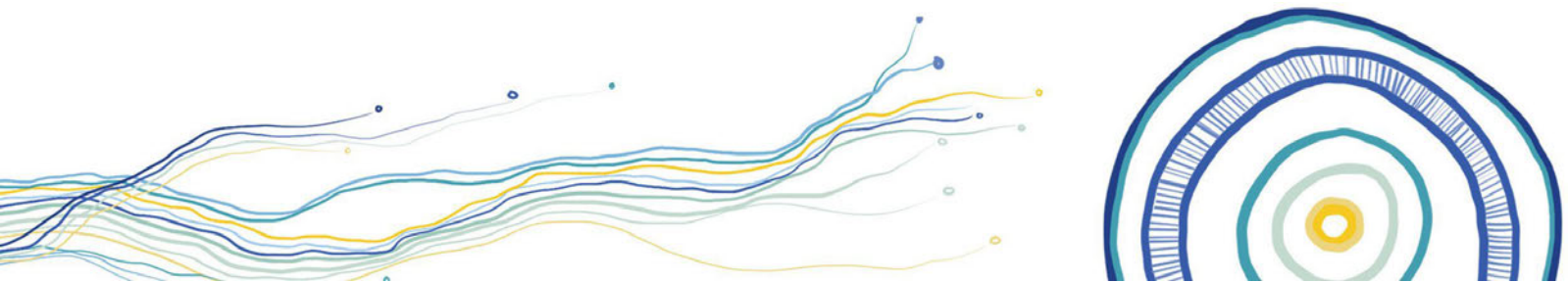
### **Measuring Outcomes**

Access to, and use of data continues to be a challenge for Aboriginal Organisations. Both Commonwealth and NSW Governments, through Priority Reform 4, of the National Agreement to Closing the Gap and the 2013 OCHRE Agreement, clearly outline government commitment to transforming the way in which data is created, collected and shared, with a strong emphasis on data sovereignty and better use of data to inform shared decision making. Barang shares this vision and would strongly encourage DSS to consider how this program can fundamentally improve both the quality of data and the way in which government currently facilitates data sharing.

Challenges to achieving these outcomes include inconsistency in the tagging/identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander related data. This issue creates gaps in information and undermines the robustness of data used to measure Indigenous-specific expenditure and programs by both providers and government. Barang acknowledges the continued efforts by government to improve data quality and access and encourages DSS to explore opportunities under the proposed program to further enhance its internal systems to address this gap.

The proposal references the use of the DEX platform as a mandatory tool for providers. DEX data is heavily weighted toward output reporting, rather than outcome. This limits the ability to understand longitudinal impacts of programs and services. A shift toward more meaningful data would better align to the outcomes articulated in this proposal.

Qualitative data is a highly valuable data source that provides insights on the impact of services and programs that quantitative data cannot. As such, the collection and use of qualitative data should be considered as part of the broader data collection and use strategy. Barang strongly encourages DSS to consider how a broader data sharing approach at both the grant submission as well as program measurement stages would greatly benefit both government and community. Data/information sharing should form a mandatory part of any agreement and measurement/metrics should be co-designed and agreed between DSS and providers, leveraging all data available.



## **Working Together**

Barang supports a relational contract approach and welcomes further discussion on the construct of such an arrangement. Fundamentally relational contract arrangements should demonstrate a commitment to the principle of genuine joint decision-making beyond community consultation and build the capacity of ACCOS to engage in relational contract arrangements. Elements of relational contracts should consider the following:

- Contract arrangements should support and align to Local Decision Making/Joint Decision Making principles.
- Emphasise and enable long-term partnerships, resourcing and flexibility.
- Contract horizons be no less than 5 years for stability and to provide the greatest opportunity for long term outcomes to be realised.
- Be outcomes focussed, with authority and autonomy provided to providers to determine the most appropriate service delivery mechanisms for the community it is servicing.
- Recognise, promote and support the critical role of regional alliance structures through holistic/partnership arrangements.
- Head agreement style approach, that focusses on how organisations work together, not tied to specific outcome funding, however consideration should be given to provide funding to support operational needs of providers.
- Provide a commitment that seeks to ensure institutional memory beyond the players engaged.
- Provides structural documentation of the process and decisions with embedded accountability frameworks.

