

Community Voice and Inclusive Governance in DSS's Future Framework

This response reflects the collective voice of the Capricorn Communities for Children (CfC) region. It was developed through broad consultation and formally endorsed by the Capricorn Communities for Children Committee (CCC) at its meeting on Thursday, 4 December 2025. The CCC is a community governance group that represents the diversity and strengths of our region. It operates as a network of networks, bringing together parents and caregivers, local businesses, and representatives from education, health, and family support services, including Community Partners and other NGOs.

Through genuine representation and shared decision-making, our CCC ensures CfC initiatives are shaped by community insight, grounded in evidence, and responsive to local needs and priorities—reflecting the aspirations of families across the Capricorn region. While The Smith Family acts as the Facilitating Partner, this submission is rooted in the lived experience and perspectives of the local community.

Drawing on the DSS Discussion Paper, Capricorn CfC Activity Work Plans, the 2022–2026 Community Strategic Plan, and related position papers, this response demonstrates how the CfC Facilitating Partner model aligns with DSS's proposed framework. It highlights critical gaps and provides strategic recommendations to safeguard the model's core principles and proven impact.

Capricorn Region Context

The Capricorn region spans the former Rockhampton Regional Council footprint, encompassing Rockhampton and Livingstone Shire. It is a diverse area with a combined population of approximately 120,000 people, covering more than 18,000 km². Anchored by Rockhampton as a major regional centre, the area includes coastal communities like Yeppoon and Emu Park, and inland towns such as Gracemere and Mount Morgan. This region is a critical transport hub, intersecting the Bruce and Capricorn Highways, and hosts significant infrastructure including a major airport, Port Alma, and rail facilities.

Despite these assets, Capricorn faces entrenched disadvantage and emerging vulnerabilities. Rates of one-parent families, social housing reliance, and developmental vulnerability in children exceed Queensland averages. AEDC data shows nearly 30% of children are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains, with physical health, social competence, and emotional maturity being areas of concern. The region also experiences higher rates of domestic and family violence, housing stress, and service access barriers—exacerbated by workforce shortages and the ripple effects of NDIS on local capacity.

These challenges are compounded by environmental and economic pressures: recurrent natural disasters, climate change impacts, and a local economy marked by high unemployment and lower skills attainment. Yet, the community demonstrates resilience and a strong appetite for collaboration. There is a growing commitment to place-based innovation, leveraging local networks and evidence-informed strategies to ensure children thrive, families are safe and supported, and services work together rather than in silos.

The Capricorn Communities for Children story illustrates why place-based, communityshaped approaches must be preserved and strengthened. This region's complexity cannot be addressed by one-size-fits-all models or transactional funding arrangements. It demands flexible, relational contracting and sustained investment in backbone facilitation—enabling local governance, integrated service systems, and culturally responsive solutions. Without these safeguards, the risks are clear: fragmentation, diminished child voice, and widening inequities. With them, our Capricorn region can continue to turn disadvantage into opportunity, building a strong, child-friendly community where every child has every chance to thrive.

The Smith Family serves as the Facilitating Partner in nine Communities for Children (CfC) sites across Australia, including Capricorn CfC in Rockhampton. The CfC Facilitating Partner model is intentionally designed as a non-direct service delivery approach, positioning The Smith Family as a backbone organisation rather than a competing provider. This structure is a key strength: it allows the Facilitating Partner to focus on system stewardship, collaborative governance, and place-based planning, rather than diverting resources into frontline delivery. By remaining independent, The Smith Family can convene diverse stakeholders, broker partnerships, and align investments toward shared outcomes for children and families. This neutrality fosters trust, reduces duplication, and ensures local services are empowered—not displaced—an essential condition for achieving DSS objectives such as “Communities are Cohesive” and “Family relationships flourish.” In short, the non-direct model amplifies collective impact by prioritising coordination, capacity-building, and advocacy for systemic change over transactional outputs.

The Capricorn CfC Facilitating Partner model delivers distinctive strengths that must be safeguarded in any redesign of DSS programs. These include authentic collaboration, partner capacity building, community-driven solutions, integration of children's voices, and innovative place-based approaches. Capricorn CfC FP acts as a trusted backbone, connecting networks and walking alongside communities to co-create sustainable change.

Key Themes in DSS's Proposed Model

- **Integrated National Framework:** Consolidation of five existing programs into a single national model, structured around three streams—**National Programs, Prevention and Early Intervention, and Intensive Family Supports**—to streamline service delivery and reduce fragmentation.
- **Evidence-Informed Practice:** A shift from rigid evidence-based mandates to evidence-informed approaches, enabling innovation while maintaining accountability. This includes applying proportionate universalism to ensure supports are scaled according to need and embedding cultural responsiveness across all service design.
- **Sustainable Funding and Simplified Compliance:** Introduction of longer-term funding agreements (up to five years) to provide stability for providers, coupled with streamlined reporting requirements to reduce administrative burden.
- **Relational Contracting:** Moving towards trust-based partnerships that prioritize collaboration, flexibility, and shared accountability, rather than transactional compliance, to strengthen outcomes for children and families.

CfC FP Alignment and Gaps

While the proposed DSS model reflects several priorities of the Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (CfC FP) approach, there is a real risk of losing what makes CfC FP transformative if its core principles are not explicitly protected. From the lived experience and practice wisdom of Capricorn CfC FP, we know that the relational ethos, child voice mechanisms, and the Community Weaving Framework are not optional extras—they are the foundation of trust, collaboration, and systemic change. If these elements are diluted or replaced by transactional processes, the sector will lose the very strategies that deliver lasting impact for children and families.

Alignment:

- **Place-Based Governance and Collaboration:** CfC FP provides strong local governance structures and fosters collaborative networks that align with DSS's emphasis on integrated service delivery.
- **Prevention and Early Intervention:** CfC FP's focus on early years and family wellbeing directly supports DSS priorities for proactive, upstream solutions.
- **Proven Impact:** CfC FP has a demonstrated track record of improving child and family outcomes through coordinated, evidence-informed, and community-shaped strategies. **Gaps and Risks:**

- **Cultural Adaptation Constraints:** Current evidence-based mandates limit flexibility for cultural responsiveness. DSS's shift to evidence-informed practice is welcome but must be operationalized effectively.
- **Administrative Burden:** Reporting requirements via the DSS Data Exchange remain resource-intensive and detract from frontline engagement.
- **Funding Limitations:** Lack of flexibility to cover indirect costs and sustain workforce capacity threatens the continuity and quality of place-based initiatives.

Recommendations for Adaptation and Advocacy

1. **Preserve CfC's Facilitation Role:** Maintain CfC FP as the backbone organisation for local coordination, ensuring strong governance and integrated service delivery.
2. **Embed Community Weaving and Child Voice:** Retain CfC FP's Community Weaving Framework and mechanisms for meaningful child participation as core design principles.
3. **Enable Place-Based Innovation:** Build flexibility into program design to support locally tailored solutions, which address barriers to engagement like local geography and transport (or lack thereof).
4. **Transition to Evidence-Informed Practice:** Move beyond rigid evidence-based mandates to allow culturally responsive and innovative approaches while maintaining accountability.
5. **Streamline Reporting and Measurement:** Simplify compliance through enhanced DSS Data Exchange processes and adopt tools like Community SCORE for group activities.
6. **Secure Sustainable Funding:** Implement longer-term agreements (up to five years) and full-cost funding models to ensure workforce stability and continuity of services.

7. **Influence Policy Narrative:** Showcase CfC FP's proven success in place-based collaboration, early intervention, and systemic impact to strengthen advocacy for its retention within DSS's future framework.

Strategic Implications

Capricorn CfC FP's place-based work shows how a dedicated Facilitating Partner can **mobilise diverse organisations**, align them to shared goals, and tailor responses to local needs without competing for service delivery. By staying out of direct delivery, the FP acts as an **impartial backbone**: convening partners, brokering relationships, nurturing capacity, and amplifying children's voices to drive systemic change.

Why the FP should not also deliver CfC like services

- **Impartial convenor and fair commissioning:** Separation from service delivery avoids real or perceived conflicts of interest and ensures **transparent, merit-based commissioning**—so the *best-fit* local providers are engaged for each need, not the FP itself.
- **Ecosystem building over program competition:** A non-delivering FP can focus fully on network weaving, partner nurturing, and integration, rather than competing for clients or funds. This strengthens trust and collaboration across schools, ECEC services, NGOs, health and local government.
- **Adaptive portfolio management:** Staying out of delivery gives the FP agility to rebalance the local portfolio (start, scale, adapt, or sunset activities) as needs shift—e.g., incubating school-based readiness where transport and childcare are limited.
- **Protected child voice and community-shaped design:** The FP's neutrality helps hold the space for children's participation and community-led priorities—so engagement isn't constrained by a single provider's model.
- **Capacity building at system level:** A non-delivering FP invests in partner capability (governance, measurement, practice improvements) across the ecosystem, lifting overall quality and reach rather than a single agency's program footprint.

What this means for DSS's future model

The Capricorn CfC FP approach is **essential** to achieving DSS's Prevention and Early Intervention ambitions precisely because the FP role is **distinct from delivery**. To realise that potential, DSS should:

1. **Preserve the FP's independent facilitation function** as the backbone for local coordination, commissioning, and governance.
2. **Embed evidence-informed flexibility** so FPs can tailor portfolios and incubate innovations (e.g., school-based readiness where services or transport are scarce).
3. **Support capacity building and partner nurturing** as core FP deliverables—recognising the time and relational work needed to sustain collaboration and quality.
4. **Reform funding and reporting settings** to cover real backbone costs and reduce administrative drag, freeing FPs to lead integration and continuous improvement.

Without these safeguards—and especially if FPs are required to also deliver services—the sector risks **transactional fragmentation**, weaker partner trust, and diminished child voice. Keeping the FP **independent of direct delivery** protects neutrality, strengthens collective impact, and sustains the local adaptability that has underpinned Capricorn CfC FP’s success.

Discussion Questions

Evidence Spotlight

- **Paul Ramsay Foundation Analysis:** Local Government Areas (LGAs) with a Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (CfC FP) have consistently outperformed state averages in reducing child developmental vulnerability since 2009—by a factor of two. This is not just a program success metric; it demonstrates CfC’s **systemic impact**, its ability to shift population-level outcomes, and the productivity benefits of investing in backbone facilitation rather than fragmented service delivery.
- **FRSA Research Findings:** CfC Facilitating Partners are **critical system enablers—not simply contract managers**. They broker relationships, reduce duplication, and strengthen local networks, creating the conditions for **collaboration, governance, and capacity building**. These mechanisms are essential for integrated service systems and long-term improvements in child and family wellbeing. Without this backbone role, collective impact strategies falter, and transactional models fail to deliver sustainable change.

Vision and Outcomes

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

Yes. The new vision also strongly aligns with existing Operational Guidelines for CfC FP and are embedded in the Capricorn CfC FP’s 2022-2026 Community Strategic Plan, which prioritised early years, family wellbeing, and resilience.

Evidence from the Paul Ramsay Foundation shows that LGAs with a CfC Facilitating Partner outperform state averages for reducing child developmental vulnerability by a factor of two. This demonstrates systemic impact. FRSA research confirms that CfC Facilitating Partners create the conditions for collaboration, governance, and capacity building—critical enablers of long-term change.

2. Are the two main outcomes what we should be working towards for children and families? Why/Why not?

Yes. These outcomes are both appropriate and achievable. Capricorn CfC funded activities empower parents and strengthen children’s emotional resilience.

PRF evidence validates CfC’s effectiveness at scale, while FRSA highlights the Facilitating Partner role in enabling these outcomes through intentional strategies like network weaving, governance structures, and capacity building. These mechanisms ensure families are supported holistically, not just through isolated interventions.

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

Potentially, yes—but only if CfC’s facilitation role is preserved as the backbone for local coordination. The FP’s independence from direct service delivery ensures impartial commissioning, fosters trust, and enables adaptive portfolio management. Without this facilitation function, integration fails—as confirmed by FRSA evidence. PRF findings reinforce that place-based models like CfC deliver measurable impact precisely because they prioritise collaboration over competition.

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. CfC activities fit squarely within the Prevention and Early Intervention stream. These streams reflect current and future needs, including early childhood development, family wellbeing, and community resilience. PRF evidence demonstrates that CfC FP’s prevention focus drives better outcomes than state averages. FRSA confirms that FP-led governance and capacity building are essential for sustaining these gains.

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

- Streamlined reporting through DSS Data Exchange enhancements to reduce administrative burden.
- Adoption of evidence-informed practices to allow cultural responsiveness and innovation.
- Full-cost funding models to sustain backbone functions and workforce capacity.

Importantly, co-location does not guarantee collaboration. Capricorn CfC FP’s experience—and FRSA findings—show that integration requires intentional strategies:

- Network weaving to connect services and reduce duplication.
- Soft entry points to engage families early and build trust.
- Governance structures that foster transparency and shared accountability.

These approaches, combined with capacity building and long-term trust, are critical for achieving DSS outcomes.

Prioritising Investment**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. The four priorities align closely with Capricorn CfC FP’s focus on early intervention, family wellbeing, and integrated service delivery. Evidence from the Paul Ramsay Foundation confirms that investing in CfC FP-like models delivers significant returns by reducing child developmental vulnerability at scale. FRSA research reinforces that CfC

Facilitating Partners act as system leaders—brokering relationships, reducing duplication, and amplifying impact through governance and capacity building. These priorities are essential, but their success depends on preserving CfC FP’s backbone role and the intentional strategies that make collaboration work: network weaving, soft entry points, and long-term trust.

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

Yes. Additional priorities should include:

- Generational engagement shifts—recognising that younger parents often prefer digital and flexible engagement options.
- Cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD) inclusion—embedding culturally responsive practices in all program design.
- Regional service delivery challenges—addressing transport barriers and workforce shortages through place-based innovation.

Evidence from published e-journal articles and FRSA research underscores the critical role of father-inclusive programs. These efforts demonstrate that strategies such as proactive outreach and managing waitlists are resource-intensive but essential for ensuring equity and access. Without these approaches, many families, particularly those facing social or geographic barriers—risk being excluded from vital supports.

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?

Yes. These focus areas align strongly with CfC priorities, but it is important to recognise the complementary roles of different systems. State-based programs typically **provide** intensive family support for families already at high risk or engaged with statutory systems. CfC-funded activities, by contrast, focus on early intervention and prevention, addressing vulnerabilities before they escalate to crisis.

Capricorn CfC FP plays a critical bridging role by creating soft entry points and using relational engagement strategies that reduce stigma and invite participation from families who might otherwise avoid formal services. Through partnerships with local schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, CfC FP builds trust and strengthens protective factors early in a child’s life. This approach ensures families receive the right support at the right time—preventing issues from escalating into crisis and reducing pressure on child protection systems—while promoting long-term wellbeing through capacity building and stronger 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?

Yes. In addition to fathers and male caregivers—who remain underrepresented in family support initiatives—grandparents and kinship carers play a vital role in raising children,

particularly in regional communities. These carers often step in during times of family crisis but face unique challenges such as financial strain, limited access to respite, and navigating complex service systems.

Approaches should include:

- Father-inclusive practices that recognise the unique role of dads in child development.
- Support for grandparents and kinship carers, including tailored programs, peer networks, and flexible respite options.
- Culturally responsive strategies to engage diverse families and respect intergenerational caregiving norms.
- Digital engagement tools to reach families who face time, transport, or geographic barriers.

These strategies, combined with CfC FP's backbone facilitation, governance structures, and intentional approaches like network weaving and soft entry points, ensure that support is accessible, equitable, and tailored to local needs—strengthening protective factors across all caregiving arrangements.

Connected, Co-located & Integrated Services

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

Beyond co-location, Capricorn CfC demonstrates that integration is relational, not spatial. Effective strategies include:

- Network weaving to build trust and reduce duplication across sectors.
- Local forums such as *Connecting Capricorn* that foster shared accountability and collective problem-solving.
- Soft entry points like *Play & Connect* events, which engage families early and create pathways to more intensive supports.

FRSA research confirms that facilitation and governance—not shared spaces—drive collaboration, while PRF evidence reinforces that systemic coordination is key to achieving population-level outcomes.

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?

Highlight participatory research and co-design practices, such as those used in *Connecting Dads of Capricorn*. Demonstrate authentic engagement through:

- Father-inclusive and kinship-inclusive programs.
- Culturally responsive, trauma-informed approaches.
- Play-based hubs and soft entry strategies that reduce stigma and build trust.

Applicants should be assessed on their ability to embed governance structures, network weaving, and capacity building, as validated by FRSA evidence.

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

In addition to geographic disadvantage, DSS should consider factors that influence service accessibility, integration, and sustainability, while leveraging proven strengths of the CfC model:

- Cultural diversity and inclusion: Capricorn CfC has demonstrated success in embedding cultural safety and family voice through collaborative governance and partnerships with local networks. Future funding should build on these practices and complement state-based initiatives like Local Level Alliances.
- Digital access and literacy: Capricorn CfC FP's experience in using soft entry points and community hubs shows how digital engagement can be layered with relational strategies to reach families in remote or time-poor contexts. DSS should align with broader government strategies for digital inclusion while supporting Capricorn CfC FP's blended engagement approach.
- Workforce capacity and stability: Regional areas face competition for skilled staff across overlapping programs (e.g., state-funded intensive family support and health initiatives). Capricorn CfC FP mitigates this by acting as a neutral backbone—brokering partnerships, reducing duplication, and building capacity across the local service ecosystem. Funding models should incentivize collaboration rather than competition, enabling CfC Facilitating Partners to continue weaving these efforts together for greater collective impact.

By considering these factors and preserving CfC's facilitation role, DSS can ensure its proposed model complements—not competes with—other government programs, creating a cohesive, place-based ecosystem that maximizes outcomes for children and families.

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

The strongest way to demonstrate genuine community connection is through evidence of codesign, collaboration, and impact at multiple levels. This should include:

- Soft entry events and outreach to natural gathering points: Highlight strategies like *Play & Connect* and community fairs that reduce stigma, build trust, and engage families who might otherwise avoid formal services. These approaches show responsiveness to local context and barriers.
- Network weaving and collaborative governance: Showcase how your organisation convenes diverse stakeholders—schools, ECEC services, health providers, NGOs, and community leaders—to create integrated solutions. Capricorn CfC FP's governance structures and local forums such as *Connecting Capricorn* exemplify how backbone facilitation fosters shared accountability and systemic impact.
- Father-inclusive and kinship-supportive programs: Provide examples of initiatives like *Connecting Dads of Capricorn* and partnerships that support grandparents and kinship

carers. These programs demonstrate inclusivity and responsiveness to family diversity, addressing gaps often overlooked in mainstream service design.

- Evidence-informed flexibility: Show how your service adapts to emerging needs—such as digital engagement for time-poor families or culturally tailored approaches for CALD communities—while maintaining fidelity to proven frameworks.
- Community voice and lived experience: Include qualitative data, testimonials, and participatory research findings that reflect authentic engagement with children, parents, and carers. Capricorn CfC’s *Children’s Voice Project* is a strong example of embedding child perspectives into planning and decision-making.
- Capacity building and sustainability: Demonstrate efforts to strengthen local service ecosystems through training, mentoring, and resource-sharing, ensuring long-term impact beyond individual programs.

By weaving these elements together, organisations can present a compelling case that their service is not only connected to the community but actively shaping and responding to its evolving needs—a hallmark of the CfC FP approach.

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

Simplify grant processes and provide capacity-building support, including mentoring and partnership opportunities, to increase ACCO participation.

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

Program design must embed cultural safety, First Nations governance, and co-design principles as non-negotiable elements. However, it is equally important to recognise that a universal approach can provide advantages in some communities, particularly where families have experienced lateral violence or feel unsafe engaging with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).

In these contexts, CfC’s inclusive, place-based model offers a neutral and trusted platform for engagement, ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families can access culturally respectful services without fear of judgment or community conflict. This does not replace ACCO leadership but complements it by creating multiple safe pathways for families to participate.

The program should therefore:

- Maintain First Nations voice and governance in decision-making.
- Support universal entry points alongside ACCO-led options to maximise choice and safety.
- Invest in cultural capability building across all providers to ensure respectful, traumainformed practice.

This blended approach respects cultural identity while addressing the realities of community dynamics, ensuring that every family has access to safe, equitable, and empowering support.

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

Data on long-term outcomes, service reach, and participant feedback, complemented by qualitative insights, would strengthen continuous improvement.

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?

To demonstrate impact effectively, a multi-layered evidence approach is essential:

- Qualitative case studies that capture lived experience and illustrate how CfC FP implementation strategies—such as soft entry points, network weaving, and governance structures—translate into real outcomes for families.
- Outcome measures and community-level SCORE data to provide a robust, quantitative picture of progress across domains like family functioning and ageappropriate development.
- Insights from Activity Work Plan (AWP) reports across DSS-funded activities, synthesised to identify patterns, innovations, and lessons learned. This collective analysis would strengthen sector-wide understanding of what works in place-based approaches, reduce duplication, and amplify shared wisdom.

By combining local impact data with aggregated insights from other DSS-funded programs, a CfC FP like model can contribute to a national evidence base for place-based practice, informing policy and improving outcomes for children and families at scale.

Q18. If your organisation currently reports in the Data Exchange (DEX), what SCORE Circumstances domain is most relevant to the service you deliver?

The most relevant SCORE Circumstances domains for our CfC services are:

- Family Functioning – reflecting our focus on strengthening family relationships and parenting practices across programs such as Care & Connect and Dads Group.
- Age-appropriate Development – capturing outcomes for children’s social, emotional and cognitive development through early learning and school-readiness activities (e.g., Connect & Grow, Step into Prep).
- Education and Skills Training – used for parent and caregiver capacity-building components, including health and safety education delivered by Life Education and father-focused peer support in Dads Group.
- Community Participation and Networks – particularly relevant for place-based engagement and social connection, aligning with the DSS aim of “Communities are Cohesive.”

While Family Functioning and Age-appropriate Development remain primary, we routinely apply Education and Skills Training where activities build parental capability and strengthen social support systems.

Note: Although *Community Participation and Networks* is critical to CfC FP's place-based model and aligns with the Families and Children Activity Outcomes Framework, it is challenging to capture through current DEX individual SCORE measurements. Community cohesion outcomes often occur at a group or network level rather than at the individual level required by DEX, making this domain harder to evidence within existing reporting structures.

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

Templates should include prompts for context, intervention, outcomes, and participant voice, ensuring stories reflect both quantitative and qualitative impact.

Measuring Outcomes

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

Relational contracting, in practice, means moving beyond transactional compliance toward trust-based partnerships that prioritise shared accountability, flexibility, and co-created solutions. For Capricorn CfC, this approach reflects what we already do: convening diverse stakeholders, aligning priorities, and enabling adaptive responses to local needs.

Key elements in practice include:

- Mutual trust and transparency – built through consistent engagement and open data sharing.
- Shared outcomes and accountability – partners commit to collective impact goals, not just isolated outputs.
- Flexibility and adaptability – contracts allow for iterative adjustments based on emerging community needs and evidence.
- Investment in relationships – recognising that network weaving, soft entry points, and culturally responsive engagement require time and resources.
- Capacity-building provisions – supporting smaller partners to meet governance and reporting requirements without losing focus on service quality.
- Continuous learning and improvement – embedding mechanisms for reflection, feedback loops, and adaptive planning.

Criteria for relational contracts should include:

- Demonstrated experience in place-based leadership and collaborative governance.
- Evidence of system stewardship, not just program delivery (e.g., CfC's role in convening schools, health, and community services).
- Commitment to inclusive engagement strategies for priority cohorts (e.g., fathers, First Nations families, CALD communities).

- Ability to measure outcomes meaningfully, including community-level indicators that go beyond individual SCORE data.
- Proven track record in risk management and child safety compliance.

Capricorn CfC FP's partnerships with currently funded Community Partners exemplify this approach: co-designing programs, leveraging local networks, and aligning with DSS outcomes such as "Communities are Cohesive"—even when current DEX structures make these harder to evidence.

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

The department should prioritise organisations that:

- Have a proven track record in place-based facilitation and collaborative governance.
- Act as system leaders, not just service providers—organisations that convene networks, broker partnerships, and drive collective impact.
- Demonstrate adaptive capacity, evidenced by successful navigation of complex challenges (e.g., natural disasters, pandemic disruptions) while maintaining service continuity.
- Show data maturity—using both quantitative and qualitative evidence to inform continuous improvement, and acknowledging limitations in current reporting systems (e.g., inability to fully capture community cohesion in DEX).
- Are embedded in local decision-making structures.

FRSA research confirms that CfC Facilitating Partners are uniquely positioned for relational contracting because they already operate as backbone organisations, enabling systemic change beyond program delivery.

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

Yes. Capricorn CfC FP is strongly interested because relational contracting aligns with our facilitation role and collective impact mandate. It reduces compliance burden while enabling us to invest in strategies that matter most for outcomes—such as:

- Network weaving to strengthen service integration.
- Soft entry points that engage families who face barriers to formal services.
- Adaptive programming that responds to emerging needs (e.g., digital engagement for isolated fathers, community forums for social connection).
- Inclusive design for priority cohorts, including First Nations families and fathers.

These strategies are resource-intensive but critical for achieving DSS aims like "Communities are Cohesive" and "Family relationships flourish." Relational contracting would allow us to focus on outcomes rather than rigid outputs, while maintaining accountability through shared governance and transparent reporting.

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

Yes. The department should:

- Recognise that measuring community-level outcomes remains a challenge under current DEX structures. Domains like *Community Participation and Networks* align with DSS's Outcomes Framework but are difficult to evidence through individual SCORE entries. Relational contracting should allow flexibility to incorporate qualitative and collective impact measures alongside DEX data, and DSS should invest in tools and guidance for capturing these outcomes.
- Build internal capability for relational contracting. DSS Funding Arrangement Managers (FAMs) currently operate within a compliance-driven paradigm. To adopt a relational approach, the department must:
 - Provide specialised training in collaborative governance, adaptive contracting, and outcomes-based facilitation.
 - Shift performance metrics for FAMs from transactional compliance to relationship stewardship and system-level impact.
 - Equip FAMs with skills in negotiation, conflict resolution, and co-design to support adaptive delivery.
 - Develop guidance and frameworks for managing flexibility without compromising accountability.
- Provide clear expectations and capacity-building supports for smaller partners to thrive under a relational model. This includes simplified reporting templates, technical assistance, and funding for backbone functions like data coordination and community engagement.
- Embed continuous improvement mechanisms. Establish shared learning forums, adaptive planning cycles, and feedback loops between DSS, Facilitating Partners, and community stakeholders to ensure responsiveness and innovation.
- Ensure risk and compliance frameworks remain robust—particularly around child safety and financial accountability—while avoiding overly prescriptive reporting that undermines innovation and flexibility.
- Consider longer-term funding horizons to enable genuine system change and reduce churn in community partnerships. Multi-year agreements (e.g., 5+ years) will allow relational contracting to deliver its intended benefits.
- Invest in cultural change within DSS. Relational contracting requires a mindset shift from “contract monitoring” to partnership facilitation. This means:
 - Encouraging trust-based engagement rather than punitive compliance.
 - Valuing place-based intelligence and local decision-making.
 - Aligning DSS internal KPIs with collaborative outcomes rather than rigid output targets.

Conclusion

The Communities for Children FP model is not just a program—it is a proven system enabler that transforms fragmented services into cohesive, collaborative ecosystems. Evidence from Capricorn CfC FP and national research demonstrates that backbone facilitation, child voice, and place-based governance are the levers that shift population-level outcomes for children and families. As DSS moves toward a consolidated national framework, preserving these core principles is non-negotiable. Without them, we risk reverting to transactional models that undermine trust, dilute collaboration, and fail to deliver sustainable change.

By safeguarding CfC FP's independent facilitation role, embedding evidence-informed flexibility, and investing in long-term, relational contracting, DSS can build a future where communities are not just served—they are empowered to lead. This is how we move beyond program outputs to systemic impact: creating conditions where every child can thrive, every family feels supported, and every community becomes a catalyst for lasting wellbeing.

The Capricorn Communities for Children Committee affirms its commitment to place-based collaboration and endorses this response as a reflection of our shared vision for children and families in the Capricorn region. We thank the Department of Social Services for the opportunity to contribute and look forward to continuing to work together to strengthen outcomes through community-led approaches.