

Submission 'A New Approach to Programs for Families and Children'

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Centacare New England North West welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation process and contribute to the redesign of programs for families and children.

We have been operating since 2001, and as a longstanding provider deeply embedded in our regional communities, we bring decades of local knowledge, **trusted relationships**, and a proven track record of delivering **physically and culturally safe services** to all members of the community regardless of race or gender. Our service model is grounded in place-based practice, cultural responsiveness, and genuine collaboration, ensuring that our programs reflect the real needs and strengths of the people we serve.

We support efforts to **strengthen ACCO-led service delivery** where this is community-led, culturally safe, and backed by strong local capability. We note the importance of **staged and thoughtful implementation** of these reforms to ensure appropriate access to all people in regional and remote areas, where service gaps already exist and families often have limited alternatives.

We offer the following key recommendations to ensure this reform delivers tangible, lasting benefits for all families and children, regardless of their location or cultural background.

1. Flexibility in Tendering: Enabling Multiple Submissions to Reflect Diverse Service Models

Historically, organisations could only appear in a single proposal, which significantly limited flexibility, reduced genuine collaboration, and unintentionally discouraged the formation of strong service partnerships.

Allowing providers to **participate in multiple proposals**, for example, one as a sole applicant and another as part of a **partnership**, would enable the department to **assess the strongest service model on its merits**. This is particularly important in the context of supporting ACCOs: it would allow ACCOs to submit a stand-alone application, while also partnering with another provider that already has proven capability and trust in the community, where **shared delivery** or capacity-building may offer **greater benefit to community**. The department would then have the opportunity to determine which approach delivers the most appropriate, sustainable and culturally safe outcomes.

To illustrate this point, Centacare NENW is not an ACCO, yet **4,107 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients** chose to access our services under the DSS Programs, due to our **long-standing presence (over 20 years)**, **trusted relationships**, and flexible delivery. Each of the 21 towns we serve has a distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, with diverse intra-community dynamics and historical relationships. In sensitive service areas such as **family violence and mental health**, clients must retain the **freedom to choose who they feel safest with**. For some, this may be a local ACCO, for others, another provider that is not linked with their mob. Respecting this choice is essential to maintaining engagement, safety and trust for people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

The flexibility we are recommending would not only **remove structural barriers to partnership** but would also actively **increase providers' ability to work together**, leverage complementary strengths, and form integrated delivery ecosystems. It would also provide a **practical solution** to the current tension between **sector collaboration and procurement guidelines**. It would align with the department's broader objectives of fostering local partnerships, strengthening ACCO capabilities, and maintaining **value-for-money and quality benchmarks**.

2. Completing the Picture: What Else Must Be Considered

While the four priorities outlined in the Discussion Paper provide a useful foundation, they omit critical elements we believe should be addressed to ensure genuine equity and effectiveness.

*a. **Safety:** There is no reference to safety. Given that one of the existing programs in scope directly relates to family and domestic violence, this omission is significant. Safety is a fundamental prerequisite for thriving children and strong families. Any framework for child and family investment must prioritise physical, emotional, and cultural safety, particularly when programs such as Specialised Family Violence Services are designed to respond to risk, trauma, and vulnerability at the point of crisis.*

*b. **Place:** The vision of co-located services, while valuable in metropolitan centres, is often impractical in regional, rural and remote towns. Smaller communities frequently lack public venues large enough or appropriate for multidisciplinary service delivery. Service models in these regions must therefore remain flexible and mobile, incorporating school-based delivery, home visits, outreach, and transport assistance to ensure accessibility. Since commencing service delivery, Centacare NENW has delivered 40,516 program sessions in regional and rural towns and a further 55,500 in school-based or community settings, demonstrating the essential role of adaptive delivery in reaching vulnerable families where they are.*

3. Fair Funding, Stronger Futures: Meeting the Needs of Regional and Remote Families

Approximately one in three Australians (33%) live outside major capital cities (ABS, 2021), with regional, rural and remote communities spanning vast and diverse areas across the country. For example, the footprint of Centacare NENW is equivalent to the size of Tasmania and includes rural towns and regional centres such as Tamworth and Armidale, which are home to growing and culturally diverse migrant communities. Delivering effective support to these populations requires targeted investment and flexible program design.

To ensure this reform delivers equitable outcomes, funding models must reflect the realities of service delivery in regional and remote communities:

- **Service reach and infrastructure costs:** Outreach across large distances significantly increases expenses related to travel, staffing, and maintaining place-based infrastructure when co-location is not available.
- **Diverse community needs:** Towns such as Tamworth and Armidale host vibrant multicultural populations, while most towns include high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Tailored approaches are essential to meet local needs.
- **Access and equity:** Without weighted funding models, reforms risk unintentionally excluding the very families and children who need support most.

To address these challenges, tiered or loading-based funding mechanisms should be adopted, similar to those used in other government programs such as:

- *Disability Employment Services (DES)*
- *Job Services Australia (JSA)*
- *Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV)*

These models incorporate regional or complexity-based loadings to account for geographic and community-based service delivery challenges.

4. Infrastructure That Reaches: Asset Flexibility to Improve Rural Access

Another important consideration for future reforms is the ability for providers to purchase assets under DSS funding. Currently, asset purchases are restricted, despite staff in regional and remote areas often being required to travel over three hours to reach the communities they support. This places a considerable financial burden on providers and for some, compromises the long-term sustainability and safety of service delivery.

Allowing limited and strategic investment in assets would enable innovative service models tailored to rural contexts. For example, adopting a mobile service centre model, similar to that used by Services Australia would allow organisations like Centacare NENW to bring services directly into remote towns, reducing barriers and improving outcomes. Asset flexibility would not only improve workforce safety and reduce fatigue-related risk, but also enable scalable, multi-service place-based responses aligned with the Government's vision for equitable access, regardless of postcode. A similar approach in this program would support fair access, uphold equity principles, and enable regional providers to deliver high-quality, culturally safe services across diverse communities.

In Conclusion

Equity, safety, fair funding, and flexibility are essential considerations to reform of services in regional areas, if this reform is to deliver on its promise for all children and families. Centacare NENW has built significant trust in our local region over more than 20 years, across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, non-Indigenous and migrant communities, and we look forward to the opportunity to continue supporting those people's needs into the future.