SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

A NEW APPROACH TO PROGRAMS FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

1. INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Public Value UWA welcomes the opportunity to respond to Department of Social Services' (hereafter, the department) consultation request for a new approach to programs for families and children.

We are encouraged by the government's commitment to reforming child and family programs in ways that appear to centre more effective stewardship, a stronger understanding of community need, improved outcomes, enabling the community sector to prioritise delivering high quality services.

We consider this reform a timely and valuable opportunity to improve the coherence, sustainability, monitoring and effectiveness of child and family services across Australia. Furthermore, we consider it a valuable trial that can inform other programs administered across government.

2. OVERALL REFLECTIONS

The proposed national program takes an important step away from fragmented program structures toward a more coherent and responsive system.

The emphasis on community need, longer-term funding, and integrated services is strongly supported, as is the stated investment priorities. In particular, the focus on early intervention and connected, integrated services is a necessary and welcomed shift in priorities.

The recognition that outcomes take time and require flexibility reflects a realistic understanding of the complexity of supporting families and children. However, we hope to see this coupled with an understanding of the support and guidance required by community sector organisations when outcomes are the primary measure of effectiveness and evaluation.

The success of this new approach will depend heavily on how collaboration, monitoring and flexibility are embedded in practice, not just in design.

3. KEY CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 A SYSTEMS APPROACH

Outcomes for children and families are shaped by a wide range of interacting factors; no single program can deliver these outcomes on its own.

Therefore, the approach should emphasise systems-level coordination, not strictly program optimisation, where feasible

- A systems approach should include how the new approach can:
  - Align the policy outcomes and intent between and within different jurisdictions to best synergise the activities detailed.
  - Supporting cross-program and cross-jurisdictional collaboration for providers and users, particularly where families interact with multiple services.
  - Any competitive and open grant approaches need to be balanced with the stated policy aspirations of co-located, collaborative and integrated service networks.

- These considerations are essential to avoid simply reorganising program boundaries while leaving system fragmentation and provider capabilities in place.

WHAT WORKS WELL TO CONNECT AND COORDINATE SERVICES BEYOND CO-LOCATION?

Effective approaches can include co-contractual referral pathways, joint intake or triage arrangements via a networked back end or the facilitation of multi-agency service discussions that support integrated and seamless responses for families. Lastly, shared data dashboards can better guide outreach and investment decisions that support supply coverage and outcome tracking across locations.

With this is mind, the department should remain cognizant of the differing levels of governance maturity and capability across service delivery organisations, as well as the additional stewardship required to support organisations to partner, collaborate and network in ways that potentiate the desired economies of scale and integrated outcomes.

3.2 INVESTMENT AND CAPABILITY, NOT JUST STEERING

- The approach aims to shift toward outcomes-focused and relational approaches. To succeed, it will require targeted investment and support in capability-building, not simply changes in contractual expectations.

- Centre for Public Value research on social service outcomes measurement[1] highlights that many providers:
  - Continue to lack the appropriate systems and tools to collect and communicate outcomes data effectively.
  - Struggle to define meaningful outcomes connected to a clear theory of change when the service is complex, opaque, or heavily relational.
  - Struggle to effectively evaluate and respond to divergent outcomes information internally due to under-developed systems.
  - Therefore, where is most necessary, investment should be made available for:
    - Transition support that promotes knowledge sharing, data system management, workforce capability-building, or evaluation literacy.
    - Building internal capacity for collaborative work and joint problem-solving where the government and organisations identify potential for partnerships at the community level.
    - Strengthening place-based planning and community need and supply mapping.

---

[1] Gilchrist, D. J. (2020). Outcomes: Research into Practice. A report for the National Outcomes Measurement Research Agenda. Grant Thornton: Melbourne.

4. COLLABORATION AND RELATIONAL CONTRACTING

4.1 WHY COLLABORATION MATTERS

The department's interest in relational contracting is welcomed. Collaboration is central to solving complex social issues and has been advocated for by the Centre for Public Value UWA, among other sector stakeholders. But it must be more than a label.

- Collaboration works when all parties genuinely try to understand each other's perspectives and work towards a well-defined shared goal.

- It relies on trust, openness, and consistent communication on expectations and challenges—not just new contract wording.

- Collaboration is an iterative, intentional behaviour that can only be prolonged through clear incentives. It is not a state or a step in a workflow.

4.2 COMMON BARRIERS TO GENUINE COLLABORATION

Extensive previous Centre research[2] has identified recurring challenges in human services partnerships, including:

- Power imbalances: Government controls the resources and is institutional risk averse, which can limit honest and open dialogue.

- Conflict is most common when outcomes and program logic are not equally understood and agreed upon and can be later contested as circumstances changes and outcomes are not being met.

- Grant rules, even when flexibility is intended, can produce rigid contracts by design that discourage flexibility and the 'give and take' partnering style that often underpins relational contracting.

- Different organisational cultures and sectoral silos across government and community sector organisations generated deviations in risk tolerance, programmatic expectations and frontline service expertise.

- Relationships are cultivated and managed at the interpersonal level. Given the turnover in both sectors, corporate memory and sharing protocols should be established to best maintain effective collaboration.

4.3 WHAT THE NEW APPROACH CAN DO

To foster genuine collaboration, the program should:

- Create shared decision-making structures. Joint governance groups or shared planning forums to help shift from reporting-up to problem-solving together.

- Build a "permission environment" by emphasising informal spaces where partners can test ideas, raise concerns, and explore solutions without fear of penalty.

- Set clear outcomes and change markers but allow flexibility in how the outcomes are achieved. Providers need room to adapt based on what they learn from families and communities but

---

[2] Butcher, J. R., & Gilchrist, D. (2020). Collaboration for Impact: Lessons from the field. ANU Press: Canberra.

requires appropriate guardrails (change markers) to align local-specific nuance with the wider evidence base.

- Be explicit about power, responsibility and expectations. Acknowledge what can be negotiated and actively share decision-making authority where possible. It is a common practice for relational contracting to specify conflict resolution and negotiation processes to support power sharing when disagreements arise.

- Resource the relationship, not just the service. Time spent on shared learning, reflection, and coordination should be built into funding expectations.

4.4 RISKS TO MANAGE

Relational contracting can revert to transactional practice if not intentionally supported.

Key risks include:

- Collaboration becoming symbolic rather than real as expressed through shared control over service design and decision making.

- Providers feeling unable to raise problems openly without fear of consequences.

- Mismatched expectations about roles, responsibilities, outcomes and program logic in a complex and oft-changing service environment.

- Formal accountability processes overriding collaborative intent as expectation diverge or contract renewal periods arise.

These risks are manageable if the program explicitly designs for collaboration rather than assuming it will emerge naturally through contract wording changes and institutional intent alone.

HOW SHOULD THE DEPARTMENT DECIDE WHO RECEIVES A RELATIONAL CONTRACT?

Relational contracts should be offered to organisations that demonstrate a reliable delivery track record, strong relationships with local partners, and a clear and coherent theory of change supported by realistic outcome indicators. Providers should also have minimum governance, financial and data capability, alongside user legitimacy, particularly where ACCO leadership is appropriate.

A short expression-of-interest process, assessed against these criteria, would support transparent and consistent decision-making, with the option of conditional relational contracts where capability strengthening is required. Given the importance of decision sharing in these relationships, the department should consider a small trial sample followed by a review period.

5. OUTCOMES MEASUREMENT AND DATA

5.1 PRACTICAL REALITIES FOR PROVIDERS

Research[3] shows widespread challenges across the community services sector related to outcomes measurement capabilities, including:

---

[3] Gilchrist, D. J., & Perks, B. (2025). Real costs, real impacts: A path to social services sustainability; Gilchrist, D. J. (2018). Outcomes research to practice: Sector practice & policy issues. National Outcomes Measurement Research Agenda Working Paper No. 3. Grant Thornton: Perth.

- Inconsistent access to functional data systems.

- Limited capability to use outcomes frameworks or develop (or adapt) well-defined theories of change.

- Difficulty measuring long-term outcomes that unfold beyond the grant period.

- Outcomes reporting expectations that can outweigh actual service delivery effort.

5.2 WHAT AN EFFECTIVE OUTCOMES MODEL REQUIRES

A workable outcomes approach should include:

- A clear, shared and evidence-based theory of change linking activities to outcomes. This should include core programmatic outcomes, in addition to suitable proxies. Of course, this includes the balancing of standardising and contextualising the outcomes design.

- Recognition that outcomes emerge over long timeframes and across multiple services is explicitly reflected in contracting, the funding model and the linked performance framework.

- Service quality does not rest on attribution. Since outcomes are often the result of a diverse range of treatments, the focus should instead be on the contribution of the program and how it interacts with the system of change in place.

- Risk-free processes for data collection, storage, interpretation, and use. Data should be privacy-compliant and carefully designed and stored to enable de-identified outcomes data to be shared through secure systems. Service organisations should be encouraged to report on challenges and negative trends to support learning across the program without fear of non-compliance within reasonable timeframes.

WHAT TYPES OF DATA WOULD HELP YOUR ORGANISATION UNDERSTAND ITS IMPACT AND IMPROVE?

To understand impact and improve services, organisations would benefit from a small set of clear outcome indicators linked to an agreed upon theory of change, and supported by basic operational data such as referral patterns, attendance, service intensity and wait times.

Client feedback through short surveys or exit interviews would identify whether supports are meeting families' needs. Local context data, such as SEIFA, AEDC and child protection engagement, would also allow organisations and the department to interpret outcomes appropriately over time.[4] Where feasible, simple follow-up data at 6–12 months would help track sustained change.

WHAT DATA WOULD BE MOST VALUABLE TO SHARE TO SHOW POSITIVE IMPACT?

The most useful information to share would be aggregated outcome results showing the proportion of families experiencing improvements across the agreed performance metrics in child protection, developmental well-being, education and general health. An accompanying source could be service reach and duration data to demonstrate equity, intervention timeliness and accessibility.

Brief case examples can illustrate how change occurs in practice. Trends in referrals, utilisation and adaptations made during delivery would provide meaningful context, supporting a learning-oriented

---

[4] We acknowledge that the department intends to use these data sources to assess community need. This approach should be extended to the monitoring against the program objectives.

approach to outcomes reporting. However, case study evidence should emphasise the theory of change and be supported by aggregated outcomes evidence. As organisations are incentivised to provide exemplar cases, it is important to establish the consistency of success alongside them.[5]

6. ALIGNMENT ACROSS JURISDICTIONS

- The reform presents a major opportunity to better align Commonwealth and State/Territory approaches to outcome frameworks, reporting frameworks, shared indicators and community needs assessment.

- Stronger alignment would reduce administrative burden on service organisations and create a more coherent, supportive service system overall for families.

- An inter-jurisdictional committee or similar informal mechanism should guide this work, ensuring the new funding and outcomes frameworks are informed by existing state-based approaches and lessons from programs delivered closer to communities.

7. COMMUNITY NEED REQUIREMENTS

BEYOND LOCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE, WHAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED WHEN ASSESSING COMMUNITY NEED?

- Beyond locational disadvantage, assessments of community need should consider local supply markets, demographic trends, and patterns of vulnerability that shape children's and families' lives.

- This includes population growth, housing instability, rates of developmental vulnerability, family violence prevalence, culturally specific needs, and gaps in existing service coverage.

- Local service fragmentation, long wait times, and inconsistency between Commonwealth and State/Territory programs are also strong indicators of unmet need.

- These factors provide a more accurate picture of the pressures that families experience and where investment will have the greatest impact.

HOW CAN ORGANISATIONS DEMONSTRATE CONNECTION TO THE COMMUNITY, AND WHAT SHOULD BE ASSESSED?

- An initial method could be a short explanation of how service design has been influenced by local factors, community-level partners and engagement with those with lived experience.

- The documenting of a simple theory of change that reflects the local conditions further demonstrates an organisation's responsiveness to a community's needs and understanding of local trends and opportunities.

- Assessment should prioritise localised detail and historical attention, partnership strength, the quality of the service model, organisational readiness and a demonstrated commitment to learning and improvement.

---

[5] Gilchrist, D., & Perks, B. (2023). Policy Evaluation in the Hands of Philanthropists and NGOs: The Politics of Getting it Right. n . Varone, S. Jacob, & P. Bundi (Eds.), Handbook of Public Policy Evaluation (pp. 299-316). Edward Elgar Publishing.

- However, this should not be the sole responsibility of an organisation. Government has a role in validating and steering the appropriateness of service models and networks through system stewardship, targeted capability investment and transparent service demand, supply and quality mapping.

8. CONCLUSION

The department's proposed approach outlines a promising foundation for reform. To achieve its goals, the new program must be built around:

- A focus on developing an enabling environment premised on genuine collaboration.

- Develop realistic and proportional outcomes frameworks that balance standardised indicators and localised measures.

- Adequate investment in capability and monitoring infrastructure to support outcome measurement, evaluation and learning.

The Centre for Public Value UWA welcomes the opportunity to continue engaging with the department to support the development and implementation of this important initiative.