

# RESPONSE TO DSS DISCUSSION PAPER: REFORMING FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

## Submission from Junction Australia

Junction welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department of Social Services (DSS) discussion paper regarding reform of the Family Support Services programs.

We note that the reform intent is to consolidate five program areas: Children and Parenting Support, Family Mental Health Support Services, Communities for Children Facilitating Partners, Family and Relationship Services, and Specialised Family Violence Services, into a single, unified program.

We support the aims of the proposed new program that include providing a range of high-quality, evidence-informed services that cater to general community needs as well as targeted assistance during times of crisis. Additionally, we support the intent of the reforms to streamline grant and reporting processes, allowing organisations to focus more on supporting families rather than administrative tasks, and to enhance services specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

We see these proposed reforms as a valuable opportunity to align efforts between State, Commonwealth and philanthropic funding to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families. We particularly welcome the potential for reforms to reduce fragmentation across funding streams, noting that providers such as Junction currently operate within complex and often inconsistent State and Commonwealth requirements and contracting approaches. Simplified, coherent commissioning settings will increase the time organisations can devote to supporting children and families, rather than administrative burden.

In the paper below we have included a summary of our position in relation to this reform and recommendations for consideration.

## About Junction Australia

With a strong footprint in the provision of early intervention, intensive therapeutic supports, community services and social and affordable housing, Junction is uniquely positioned to respond to the proposed reforms.

Our strategic vision is for South Australia to be a great place to live where people feel safe and connected and community transformation has inspired systemic change.

Established in 1979, we have grown from an onsite emergency youth accommodation service to a leading social enterprise with close to 400 staff, across 30 local government areas, predominantly located on Kurna and Ngarrindjeri country in South Australia, and on Karta Pintingga – the Aboriginal name for Kangaroo Island.

As a leading Community Housing Provider in South Australia, Junction manages over 2,500 tenancies, providing safe, secure, high quality social housing to close to 4,500 people in our social housing programs.

Junction also creates a range of affordable housing options for South Australian renters. We have an ambitious pipeline to build 2000 new social and affordable homes across South Australia by 2030, many of which will be higher density, vertical communities.

Our Hackham and Kangaroo Island Community Centres provide a diverse range of early intervention, prevention, crisis and recovery-focused services and activities in response to local needs. This includes homelessness, family and domestic violence support, young parenting programs, creche and playgroups, workshops and clubs, emergency relief, and financial wellbeing support.

For the children, families and carers who are involved in the child protection system, we help create conditions for them to heal from trauma in residential, family and foster-care places, building safe, stable, nurturing connections and positive pathways into young adulthood and beyond. We are strongly committed to young people and note the disadvantages they currently experience in South Australia, particularly those exiting the child protection system.

Junction has a strategic focus on incorporating placemaking across all aspects of our work in creating communities that enable children, young people, families and adults to thrive.

We have included two case studies for your consideration to demonstrate the transformative impact that place-based approaches can achieve.

## Investment Priorities

Junction notes and supports the proposed reforms are intended to unify program outcomes across a spectrum of responses, acknowledging the varying degrees of complexity presented by different families' circumstances. We suggest that by supporting a continuum of service intensity: from information access points, through prevention and early support, to intensive wraparound supports, the program will ensure that families receive the right support at the right time.

Junction preferences the phrasing of “early support” rather than “early intervention” due to the negative legacy of protectionist interventions imposed on Aboriginal families.

Currently, South Australia under invests in early support services, resulting in a service system that too often pushes families into crisis because there are simply not enough supports available before issues escalate. Challenges to access early support services further stigmatises early help seeking behaviours amongst families.

South Australia's child protection expenditure profile is out of step with other Australian jurisdictions. Our State has the lowest proportion of the child protection budget directed to protection and early intervention. We believe this has a flow on effect that has catastrophic effects on the wellbeing of children and families in South Australia. Late intervention pushes children into the child protection system and means that by the time help is offered, crisis services are required. We call attention to the high rates of residential care services in South Australia with 40% of children in Out of Home Care in a residential care setting. We suggest this is directly related to the limited resources directed towards early support and the inability of families to access help early.

We support the intention of these reforms to provide a new range of early help services. However, to avoid the unintended consequence of creating or exacerbating service gaps, it is critical that reforms are informed by comprehensive statewide mapping of existing services, measured against clear statewide demand indicators as well as the insights from families who have accessed these existing services. This approach will help ensure that the reforms deliver equitable access to early supports for families who need them most in the right locations while investing in programs that matter most to families and deliver proven positive outcomes.

We note that the reforms propose to deliver a range of services, from prevention to intensive family supports. We support the proposed focus on earlier support and the value of accessible, 'soft entry' points, enabling families to seek help before issues escalate, promoting healthier, more resilient children and communities. We urge the government to consider the current service footprint of soft entry points in South Australia (including community centres) and support these place-based responses in the new responses. We note that challenge in reporting outcomes in relation to "soft entry point" service delivery. We suggest investment is made building data collection that demonstrates outcomes.

#### **Case Study 1: Hackham Community Centre**

Located in Onkaparinga, Hackham Community Centre demonstrates the power of accessible, place-based services in empowering the local community to address complex challenges. Welcoming around 200 children and their families each week, the centre acts as a vital access point, connecting families with further support across a range of needs. Through programs such as Little Mother Earth Caretakers Playgroup, Little Mother Earth Caretakers Music Group, and the Friends Resilience Program, the centre offers targeted activities for children of various ages, supported by partnerships and grants from initiatives including Communities for Children and the DSS CaPS program.

We suggested that our welcoming environment means we provide a soft entry point to community members who otherwise may be hesitant to access services. This inclusive approach not only encourages families to seek support but also enables our workers to build genuine partnerships with families. By establishing trust in a non-judgemental, community-based setting, our staff can better understand the individual needs of each family and assist them in navigating the often-complex web of available services.

Importantly, this model allows us to offer "warm referrals"; where staff personally connect families to the right service at the right time, rather than simply providing information or contact details. This hands-on, supportive approach ensures families are less likely to fall through the cracks and more likely to access the services that best meet their needs. The centre's provision of occasional care, particularly for children who are excluded from licensed early childhood

services due to vaccination status, further demonstrates our ability to reach and support families excluded from mainstream services.

As reforms are considered, it is critical that existing community access points, where families feel safe and comfortable, are maintained and supported. These trusted locations are vital for engaging families early, facilitating timely intervention, and ultimately improving the wellbeing of children and families in place.

**Recommendation:**

- **That DSS work with state government funded services to map and sustainably fund a network of community based “soft entry points” (including existing community centres) as part of the reformed program to support navigation to other services.**
- **That specific investment is made in outcome measurement and data capability for these early support/soft entry services.**

Efforts to provide intensive family supports is resource intensive and require high levels of clinical and cultural governance to manage risk. We note and support the proposed reform to include intensive family support services but urge DSS to consider how agencies can be supported to build clinical and cultural capacity to manage risk and ensure positive outcomes. With pressure to restrict “indirect costs,” we suggest that typically in South Australia, governments have not adequately funded agencies to deliver programs to families experiencing significant risk. To provide intensive support services, agencies will be required to build risk management, client information management systems, increase insurance and build internal clinical governance and cultural governance capacity. We refer to the *“Paying What it Takes”* study and have included the link below:

[Paying what it takes: Funding indirect costs to create long-term impact](#)

**Recommendation:**

- **That intensive family support services are funded at a level that explicitly covers the indirect costs required to work safely with families experiencing significant risk, such as clinical and cultural governance, insurance and workforce development.**

We support the proposed key cohorts for service provision identified in the discussion paper:

- Families at risk of child protection involvement.
- Prevention and early intervention support for children aged 0-5 years.
- Young parents aged under 25

We note the prevalence of child maltreatment in South Australia established through the Better Start BEBOLD data platform at Adelaide University that suggests one in three children are notified to Child Protection Services before they can walk and talk.

We also note and support the focus on young parents and the opportunity to better support children and young people across the lifespan. We note the Taylor Fry study for the New South Wales Government *“Forecasting Future Outcomes Stronger Communities Investment Unit*

*2018 Insights Report*” that highlights the projected future outcomes of care leavers, young mothers and the children of young mothers:

[Forecasting Future Outcomes - Stronger Communities Investment Unit 2018 Insights Report](#)

The modelling in this report tells a powerful story: a relatively small proportion of the population account for a disproportionate share of future service costs and many of these people could be identified early in life. This presents an opportunity for DSS. By investing in targeted, evidence-based interventions for young people, young mothers, and care leavers, together with State funded services, the NGO and ACCO sector can change life trajectories, significantly improve wellbeing while reducing long term costs to government.

Young people at highest risk are predicted to encounter unemployment, limited educational achievement, and involvement with the justice system. Early disengagement from schooling is a key warning sign and opportunity for support – of the student and their family. Stable housing, mentoring, and customised education or training pathways are vital for supporting young people to transition well to independence and live thriving life well beyond welfare supports.

Young mothers, especially those under 20, are notably over-represented in this high-risk group. Without early support designed in response to their unique challenges, needs and interests, delivered in a manner most conducive to this life stage, their children face increased chances of developmental delays, poorer health, and entry into out-of-home care. We know what works, as evidenced by Junction’s Young Parent Project: Comprehensive, wrap-around support during pregnancy and early parenting (including access to health, housing, and education services) are crucial protective factors – having immediate and intergenerational impact.

Care leavers, young people aged 17-21 years, exit from the care system often without the safety net of housing stability and a natural network of support. They are confronted with significant barriers, including elevated risks of homelessness, unemployment, mental health challenges, and contact with the justice system soon after leaving care. Continuing care supports beyond age 18, gradual transition planning, and strong community connections are essential for improving their life outcomes. In South Australia there are approximately 2,400 young people in state care, with about 700 children living in residential care services. Better Start research highlights that a third of young people exit care into homelessness and go onto experience lifelong disadvantage. Limited and/or poor preparation for adulthood and fewer social and community connections make the journey to independence far harder than it should be.

We suggest that the evidence is clear: investing in targeted, evidence-based interventions is cost effective, relational and restorative. By supporting young people, young mothers, and care leavers with the right supports and the right time, we can unlock their potential, strengthen communities and substantially reduce long-term government expenditure.

As a Community Housing Provider, Junction is acutely aware of the additional challenges faced by young people (especially care leaver and those estranged from family) trying to secure housing; challenges which pre-date the current housing crisis. The inadequacy of Youth Allowance, young people’s limited access to Commonwealth Rent Assistance, age discrimination and lack of a rental history have long locked young people out of the housing market, pushing them into unsafe, inappropriate housing and into homelessness.

This is unacceptable and indicative of systemic failure that demands urgent coordination of services and government interventions to observe their role as corporate parent. Young people aged in early adolescence and young adulthood – those independent from families and entering the Specialist Homelessness Sector as unaccompanied children, have for far too long been overlooked in State and Federal programmatic responses to families and children. This DSS reform is a long-overdue opportunity to focus on this unique life stage to deliver critical early supports that will help set young people up for success.

For these reasons, Junction is a key advocate of the Home Stretch and Home Time Campaigns. We ask the DSS reforms align with the “call to action” of these vital campaigns. Both campaigns share the goal of giving young people a stronger, more supported start to independent adulthood.

We also note the currently under expended Commonwealth Outcomes Fund and ask that these resources are directed to support care leavers.

**Recommendation:**

- **That care leavers are focused on as a priority cohort with early support strategies and ongoing assistance into adulthood, until at least 21 years of age**

**Case Study 2: Young Parents Project – A Data-Informed Model for Positive Outcomes**

The Young Parent Project (TYPP), launched in 2023 with a \$750,000 grant, is a collaborative initiative between Junction Australia, TACSI, and Better Start at Adelaide University. TYPP targets young parents with lived experience in the child protection system, aiming to break intergenerational cycles of involvement through early intervention, peer mentorship, and community connection.

TYPP stands out as a model of good practice by grounding its approach in linked administrative data and ongoing evaluation. Outcomes are tracked using established measures (PEEM, PWI), assessing increases in protective factors, reductions in risk, and enhanced developmental opportunities for children. Early evidence shows improved parenting capacity and stronger community ties among participants.

The program’s codesign methodology, involving young parents in shaping and delivering support, ensures responsiveness and relevance. Peer mentors are available for ongoing support and families are linked to the Hackham Community Centre’s other programs. TYPP demonstrates how data-informed, outcome-focused practice can be scaled and replicated, providing a blueprint for reforms in family support services and care leaver programs.

This program has successfully achieved a Commonwealth Outcomes Grant and is currently being scaled up in South Australia.

**Recommendation:**

- **That young parents who are care leavers have access to focused and evidence-informed interventions that support their own wellbeing, parenting capacity and children’s development, drawing on models like the Young Parents Project.**

## Investment in Place

We argue that supporting place making must be a central priority in the reform agenda, recognising that strong, thriving communities are foundational to achieving better outcomes for families and children. Junction is unique as a community housing provider that delivers a comprehensive service footprint that spans early support, child protection, and community services, positioning us to play a pivotal role in fostering vibrant, inclusive neighbourhoods.

We believe that effective place making requires an integrated approach, where the design and activation of communities are underpinned by thoughtful, coordinated capital and operational funding from both State and Commonwealth governments. Ensuring the sustainability of these initiatives demands investment not only in physical infrastructure but also in the people and programs that bring communities to life. By aligning funding streams and supporting collaborative decision-making, we seek to empower residents to lead, participate, and thrive in connected, harmonious environments where everyone has a voice and a sense of belonging.

We encourage DSS to explicitly recognise housing stability as a foundational condition for family wellbeing. Place-making must integrate built form, community activation, and sustained local presence, particularly in higher density environments where new social connections need deliberate cultivation.

We also suggest there be investment in place-based outcome measurement. The Better Start BEBOLD data platform is an example of linked administrative data that can report on child and family outcomes in place. We suggest that capacity for outcome measurement is resourced and supported in these DSS reforms, with a focus on supporting workforce to learn evidence gathering and how it relates to continuous improvement.

### **Recommendation:**

- **That place based interventions are resourced over the long term and include outcome-based reporting using linked data (for example, platforms such as Better Start BEBOLD), with funding for workforce capability to collect, interpret and use this data.**
- **That housing stability and community development are recognised and funded as crucial enablers of family support, with explicit links between services, social and affordable housing, and local community activation in the reforms.**

## Reform of the Commissioning Approach

Junction strongly supports the proposed reform direction towards a relational approach in contracting and commissioning within Family Support Services. We are particularly interested in the shift away from traditional compliance models to one that prioritises relationships, trust, and transparent decision-making.

However, we believe several key considerations are vital to ensure the success of this approach. Building genuine relationships requires trust, transparency, and a commitment to

shared decision-making, which must be reflected in both policy and contract management practices of both the commissioning agent and funding recipient. Relational capability in commissioning is not uniform across the sector and demands skills in reciprocity, awareness of power dynamics, and a high level of mutual support.

Currently there are vastly different approaches to contract management across state and federal funders with providers managing multiple approaches and reporting requirements for small amounts of money. Additionally, funding eligibility or rigidity of funding parameters between Federal and State government bureaucracy can at times result in perverse outcomes for families and communities - counterintuitive to the intent of providing timely, human-centred, targeted support.

We suggest that a trauma responsive approach is required that recognises that our systems and structures are colonial, with staff often affected by burnout and systems-trauma. A trauma-responsive commissioning approach requires investment in capability building for both government staff and service providers, so that contract relationships are restorative and grounded in reciprocity, shared accountability, cultural safety, and a commitment to learning. We suggest this approach is codesigned between the sector and government to ensure emotional investment and support for the approach.

We urge these reforms to be considered as a broader platform for state and federal alignment in this approach. This should include contracting and commissioning of Out of Home Care Services associated with Child Protection which are currently onerous and reflect a “master servant” relationship. We suggest a trauma informed approach to contracting that recognises the importance of relationship-based contract management and values a learning environment that prioritises the needs of children and young people, in the context of their family, community and culture.

#### **Recommendation:**

- **That relational commissioning and contracting reforms are adopted and aligned across State and Commonwealth funders.**
- **That commissioning and contracting reforms recognise a systemic approach to trauma and are codesigned with the sector, acknowledging systems trauma and the need for reciprocity, cultural safety, shared accountability and a learning environment across contract relationships.**

## **Reporting and Demonstrating Impact**

Junction is committed to transparently demonstrating the outcomes of our programs, recognising that robust outcomes reporting requires significant investment in internal infrastructure and workforce capability. As highlighted in the '*Paying What It Takes*' report, building the systems and capacity necessary for meaningful measurement is essential to reflect the true impact of our work.



In South Australia, ongoing workforce challenges including the failure of government to pass on indexation and the complexities arising from award conditions, further underscore the need for adequate funding to support both effective reporting and service delivery.

We encourage policy makers to consider these realities when reforming reporting frameworks, ensuring investments genuinely enable organisations to evidence outcomes and improve the lives of families and children. This is particularly essential for organisations in regional and remote areas, where ability to attract and retain adequate staff levels to manage the juggle of high-quality administration and service delivery.

**Recommendation:**

- **That any new outcomes and reporting framework is co-designed with providers and proportionate to contract value, with simplified grants process for small grants so that reporting does not divert resources away from children and families.**

## Contracting and Workforce Development

We strongly support the move towards longer-term contracts of five years or more, recognising that extended contracting periods are vital for workforce stability, retention, and the ability to plan and innovate effectively. Relationships and trust also take time to build. Relational contracting can only be successful if agreements are longer term, with parties feeling psychologically and contractually safe to sit together in raising and resolving challenges. In contrast, short-term contracts create uncertainty, undermining providers' capacity to build and maintain a skilled workforce, particularly in rural and remote communities.

We also emphasise the importance of adequate funding to enable genuine capacity building, especially in areas such as cultural governance, community-led design, and incorporating the voices of those with lived experience. Investment in these areas is essential to ensure that services are culturally safe, responsive to community needs, and able to adapt and grow in line with best practice and Fair Work obligations. Without sufficient resources, it is challenging to meet these requirements and achieve meaningful outcomes for families and children in the context of their community.

**Recommendation:**

- **That contract terms are a minimum of five years, with appropriate indexation, to support workforce stability, relationship-building and innovation, especially in regional and remote communities.**
- **That contracts include dedicated funding for workforce and organisational capability building – including cultural governance, community-led design, lived experience participation, and compliance with Fair Work obligations.**

## Advancing Self-Determination, Equity, and Choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families

Junction is deeply committed to achieving the Closing the Gap targets and acknowledges the critical role of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in achieving positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities. Our stretch Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) and organisational Allyship statement underpin our ongoing dedication to meaningful partnerships and advocacy for Aboriginal self-determination.

We strongly support increased investment in ACCOs as the most effective way to deliver culturally safe, community-led services. Achieving Priority Reform 2 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap requires not only government commitment, but also tangible resources directed to ACCO-led service delivery, particularly in communities with significant First Nations populations. Junction urges policy makers to ensure that this transition is thoughtfully planned, recognising the current limitations of preventative and early support funding within South Australia and the need for additional, not redistributed, investment to build ACCO capacity.

We advocate for a statewide approach that guarantees equitable access to high-quality services for all people, regardless of location. Government should facilitate a conversation about the careful divestment of funds to ACCOs, empowering Aboriginal organisations to lead where appropriate, while safeguarding the right of Aboriginal people to choose the service provider that best suits their needs, including the option to choose their preferred provider – be that an NGO or an ACCO. Choice, dignity, and respect must remain central throughout this process.

What is more, we argue that investment in early support services in South Australia must increase, to support this transition. Failure to increase investment may lead to unintended consequences including geographic service gaps across the state and lack of choice for Aboriginal people. Junction remains steadfast in its support for the Closing the Gap agenda, and calls for collaborative, well-resourced action to advance Aboriginal self-determination, strengthen ACCOs, and ensure all families have access to the services they need, wherever they live.

**Recommendation:**

- **That investment in early intervention and ACCO service capacity is increased through additional funding, rather than reallocation from existing services**
- **That reforms are carefully planned to avoid geographic service gaps and preserve choice, dignity and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in selecting their preferred provider (ACCO or NGO or a combination thereof).**

## Conclusion

Junction is largely supportive of the Department of Social Services' (DSS) proposed reforms and welcomes the shift towards a more adaptable, responsive, and integrated family support system.

By adopting our recommendations, we believe the reforms will be more effective in supporting families and communities across South Australia, ensuring access to high-quality, culturally appropriate services wherever people live.