



3/12/2025

Department of Social Services  
GPO Box 9820  
Canberra ACT 2601  
By email: [families@dss.gov.au](mailto:families@dss.gov.au)

## RE: Submission - A new approach to programs for families and children

Dear Review Team,

May I extend our organisations appreciation for the opportunity to read and respond to the Departments family and children reform agenda. This is brave, good and necessary work. We also wish to extend our appreciation and acknowledgement to all the organisations and communities that have worked so hard under the current programs and their leadership and support in shaping the consultation scope.

Systems change is often defined as hard, however opportunities for reform require the right moment, great leadership and relationships – through these contributors, genuine change and progress is absolutely possible. We commend the Department's commitment to creating a more co-ordinated, flexible, and evidence-informed approach that respects local community knowledge and responds to the diverse needs of local communities. We acknowledge also the wisdom and lived experience of the people and communities the new program is designed to serve – they know best what works for them.

Our submission reflects our strong support for the Department's focus on early intervention and prevention. It draws on our experience living and working alongside diverse communities, in many occasions at crisis point, to provide practical insights and constructive solutions to matters raised in the Department's discussion paper.

This level of reform is intricate and requires shared investment in collaboration. We welcome the opportunity to engage further with the Department and collaborate on the next phase of these reforms, including in our role in The Possibility Partnership (whose submission we have also contributed via). Please do not hesitate to contact me ([tabatha.feher@lwb.org.au](mailto:tabatha.feher@lwb.org.au)) for any further engagement opportunities or information regarding this submission.

Yours sincerely,

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# A new approach to programs for families and children

## Overview

Life Without Barriers actively supports the Department's focus on early intervention and prevention as central to these reforms, and advocates for place-based, community-led and relational approaches as essential to achieving sustainable outcomes.

As a founding member of The Possibility Partnership, our position is reflected in the separate submission prepared in collaboration with our sector partners. We seek to complement this collective's submission by sharing additional insights drawn from our experience living and working alongside diverse communities.

This submission focuses on the following key areas:

- Ensuring program outcomes reflect the importance of children and young people's relationships and connections with family, kin and community
- Strong support for prevention and early intervention, alongside ongoing intensive supports for families at risk of contact with child protection services
- Additional measures to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) led service delivery
- Adopting relational approaches to enable strong community-led, placed-based responses and local innovation
- Alignment on impact measurement and data sharing
- Enabling phased implementation and co-design of the next phase of these reforms in partnership with service providers, communities and lived experience.

## About Life Without Barriers

Life Without Barriers began as a local community organisation in Newcastle, founded by people with disability and community members determined to create solutions that truly met local needs. Today, we continue to live and work in communities across Australia, partnering with children, young people, families, and people with a disability or mental health needs to change their lives for the better. Our community work includes care and support for children, young people and families through family support and prevention services, out of home care and residential care, and a range of intensive supports to improve family wellbeing.

We live and work in the communities we serve. This deep connection to communities has given us a strong understanding of the realities and challenges faced by the children, young people and families who trust us to provide support, including the intersecting impacts of disability, trauma, socio-economic disadvantage, systemic racism and other barriers to accessing services. Through this consultation process, we hope to offer practical insights and constructive solutions informed by this experience.

## Ensuring program outcomes reflect relationships with family, kin and community

Life Without Barriers supports the proposed program outcomes and recommends expanding these to recognise children and young people's relationships and connections with family, kin and community as critical to their wellbeing and development. Strong, positive relationships and a sense of belonging are foundational to resilience, emotional security, and long-term

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success. Evidence consistently shows that children and young people thrive when they are connected to supportive networks and culturally safe community environments.

As part of The Possibility Partnership, we also advocate for the inclusion of parental well-being and strong, engaged communities as key drivers of positive outcomes for children and families. Parents who are supported and empowered are better able to provide stable, nurturing care, while engaged communities create protective factors that reduce isolation, strengthen social capital, and enable families to access help early.

Embedding these elements within program outcomes ensures a holistic approach that addresses the interconnected factors influencing child and family wellbeing.

### **Support for early intervention and ongoing intensive supports**

We strongly support prioritising early investment to improve family wellbeing, break cycles of disadvantage, and reduce the need for later interventions, such as out-of-home care. We have seen firsthand the consequences of a lack of early and ongoing help for families. Our experience underscores the need for sustained investment in early intervention and prevention as essential to achieving long-term, generational change and creating the conditions for children, young people and families to thrive. We are appreciative of the Departments recognition of child protection systems as the crisis point for families that early intervention can prevent.

We also support ongoing investment in intensive supports for families at risk of contact with child protection services, as well as tailored, flexible and place-based support for families facing multiple complex challenges. We have observed families most at risk of child protection involvement and child removal experience significant barriers to accessing universal services due to distrust and fear of reporting. These families are also frequently marginalised and excluded from early intervention programs because they are considered ‘too high risk’. However, these families must continue as a priority if we are to break cycles of disadvantage, child removal and youth justice contact.

### **Enabling ACCO-led service delivery**

Life Without Barriers recognises the best outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families are achieved when supports and services are designed, led and delivered by ACCOs. As a non-indigenous organisation, we fully support prioritising funding for ACCO-led service delivery in communities with significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. Our commitments to thriving First Nations communities are detailed thoroughly in our Transformation Project, backed by a national partnership with SNAICC – National Voice for our children. The partnership includes the full transition of care of First Nations children from Life Without Barriers to ACCO's nationally.

We understand this means increased responsibility for ACCOs. To support this critical aspect of the reforms, it is essential ACCOs are resourced and empowered to lead service delivery. We encourage DSS partners to listen to and work directly with Aboriginal leaders to develop the supports necessary to enable this, including:

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- A separate tender process for ACCOs to ensure equitable access to funding opportunities.
- Commit to longer term contracts of at least 5 years (with an additional 5 years based on performance and community engagement)
- Culturally safe and appropriate, Aboriginal-led metrics and governance
- Shared accountability structures to ensure coordinated, culturally safe outcomes across the Department, ACCOs and non-indigenous service providers
- A detailed transitional framework and capacity building to support implementation, including funding for infrastructure and training, particularly to support relational approaches.

We welcome the opportunity to engage further with DSS and share detailed insights gained through our partnerships with ACCOs and our national partnership with SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children.

### **Strengthening community-led, local partnerships through relational approaches**

Life Without Barriers welcomes the emphasis on community-led, local partnerships to deliver integrated and collaborative services that are responsive to community needs. This approach presents an enormous opportunity to amplify community solutions that are just waiting for support and improve outcomes for children, young people and families. However, realising this potential requires the creation of an enabling environment which actively supports and invests in genuine community leadership, collaboration, lived expertise, place-based solutions and local innovation.

We strongly support the introduction of relational contracting as a key aspect of this enabling environment because it creates the conditions for local innovation. Unlike traditional contracts, relational contracting provides the flexibility and responsiveness needed for providers to adapt solutions to local contexts and test new approaches in partnership with communities. This is essential in complex social service environments, where one-size-fits-all models often fail to meet diverse needs. By fostering trust, shared accountability, and continuous learning, relational contracting enables innovation grounded in lived experience and evidence.

We believe the success of these arrangements requires time, capability-building, strong partnerships, and investment. It will be a learning and we have commenced shared effort to establish our readiness with the Possibility Partnership (TPP). Through our shared submission with the TPP, we advocate for a 'Funder as Partner' approach to underpin this shift, alongside upfront investment in capability building for the Department and service providers, and opt-in participation supported by training for smaller organisations and ACCOs.

In addition to the above, we recommend that relational contracting be embedded within a broader relational approach which also includes collaborative commissioning and shared decision-making. We draw the Department's attention to the discussion of relational approaches in the submission made by Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment (PLACE), a national organisation championing and supporting community-led approaches to social and economic challenges. We support recommendations from PLACE, including:

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- Implementing a collaborative (rather than competitive) commissioning process where providers work in partnership to plan, procure, coordinate and evaluate services for their local communities.
- Investing in the Department's capability as a system and market steward, including high-level policy, funding, co-ordination and capacity-building
- Funding ongoing community engagement in local service design, commissioning and delivery
- Embedding shared decision-making and community leadership in governance structures
- Adopting a phased, pragmatic approach to reform implementation, including identifying priority communities to trial relational approaches and leveraging existing relational commissioning and contracting capability.

We also applaud the Department's emphasis on cross-departmental and cross-jurisdictional policy, data alignment and program planning. Ongoing alignment is critical to reducing the fragmentation, duplication, and gaps in service delivery which often undermine outcomes for families and children. Facilitating this alignment should be an ongoing aspect of the Department's role as a system and market steward. As a member of the care sector we offer our open support in all our partnerships to support this enablement.

### **Alignment on impact measurement and data sharing**

The Department's clear focus on outcomes under the new national program provides an opportunity for government and service provider collaboration to establish shared standards for impact measurement and evidence. Aligning on impact measurement and committing to transparent data sharing, including linked datasets, will enable continuous learning and improvement across the sector. By pooling insights and outcomes data, providers can identify what works, adapt approaches in real time, and collectively lift practice to deliver stronger results for children and families. Importantly, linking quantitative data with qualitative insights and real stories will generate richer understanding of impact and ensure learning is grounded in lived experience. This collaborative approach ensures accountability while fostering innovation grounded in evidence and lived experience.

### **Phased implementation and co-design**

Life Without Barriers strongly supports a phased implementation approach as a pragmatic and collaborative pathway to achieving sustainable reform. Phasing creates space for co-design with sector partners, local communities and lived experience. This approach also enables early identification of challenges, testing of solutions in real world settings, and refining of processes before broader rollout.

### **Conclusion**

Life Without Barriers welcomes the Department's commitment to a more co-ordinated, flexible, and evidence-informed approach that responds to the needs of diverse communities. These reforms present an enormous opportunity to shift towards approaches that prevent harm, reduce child protection and youth justice involvement, and improve outcomes for children,

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young people and families. Embedding community-led, place-based solutions within a well-governed, adequately funded, and relational framework is essential. Relational approaches, including collaborative commissioning and relational contracting, create the conditions for local innovation and responsive service delivery. A phased, co-designed implementation will ensure reforms are practical, sustainable, and grounded in lived experience. Life Without Barriers is ready to work alongside communities, the Department, sector partners and lived experience to shape a system that delivers lasting change.