

Response to DSS – FAC Reform Discussion Paper



The evolution of the program is welcome as it is a significant opportunity for the Government to improve outcomes for children and families by delivering the reforms identified in:

- [Early years strategy.](#)
- [Targeting entrenched disadvantage.](#)
- [Community Sector Grants Engagement Framework](#) (including diverse providers).

To be successful the reform needs to build on the strengths of current programs, including Communities for Children Facilitating Partners (CfC FP), Stronger Places Stronger People, Empowered Communities and Connected Beginnings. These strengths include:

- Strong community engagement, with some sites maturing to community leadership.
- Flexible local commissioning of services possible within grants.
- Coordination of services to meet community needs and drive service system integration, collaboration and adaptation to meet community need.
- Tailoring approaches to different communities - some communities may be best served by one provider delivering multiple programs, others by a range of providers.
- Targeting demand to communities in most need, noting the investment will not meet demand across Australia.

The CfC model is integral to DSS's future direction. Its strengths in collaboration, prevention, and local responsiveness position it as a natural fit for the Prevention and Early Intervention stream. However, success depends on preserving the facilitation function, embracing evidence-informed flexibility, and ensuring systemic reforms in funding and reporting. CfC sites that have adopted a collective impact approach have further strengths in supporting community leadership that can be harnessed to effectively deliver the FAC program.

Recommendations

1.	Adopt a tiered approach based on a location's capability and capacity.
2.	Invest in capability building of government, services and communities in: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• building and sustaining community leadership,• relational contracting, and• measurement and evaluation.
3.	Require demonstrated cultural capability in contracts.
4.	Invest in local capacity for integration and collaboration to create the conditions for success.

Community-led

Effective approaches to prevention and early intervention are community-led and place-based. Community leadership is the key to sustainably delivering better outcomes for children, families and the communities that support them. If a community is empowered and cohesive it has the strength to support its community members experiencing challenges.

This requires:

- community voice – through voice collection, a community collective plan and co-design
- building trust – through investing time and resources in relationships
- collective governance – including community
- shared decision making – at all stages from design, delivery and reporting
- asset-focus – building on what exists and is already working in communities

The new program should be a mechanism to build strong communities - placing community leadership at the centre and supporting communities to build their leadership capacity. Each place will be on a continuum of maturity and will look different, requiring a different approach:

1. Mature place-based initiatives (including some Stronger Places Stronger People (SPSP), Empowered Communities and Connected Beginnings sites) and CfC FP sites with strong community leadership should lead and be entrusted to design and deliver solutions in partnership with local providers.
2. Emerging place-based initiatives should be engaged in local co-design of program delivery and supported to continue to build their capacity for shared decision making and adaptive governance to build on community-shaped approaches.
3. Communities without place-based initiatives should be consulted on service design and supported to build capability to organise community-led governance, with providers adopting place-focused, community-shaped approaches to delivery.

Dedicated funding will be required to enable community engagement, system integration and relationship building, and investment in the capability and skills to do this. Flexible funding will support this.

Community leadership can also drive local service system integration across the large number of mainstream and specialist services funded by different levels of government working to support children and families.

Gladstone is an example of this. Gladstone is an existing Stronger Places, Stronger People (SPSP) site supported by Gladstone Region engaging in action Together (GRT), the community's backbone organisation. GRT brings local partners together around the priorities identified by community, including early childhood access, developmental pathways, workforce pressures and shared planning across government, industry and service providers. This includes coordination across the Early Years Leaders and

Champions, the Housing Round Table, Industry and First Nations stakeholders, and a multi sector Leadership Group that supports collaborative decision making. SPSP investment has enabled the community to identify clear local needs and priorities through this coordinated backbone role, and ongoing investment in backbone functions and community-led organising will be important to support service delivery that responds directly to the needs identified by the community.

Existing DSS investment has built strengths that can benefit the FAC program. Where there isn't existing funding, communities will need to be funded and supported to engage with commissioning and co-design processes on their own terms and timeframes.

Relational Contracting

It is welcome that the Government has considered that delivering outcomes for families, children and communities will require more relational approaches such as local commissioning, relational contracting, and shared decision-making.

- *Relational contracting* is a specific legal agreement with shared goals and an expectation of open communication and data sharing. It includes agreed values, guiding principles, governance arrangements as well as required outcomes of both parties, target groups and delivery timeframes.
- *Local commissioning* is about how an organisation involves the community in shaping what the service should look like.
- *Co-commissioning* usually means parties pooling funding and planning together.
- *Joint commissioning* goes further by adding shared governance and oversight of a service or group of services after the execution of the contract.
- *Shared decision making* is power sharing with community to enable self-determination. It involves flexible thinking, collective problem solving and having a diversity of voices in the room that represent the community.

As this is a new way of working for government and some service providers, we encourage Government to invest in building capability in relational contracting, both within government procurement teams and service delivery organisations, and engaging in ongoing learning, evaluation and improvement around the process.

In developing and establishing formal relational contracts, communities must be involved in the development of the proposed outcomes. Frameworks such as the ARACY NEST domains are useful to guide communities through designing the outcomes they want to see for their children, families and community. The Local Solutions Fund currently allows for a partnership approach to developing outcomes.

The inclusion of choice for providers to adopt relational contracting hints at a two-speed approach – one for more mature sites/services and one for those developing. This would benefit from a formalised framework in implementation (such as the three-tiered approach described above) to ensure those that are ready can operate with a truly community-led approach and others are supported to build their capability while operating under a more

traditional contract. The aim of the reform should be to have all communities activated to adopt community-led approaches over time.

Key success factors for relational contracting include:

- **Community participation:** involve communities in the development of the proposed outcomes of the relational contract and ensure reporting of results/outcomes to community.
- **Government capability:** train government contract commissioning and management teams on formal relational contracting and how to work differently with communities.
- **Service provider capability:** train service providers or facilitating partners on formal relational contracting and enable sharing of lessons across providers.
- **Authorising environment:** systems settings need to allow for work to occur in this way. The Centre For Policy Development describes the conditions required and ways to overcome entrenched system dynamics in their paper on Collaborative Commissioning [Overcoming challenges in collaborative commissioning](#), which is equally relevant to relational contracting.
- **Evaluate and learn:** establish learning approaches to build capability across communities and government and prepare early for an effective evaluation of the approach.

There are organisations across Australia that have expertise in relational contracting and working with local communities, including:

- Community sector organisations supporting place-based initiatives including CfC FP. Many of these organisations are also members of Strengthening Communities Alliance and The Possibility Partnership and have been actively working to strengthen place-based approaches.
- NIAA, for Indigenous communities (especially Empowered Communities).
- Many local and state government departments

Primary Health Networks (PHNs), have experience working with communities to commission and coordinate place-based integrated services responses. PHNs who community endorse as high quality providers, with a strong and trusted community relationship, could adapt to relational contracting with support.

By working with these organisations, DSS can focus on policy and funding settings, as well as coordination and oversight of the service system.

Recognising integration effort

Service integration, coordination and collaboration in a community does not occur spontaneously. It requires a coordinating organisation with deep and trusted relationships across the sector and with community and with specific roles and capabilities.

To meet the needs of the four investment priorities, ensure appropriate funding is made available in each place for the roles and functions required to do this work (i.e. integration, co-design, collaboration, navigation, evaluation and data collection).

Investment in time will also be required under contracts to allow locally led approaches, acknowledging that investment in relationships and fundamentally different ways of working takes time. Adequate investment in this capability also recognises the role of systems in facilitating change and such investment is needed to truly shift the dial on persistent disadvantage.

Funding

The longer-term funding model is welcome and will help in ensuring the enabling conditions for lasting impact. Investment needs to be targeted to communities most in need. This should be more than the 52 communities currently receiving CfC FP funding.

Building on the longer funding already identified, extending funding to 5 + 5 years funding (subject to satisfactory performance and community endorsement) would give community assurance of consistency, with flexibility to adapt to changing contexts and continuously improve performance.

Discussion Paper Questions

Vision and outcomes

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

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

Outcome 1: Parents and caregivers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children.

Outcome 2: Children are supported to grow into healthy, resilient adults.

Both the outcomes, focus area and investment priorities are critical to improve outcomes for some of the most vulnerable children and their families in Australia. The program would benefit from a theory of change that describes the drivers and enabling conditions that lead to the desired outcomes.

The outcomes could be strengthened if they expanded to families not only being empowered but also supported and connected; and children to not only grow but also develop well.

- Families to be empowered, **supported and connected** to raise healthy, resilient children
- Children are supported to grow and **develop** into healthy, resilient adults
- Include **strong, engaged communities** as a driver of child and family outcomes – either as a third outcome or within Outcome 1.

A highly empowered family can still face systemic and practical barriers to accessing the services they need. Focusing solely on 'empowered' places the burden of change on the families themselves, without providing accountabilities for others across the service system. Including 'supported and connected' makes clear the full spectrum of work required from the whole system to raise healthy, resilient children.

The inclusion of 'develop' in the outcome for children more accurately represents the brain development and social and emotional development children undergo to become healthy, resilient adults.

A holistic understanding of how children and families become and stay healthy and resilient includes the resilience and wellbeing of the community around them. The vision could be strengthened by including the broader community as part of the program's theory of change. To achieve the outcomes desired, communities will also need to be empowered, supported and connected, to wrap around families.

Program structure

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

The aim to create more flexibility for service providers is welcome. The streamlining into a single national program assumes organisations have the capacity and capability for the organisational, cultural and practical shift required to focus across a person's life course. This comes with risks to the community if the organisation is not able to make that transition well.

We advocate for flexibility for the community to receive services in the way that works best for them. This is a strength of the CfC FP model – that a range of smaller local services can deliver to the community they know well, with the coordinating support of the CfC FP. This strength should not be lost in the new model.

To strengthen the program structure, it could explicitly include and fund community strengthening (capacity and capability) in integration and coordination.

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?

Logan Together is a collective impact movement – a collaboration between community, service partners across Logan and government, who deliver a majority of activities across streams 2 and 3. Logan Together is focused on prevention and early intervention for

children 0-8 years and has reimagined the early childhood system in Logan through the First 2000 Days Model ([Library | Logan Together](#)). The enabling conditions of this model are the same enabling conditions that make a program delivered through Families and Communities successful in a community.

Stream 1 funding

The Logan Together experience is that over the past 10 years, national programs have been less effective in making change for families than co-designed solutions tailored to their local context and lives.

Families do not need more information services – it's not that they are 'hard to reach', it's that systems feel impenetrable. Access to trusted advice is important to Logan families, but who delivers that advice matters. In Logan, a workforce of Community Connectors, operating from Community Hubs, provide trusted advice in navigating systems and accessing services. They open doors through professional relationships that families cannot open themselves.

These Connectors are respected community members who build deep and trusting relationships with families. They provide culturally safe connection, identify needs, offer social prescriptions and provide wrap around supports within the culturally safe environment of Community Hubs, often translating government or service information into language and context to support understanding.

An evaluation of connector roles commissioned by Communities for Children (Logan) in June 2024 found:

- Families develop a better understanding of child development and the working of the child healthcare system
- Connectors help alleviate family anxiety
- Connectors build the capacity of the sector by sharing information about service gaps and provisions – finding ways to make systems work for families.

Funding ongoing Community Connector roles to support the delivery of trusted advice to families would more effectively achieve the outcomes sought by Stream 1 and provision should be made for this activity under Stream 1 funding. This includes adequate funding to translate information into language. Logan is home to over 240 culture and language groups. The burden of translation has fallen to community organisations and community members themselves, the majority of which is unfunded.

[Are there other changes we could make to the program to help your organisation or community overcome current challenges?](#)

Community leadership

Community leadership is the key to sustainably delivering better outcomes for children, families and the communities that support them. The new program should place

community leadership at the centre and support and fund communities to build their leadership capacity. This will look different in different communities:

- Mature place-base initiatives (including some Stronger Places Stronger People (SPSP), Empowered Communities and Connected Beginnings sites) and CfC Facilitating Partner sites with strong community leadership should lead and facilitate the local program design and delivery in partnership with local providers.
- Emerging place-based initiatives should be engaged on local co-design of program delivery, implementation and supported to continue to build their capacity and governance.
- Communities without place-based initiatives should be consulted on service design and supported to build capability to organise community-led governance, with providers adopting place-focused approaches to delivery.

Funding flexibility should be provided within the program to enable community engagement, and investment in capability and skills to engage with commissioning and co-design processes on their own terms and timeframes.

Community leadership can also drive local service system integration across the large number of mainstream and specialist services funded by different levels of government working to support children and families.

Role of DSS in program delivery

It is recommended that for streams 2 and 3 of the new program, DSS shift its role to system-level policy, funding and coordination, rather than managing grants to deliver services. This could look like:

- DSS identifies the communities in need of integrated family and children services. This would include communities benefiting from the current 5 programs, identified IDAC communities, and additional communities based on other quantitative and qualitative evidence.
- DSS identifies the lead commissioning partner for each community, either through an open or closed grants process, looking for organisations that:
 - Have strong relationships with the community,
 - Have experience in local commissioning, relational contracting, and service coordination, or the demonstrated capacity to build this, and
 - Are committed to community-led, place-based approaches.
- DSS would enter into relational contracts with each commissioning partner to work with each community to design, coordinate and deliver services. This contract would focus on high-level outcomes, expectations and service parameters, noting that each

community's journey will look different. There should be a balance between continuity of existing services and supports while transforming to a more community-led, integrated service system over time.

It is anticipated that this would reduce the number of grants that DSS is managing, as a number of organisations may support more than one community (as currently already occurs for CfC FP).

At a systems level, DSS can also focus on better supporting the capability shifts required across the system to work more relationally, empower communities, and share decision-making. DSS can be supported in this work by organisations such as PLACE, IDAC, Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership, ARACY, the Strengthening Communities Alliance and The Possibility Partnership.

Prioritising investment

Do you agree that the four priorities listed on page 4 are the right areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families?

We support the four priorities identified and make suggestions to strengthen them.

Prevention focus

The program would benefit from recognising the differences between Prevention and Early Intervention and ensuring that there is sufficient investment in prevention, noting the challenge of demonstrating improvements in outcomes. When it comes to outcomes for children, prevention must have the greatest focus, given the importance of the first 2000 days of a child's life, as identified in multiple studies across Australia, such as the Australian College of Nursing [discussion-paper-the-first-2000-days.pdf](#)

And as committed to by the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing [Maternal Health and First 2000 Days/Women's Health initiative | Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing](#).

Culturally safe services

Prioritising connected, co-located, and integrated services that work together to meet family needs could be strengthened by including a focus on cultural safety. Under-utilised services are often a result of families not feeling seen, respected or understood by the service – the fundamentals of cultural safety. Families in Logan would rather seek the support of family, friends and community, than access a service that didn't feel safe for them. Cultural safety is also critical to providing the holistic support a family needs. It allows a family to feel comfortable enough to disclose the full complexity of their lives that allows support to be wrapped around them, resulting in better outcomes for children and families.

Embed community voice

Ensuring services are informed by and respond to community needs should be the bare minimum requirement for funding under this program. A model that builds capability to hear from the diversity of the community's voice, co-design with community and move to community leadership should be built into the implementation of this program.

DSS should seek support from organisations across Australia experienced in implementation, to understand how to support capability building towards community-led approaches.

Strong and sustainable ACCOs

While increasing the number of ACCOs across Australia, particularly in locations where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live, is a relevant goal, it is narrow in scope. Are the existing ACCOs adequately and sustainably supported to operate to support children and families in all locations across Australia? A measure that includes more than the number of ACCOs would strengthen the priority.

Connected Beginnings, Justice Reinvestment or Empowered Communities sites could be key learning sites for this program, as they have a history of building ACCO capability and capacity to operate with impact. The Department of Education has established ACCO support with resources, networks and learning that could be drawn on and built upon.

In an example of capacity building, in Logan, Child Safety is taking a 'two-way learning' approach to support ACCOs meet compliance requirements in the delivery of kinship and foster care and other community solutions. The support models a step into the middle space and offers deep support, walking alongside ACCOs for an initial period, navigating Western systemic requirements.

Improving family wellbeing

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?

Are there other groups in your community, or different approaches, that you think the department should consider to better support family wellbeing?

We support the proposed focus areas under improving family wellbeing. How these services are designed and delivered will be the key to achieving successful outcomes.

Currently, Australia's wellbeing system requires specialised support to navigate. In Logan, as in many other places, this comes from Community Connectors who fill the gaps between systems with their specific skills and qualities. This is particularly critical for families experiencing complexities such as those the focus areas identify. People accessing a support program are still part of the community in which they live and are held well, or poorly by that community based on its strengths.

Community Connectors are professional practitioners who are deeply trusted and respected community members, building deep and trusting relationships with families. They provide culturally safe connections, identify needs, offer social prescriptions and provide wrap-around supports within the culturally safe environment of Community Hubs. Community Connectors link families with information and support, services and walk alongside them as they navigate multiple service systems. Importantly, Community Connectors are accountable to the Hub they work within and to the community themselves.

This contrasts with system navigators that are increasingly available within service systems. System navigators hold deep, detailed understanding of the system they work within. They support families to access services within their system, but once families are no longer using services in that system, the support ends. System navigators are part of a service system and are accountable to that system.

Community Connectors and the Community Hubs they operate from are critical to improving family wellbeing. Currently, the Community Connector roles are not recognised and invested in as ongoing components of effective service delivery in a community. Funding for these roles is short term and often co-commissioned by community partner organisations to ensure they continue. Some Community Connectors operate in a volunteer capacity.

Community Hubs offer places of cultural safety, support and wrap around services – all delivered by locals, to locals. Logan's Community Hubs are the first stop for many families on their journey to find the right support for them in achieving wellbeing for themselves and their children. Community Hubs also facilitate the creation of supportive communities that hold and grow individuals outside individual programs. Logan's hub are constrained by their infrastructure such as sufficient spaces for services and are currently turning away up to 70% of people seeking support.

Investing in the critical infrastructure that is Community Connectors and Community Hubs will make a difference to family wellbeing outcomes, as it strengthens the community infrastructure around the individual families or children.

Connected, co-located, and integrated services

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

Co-location alone, does not guarantee integration of services or a seamless experience for families. Optimal support requires coordinated efforts within and across services, especially for those children, young people and families experiencing life challenges. No individual, organisation, agency or sector has all the levers and solutions needed to achieve a positive change, therefore a collective approach is required.

The reform calls for applications and services to work together in partnership to meet the community needs and provide genuine integration. Integration, navigation and coordination is not organic, but requires resources, time and local facilitating partnerships in communities (the "glue"). This needs to be resourced at a local level.

Key parts of effective integration include:

- Dedicated staff who build strong relationships between families, services, and partners – such as community facilitators, navigators, and linkers
- Operational systems and processes that enable collaboration – such as integrated referral processes and IT platforms, shared data systems and joint case management, and
- Access to shared evaluation capability to help define, measure, and continuously improve their integration service dose, quality and participation (Investing in equity through Early Childhood Hubs: SVA 2025)

Collective governance drives integration. Local leadership tables where community, government, services and facilitating partners come together to monitor activities across the community and identify system gaps or issues are powerful integration tools.

If connected, co-located and integrated services are the goal, contracts must enable a non-competitive environment and include time and funding for communities and services to attend shared planning, training and/or governance meetings.

The maturity of the organisations in the community is another important factor, demonstrated by their experience of working together. For example, communities where Connected Beginnings, Empowered Communities, Justice Reinvestment, SPSP and CfC have been collaborating will be effective at delivering integration across the three streams as they are practiced at it.

Relational ways of working in these communities support transformational (rather than transactional) change by:

- Holding space for partners to feel respected, valued, supported and connected, which enables them to take the time they need to respond to community need.
- Through their commitment to genuine relationships community partners are learning, enabled and/or becoming more courageous in their approach to building and maintaining relationships.
- Supporting intelligent trial and error, including creating space and safety to try new things and enable flexibility and time to problem solve, adapt and respond.

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?

Community-led

To be truly connected to the community it serves an organisation needs to demonstrate it is community-led. Community-led approaches that applicants should be assessed on include:

- Experience co-designing with community,
- Experience capturing and adopting community voice to inform action,
- Reference to a community collective plan,
- Demonstrated authentic engagement with community through culturally responsive approaches,
- Shared governance models and demonstrated shared decision making, and
- Strong existing relationships and endorsement from local providers and community leaders.

Readiness

The readiness of the community (which includes the service providers and organisations within it) to work in this integrated and collaborative way is critical to achieving the four program priorities. A demonstrated understanding of community readiness is important for a community-led approach to service integration to be effective.

Logan Together operates with the following mind frames and ways of working that demonstrate readiness:

- Government and community partners are ready and capable of working together.
- We look at the whole picture, not just individual parts.
- Supportive systems (like social prescribing and local enablers) are embedded.
- We engage deeply with the whole community—not just individual representatives.
- We make the most of existing community assets.
- We focus on strengths rather than problems.
- We prioritise community-led ideas and high-quality delivery by local groups.
- We start with specific places, rather than regions, and ripple out
- We focus on real outcomes that matter for community – we know because we asked them.

Responding to community need

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

The cultural diversity of a community is an important consideration as it can indicate hidden complexities that increase a community's need. For example, a community can appear to have adequate services based on the population, but if services are not culturally safe, or interpreters are not available in the community, services can be under-utilised, and families are left without support.

Measures of community cohesion would also provide a deeper understanding of the complexities of a community and insight into need. The Social Cohesion Compass (Scanlon Foundation) provides insights into social cohesion and democratic resilience for

each LGA. ([Social Cohesion Compass - The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute](#)) The ABS indicators under Cohesive in the Measuring What Matters Framework, could also provide insights if they were available to DSS at the LGA or SA2 level.

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

A requirement to meet the needs of the community is a welcome focus but could be significantly strengthened if to receive a grant, providers were required to demonstrate their relationships with the local community and how they will work to strengthen local community leadership.

Community leadership is the key to sustainably delivering better outcomes for children, families and the communities that support them. The new program should place community leadership at the centre and support communities to build their leadership capacity.

Where community leadership exists (such as in some CfC, Empowered Communities, Connected Beginnings, Justice Reinvestment or SPSP sites) there is an opportunity to build on the existing social infrastructure.

Reference to a co-designed community collective plan would be a strong way to demonstrate the needs of the community have been understood. More mature communities and organisations could provide demonstrated actions aligned to achieving that community collective plan.

Responding to community need requires communities to be resourced sufficiently, to enable roles or functions such as co-design, integration, collaboration, navigation, evaluation and data. This could be achieved by allocating a percentage of the total funding pool to fund these roles. This investment also needs to be targeted to communities most in need, with flexibility and ability to tailor approaches to different communities.

For example, Bundaberg is a mature, community-led site already demonstrating the outcomes DSS seeks to achieve through reform. The Family and Baby Network (FAB) coordinates integration, cultural safety, workforce development, community voice, and shared governance across more than 100 organisations entirely without dedicated funding. To maintain and strengthen this proven model, Bundaberg requires investment in backbone roles, navigation tools like the Seekers Tree, long-term relational contracting arrangements, and funding that supports local co-design and integration. Bundaberg is ready now and provides a clear example of what is possible when community leadership is supported. See FAB strategic plan (funded by DSS) for more information.

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

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

DSS should consider exemptions to the use of DEX and SCORE, instead working with ACCOs to develop measurement and reporting tools that are culturally safe. There is a risk identified in Logan that ACCOs would reject funding if measurement tools were inappropriate. In the same way that service design and delivery should be co-designed with community, so too should the monitoring and measuring of outcomes be co-designed as part of this program.

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

The program design would be strengthened by explicitly requiring:

- First Nations governance to be embedded in ways of operating in communities,
- co-design principles in service design and delivery,
- co-design principles in monitoring and evaluation,
- application process designed to not disadvantage ACCOs by keeping the process simple, not onerous and prioritise community voice.

Measuring outcomes

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

Accessible and useable data is crucial to enabling communities to understand and design solutions to create places where kids can thrive. The collection and use of data in reporting can create opportunities for shared decision-making, if organisational capacity is also supported, to enhance feedback loops and sense-making. The role of community and service providers as knowledge holders must be acknowledged and respected.

Reporting of lead indicators can provide actionable insights on whether services are on track to achieve the desired goals or outcomes of community. Applied well, these lead indicators allow service providers and stakeholders to regularly assess performance, monitor progress, and make necessary course corrections to improve service delivery.

Confidence in using data often differs across teams and establishing a shared purpose and aligning around common goals improves buy-in and readiness for change. This helps teams recognise the importance of data in enhancing service delivery and strengthens data practices.

The Data Toolkit (Available from: <https://tqkp.org.au/resources/data-toolkit/>) was designed to help grow organisation capacity, knowledge and skills in using data for improved service delivery and client outcomes. The Data Toolkit relates to the 'Service data' bucket in the Place-Based Data Framework (Available from <https://tqkp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Data-Framework-301024.pdf>). The Place-Based Data Framework was co-designed by place-based leaders and data experts, with support from Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership, to create a framework to guide practitioners on

building a shared understanding of the 'how to' of accessing, collecting, and using data for the purpose of shared measurement and shared decision-making. We encourage the use of this framework and toolkit.

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 break the cycle of persistent disadvantage, all stakeholders (including public management system) need to work differently. Reporting should include a clear purpose with a shared understanding of intentions made clear from the outset and fully acknowledging different levels of comfort with data among stakeholders. A good learning system can help systems focus on what matters to children, young people, families and communities.

To support a learning system to work on the ground:

- Recognise that people, families and communities know what matters for them.
- Invest in learning how to strengthen the system at all levels.
- Actively involve people, families and communities in innovation, learning, and policymaking.
- Measure the wellbeing impacts that matter for individuals, families and communities.

An overly narrow emphasis on what the system has delivered to individuals, families, and communities (such as services) – especially when determined by proxy measures in administrative and survey data – is simplistic and can lead to stigmatising views of people and their experiences. The Logan community specifically has expressed that constantly being surveyed and asked for their data is a barrier to accessing services. Being tracked, monitored and assessed by government undermines trust in the community and some families will go without services for fear of being monitored.

The choice of indicators to monitor performance needs to enable learning (how best to provide a safe and effective service), as well as meeting accountability requirements (transparency on how funding is spent).

Service measures and indicators that align to the desired outcomes expressed by community can improve the efficient and effective delivery of local services, improve the streamlining of administration requirements, and allow for meaningful outcomes-based reporting. Harnessing local community voice and priorities into a local shared measurement system that supports high-leverage actions is a critical stage for any collaboration as it will guide and lead to sustainable impact. These key measures of success are a mechanism to keep services and government on track to make sure real change happens through continuous improvement and a shared understanding.

The ARACY NEST provides a holistic way to understand and act for child wellbeing and to guide monitoring, evaluating and reporting on children's outcomes. The NEST is currently used across Australia in many place-based initiatives.

Connected Beginnings (Department of Education) provides communities with an indicator bank to support choosing relevant outcomes and indicators that measure them, for example, the First Nations Child and Family Services Wellbeing Framework. Connected Beginnings also provides for communities to choose their own indicators.

Local Solutions Funding from DSS provides an existing model where measurement, reporting and evaluation was designed in partnership with the department to achieve the most effective measures for the community.

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

Connected Beginnings use effective templates to support case study development that could be quickly adapted.

Working together

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

We welcome the focus on relational contracting (noting this is only optional) as it shifts from the traditional transactional approach (focused on protecting the purchaser) to a focus on ongoing cooperation (focused on the best interest of both parties).

In recent years there has been a growing movement towards a more relational approach to designing and investing in social services according to community need. In a distillation of knowledge across Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, Sydney Policy Lab noted that good commissioning needs to adopt four key principles:

1. Centring the need to build relationships and trust.
2. Elevating the role of communities in planning and delivery.
3. Embedding learning and flexibility to allow for experimentation, reflection and evolution.
4. Rethinking funding models to invest in people and communities.

Relational contracting should be in collaboration with community partners, therefore will require resourcing, capability uplift and leadership across all stakeholders (government, agencies and community partners) to achieve.

Relational contracting focusses on leveraging long-term, trusted relationships to deliver outcomes with openness and flexibility to adapt as conditions change. It requires significant time and capability, which will be a challenge when delivering a national program across hundreds of communities.

Relational ways of working are underpinned by key mindsets, including:

- Intentional - hold an intentional focus on relationships, while offering a strategic lens in planning for change and supporting new strategic connections;
- Adaptable - open to the need to adapt programs or practices to fit the context and do this in a way that builds relationships by slowing down, being open to different opinions and listening; and
- Agile - capacity to work within the moment, balancing planning and sensing simultaneously, including the ability to 'let go' and change.

Along with skills and resources, the success of this approach will also need removal of system-level obstacles via policy, process, legislative and/or funding changes, along with addressing the centralised power imbalances, so that relational contracting of services and flow of resources into communities is more collaborative between funders and providers.

DSS should lean into the expertise of organisations and places already successful implementing relational contracting/commissioning and working with local communities, such as:

- Community sector organisations supporting placed-based initiatives and/or delivering CfC FP. Many of these organisations are also members of Strengthening Communities Alliance and The Possibility Partnership and have been actively working to strengthen place-based approaches;
- Primary Health Networks (PHNs), who have demonstrated experience working with communities to commission and coordinate place-based integrated services responses, and who community endorse as high quality providers with a strong community relationship;
- NIAA, for Indigenous communities (especially Empowered Communities); and
- Many local and state government departments.

By working with these organisations, DSS can focus on policy and funding settings, as well as coordination and oversight of the service system. DSS could also build its capability in relational contracting and shared decision-making by retaining grant management for the communities it is currently working directly with (e.g. SPSP communities) and learning from organisations with more experience.

Building on the longer funding already identified, extending funding to 5 + 5 years funding (subject to satisfactory performance and community endorsement) would give community assurance of consistency, with the flexibility to adapt to changing contexts and continuously improve performance.

At a systems level, DSS can also focus on better supporting the capability shifts required across the system to work more relationally, empower communities, and share decision-making. DSS can be supported in this work by organisations such as PLACE, IDAC, Thriving Queensland Kids Partnerships, ARACY, the Strengthening Communities Alliance and The

Possibility Partnership. Capacity building for less mature locations or organisations must be part of DSS responsibilities – building the capability and capacity of all to work under relational contracts in the long-term.

The current model as articulated raises concerns that the accountability for achieving outcomes is pushed to front-line staff and the families themselves.

The responsibility of DSS for outcomes needs to be clearly articulated in relational contracts. This includes:

- Adequate funding for the relationship building and integration work
- Authority for data collection to be designed and managed by community (where there is capacity)
- Funding flexibility provisions
- The use of evidence informed programs – allowing co-designed by community for adaptation to fit context
- Timing flexibility in line with community rhythms
- Provide support for effective evaluation
- Enact systems or policy change responses in response to community need

Commissioning partners' responsibilities in a relational contract should include:

- connections to community
- demonstrated good stewardship
- funding what delivers outcomes
- monitor and evaluate in line with program outcomes
- enact systems change responses in response to community

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

DSS should explore lead commissioning partners for each community that have:

- strong relationships with the community – as evidenced by alignment to the community collective plan, use of co-design, participation in joint governance structures, demonstrated commitment to hearing community voice and using it to guide ways of working.
- experience in commissioning, relational contracting and service coordination
- commitment to community led, place-based approaches
- Cultural capability and responsiveness - to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities accessing services from well-trained, well-equipped service providers (not solely ACCOs).

Letters of support from a community alone are not enough to genuinely understand an organisation's connection to community.

To ensure community leadership is strengthened in the new program, relational contracts should require:

- Community leadership and engagement based on local maturity (as above)
- Explicit focus on building community capacity
- A focus on coordinating and integrating local service systems to meet community needs
- A commitment to shared decision-making, including building local structures and processes

While this may favour existing successful CfC FP providers, this is appropriate given the years of investment in community-based approaches through this program.

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

Logan Together as a community-led collective is interested in a relational contracting approach. We advocate for provision to be made in the guidelines for communities to submit bids for relational contracts, to allow those communities with strong and mature leadership approaches to lead the work. This would be a significant innovation in this work but needs to be enabled through legislative and policy settings.

Other

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

A robust evaluation approach must be considered as part of the development of this program. Early planning for evaluation allows for effective measurement during roll out of the changes, which is particularly important for the new aspects of relational contracting. This program has the potential to build the evidence base for community-led, place-based work across Australia and internationally and evaluation cannot be an afterthought.

As a collective, we are committed to improving outcomes for children, families and the communities they live in – it's why we do what we do. Our goal is to take the aspirations of the Families and Communities reform and make them a reality on the ground, in the places we work.

We call on DSS to use the deep implementation expertise shared here to create the conditions for an impactful program, that does not unintentionally risk the wellbeing of children, families and communities.

We are keen to work with DSS to make the program a success.



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