# National Child & Family Hubs Network

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# Advancing an Integrated, Place-Based Approach to Better Support Children and Families

**Submission to the DSS Discussion Paper –
'A new approach to programs for families
and children'**

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# Advancing an Integrated, Place-Based Approach to Better Support Children and Families

## About the Network

The National Child and Family Hubs Network (Network) is a national, multidisciplinary group dedicated to strengthening Child and Family Hubs across Australia. Hubs enable children and families to access the support and services they need and provide a welcoming place to meet other families and build essential social networks. The Network supports over 470 Child and Family Hubs (Hubs) across Australia and unites over 1,950 caregivers, service providers, policymakers, sector leaders and academics to strengthen Hubs and ensure they deliver high-quality, integrated support to children and families.

The Network is generously supported by The Ian Potter Foundation, Minderoo Foundation, and Paul Ramsay Foundation.

## Introduction

The Network welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation paper on the new approach to programs for families and children through the Department of Social Services.

The early years are critical in shaping children's lifelong health, development, and wellbeing. Yet despite significant investment, developmental vulnerability is increasing, with more children falling behind across all five Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains.[i] The State of Australia's Children Report also indicates that systemic inequalities such as poverty, intergenerational trauma and racism, are leading to children in the most at-risk groups, continuing to fall behind.[ii] Addressing these inequities early can transform children's health, educational outcomes, and overall wellbeing.[iii] Prevention and early intervention not only deliver the best outcomes for children and families but are also cost-efficient for government. In 2024, the economic cost of late intervention reached $22.3 billion, with child protection accounting for nearly half of this figure.[iv]

We support the vision outlined in the consultation paper, particularly its emphasis on integrated ways of working, greater flexibility, and an outcomes-focused approach that responds to community needs. Place-based approaches empower communities to design solutions that reflect the realities of families, ensuring more equitable service delivery. We also strongly endorse the prioritisation of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO)-led service delivery in communities with significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

To realise this vision, funding must reflect the true cost of service delivery. This includes core operational costs, especially in communities where delivery is more expensive, as well as the relational and integration work required to meaningfully engage families and collaborate across services.

The national network of Child and Family Hubs are well placed to serve as a local service delivery mechanism for all three program streams for families and children. Hubs offer a proven mechanism for delivering place-based, integrated child-and-family centre support, designed with community.

This submission outlines **five key recommendations** for DSS to maximise the impacts of these changes and deliver stronger outcomes for children and families.

**Recommendations:**

1.  **Establish a grants assessment model that embeds place-based approaches, strengthens the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled sector, and enhances integrated service delivery**

2.  **Provide flexible, adequate resourcing to sustain quality service delivery and integration**

3.  **Support effective, relational contracting through meaningful outcomes and capability development**

4.  **Leverage Hubs to deliver integrated, locally responsive support**

5.  **Align investment to maximise outcomes for children and families**

# 1. Establish a grants assessment model that embeds place-based approaches, strengthens the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled sector, and enhances integrated service delivery

**1.1 Support place-based approaches by prioritising providers who hold deep and authentic connections with their local communities and have the capability to engage groups who are historically underserved**

**1.2 Improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families by continuing to build capacity and capability of the ACCO sector**

**1.3 Support integrated service delivery by preferencing applications which demonstrate experience or capability working in integrated child-and family-centred ways and hold evidence of genuine collaboration in their local community**

## Support place-based approaches, grounded in community need

We endorse the prioritisation of locally responsive services, informed by community need. Place-based approaches empower communities and services to design responses that reflect the realities of children and families. Children, families and communities are experts in their own experiences and offer essential insights into how services can best be delivered. It is important that communities are meaningfully involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of services.

Insights from historically underserved groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, and those experiencing geographic or socioeconomic disadvantage, are vital. Achieving this requires services to hold deep and authentic connections with the communities they serve.

We recommend that grant applicants be required to provide clear evidence of how their proposed strategy understands and responds to identified community needs, strengthens local opportunities, along with evidence of their connection to community. Applications should be formally assessed on this basis.

**Evidence could include:**

**Demonstrate an understanding of community context,** including:

- Experience or plan to conduct a comprehensive service needs analysis or environmental scan that reflects knowledge of the local service system and community context.
- Experience or plan to identify barriers faced by families in accessing services and to develop strategies that effectively engage those most in need.

**Prove ability to connect and engage with the community,** including:

- Experience or plan to consult with local stakeholders to identify gaps, assess needs, and co-develop solutions.
- Commitment to meaningfully engage with communities in service design, planning, evaluation, and continuous improvement.
- Evidence of trust and long-term presence in the community, such as length of time operating locally and participation of community members in governance mechanisms.

**Demonstrate investment in community leadership and governance,** including:

Evidence of community-led governance structures or plans to implement governance structures which support community connection and representation in decision making.

**Ability to provide validation of community relationships,** including:

- Reference letters or endorsements from partner organisations or community members confirming strong connections and collaboration.

Small providers often bring significant value through their deep community connections and established local partnerships. Grant processes must ensure a level playing field, recognising the diverse strengths of providers, regardless of size. This will help ensure funding decisions reflect genuine community connections and the capacity to deliver responsive services.

Grant assessors must be equipped with the knowledge and capability to make informed, context-sensitive decisions. They should validate that applications align with community need, looking beyond top-line data to prioritise evidence of genuine, nuanced understanding. Involving community members on selection panels would further strengthen this approach. It is also important to recognise that smaller, community-based organisations may not yet have had funding required to demonstrate this work but are often well-placed to deliver it with the right support.

**Grow and support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled sector**

ACCOs have long implemented holistic, culturally responsive, integrated service models. These community-led services support the well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families by addressing cultural, social, and environmental factors through strengths-based, whole-child approaches. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years centres, embody these principles by serving as culturally safe community Hubs which support early identification and improve access to both universal services and tiered interventions.

We strongly support the focus on increasing the number of ACCOs to deliver supports in locations with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations in line with Priority Reform area Two of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It is crucial the program enables self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by enabling flexible, long-term and sustained funding; provides workforce capability and

capacity building and embeds data sovereignty from the outset. Refer to SNAICC's submission for further detail on these recommendations.

### Support integrated service delivery and partnerships

We strongly welcome the focus on connected, co-located and integrated services. Families often face multiple and intersecting challenges that require holistic support, which cannot be achieved by a single service or stream alone. There is growing evidence of the benefits of stacked interventions[v], and wraparound supports for children and families with the most significant impact on those who face disadvantage or inequities.[vi,vii,viii,ix]

Integration occurs along a continuum from isolated action and communication, through to coordination, co-location, collaboration, and ultimately integrated practice.[x] It is important to recognise this nuance and to incentivise a shift towards integration with the aim of reducing fragmentation and increasing access and engagement for families, noting that integration may not be appropriate and achievable in every community.

To support this, we recommend weighting assessment criteria towards services that can demonstrate experience or capability working in integrated child-and family-centred practice, as well as evidence of genuine collaborations and partnership in their local communities. For smaller community-based organisations that may not yet have had the opportunity to work in this way, this could include a clear plan or defined steps to move towards such an approach. We also recommend encouraging consortium applications. These should clearly outline the roles of each organisation, governance structures to enable effective collaboration, and strategies for enabling shared outcomes.

## 2. Provide flexible, adequate resourcing to sustain quality service delivery and integration

**2.1 Fund the true cost of service delivery, and provide flexibility in how funding is used so services can best meet the needs of their communities**

**2.2. Recognise and fund the 'glue' required to enable integration, including support for shared governance, community engagement and outreach, and dedicated time for shared planning and collaboration**

### Fund what it costs to deliver services

It is important that the service delivery model fully recognises the inherent operational costs of delivering quality services, including rent or room hire, IT systems, and staffing. This is particularly critical in areas where service delivery is more expensive, such as rural and remote regions, outer suburbs, or communities experiencing deep disadvantage. The principle of *Pay What It Takes*[xi] is recommended to ensure adequate funding.

Increases in grant duration are needed but must be accompanied by indexed funding to ensure the financial value of the grant is not reduced over time.  We also strongly support

flexibility in how funding is used, so that services can determine how to best meet the needs of their local communities.

## Recognise and resource the 'glue' required to enable integration

True integration requires dedicated time, effort, and investment in the 'glue' that underpins coordinated, wrap-around support. The 'glue' refers to the people, relationships, infrastructure and systems, that makes integration possible.[xii]

**People and relationships:**

Peer Key Workers or Navigators, Community Outreach Workers, and Child and Family Hub Leads, play a vital role in engaging families, building trust and relationships, guiding families through the service system or streams, and enabling coordinated support or warm referrals to external services. In addition, roles such as Hub leaders support clear governance structures, which are essential to align services to a shared vision and create authorising environments that enable collaboration, distribute leadership across sectors and services, and drive a shared culture and accountability for integrated outcomes. [xiii]

**Infrastructure and systems:**

Shared data platforms, integrated referral processes and IT platforms are equally essential to enable effective integrated service delivery. [xiv] Physical design features that optimises collaboration and support engagement with families, such as co-location and shared space, are also beneficial where possible. Mechanisms to embed family and community voices in service design and delivery are also vital to creating culturally safe and inclusive services. These activities do not occur without local leadership that is funded – such as Hub Leads.

Too often, the 'glue' work is invisible and unfunded, despite providing the essential conditions that enable integration and improved outcomes for families, communities and government. Evidence shows that Early Childhood Hubs with funded glue can manage and integrate significantly more partnered delivery services, up to 22 times more by dollar value, than those without.[xv] For genuine integration to occur, the 'glue' must be adequately funded and built into service design. It is not 'extra' but is a core part of what is needed to deliver integrated services and engage with communities, particularly to reach the families who need it most and face barriers to engagement.

# 3. Support effective, relational contracting through meaningful outcomes and capability development

**3.1 Define outcomes with meaningful community input and capture holistic, child-and family-centred measures.**

**3.2 Develop lead indicators, in consultation with priority populations, relating to service quality, quantity, participation and integration**

**3.3 Equip services with the tools, capability, and resourcing needed to routinely collect, interpret, appropriately share, and act on data**

**3.4 Invest in capability building for both DSS staff and service providers so they can confidently implement relational contracting and reporting approaches that reflect outcomes rather than compliance**

**Enable meaningful outcomes-based reporting**

We strongly support the shift towards flexible, longer-term funding and outcomes-based reporting. To maximise impact, outcomes should be defined with meaningful community input and capture holistic, child-and family-centred measures. These outcomes should be assessed using both quantitative data and qualitative insights, such as surveys and stories from families, to ensure a full understanding of impact.

Alongside outcome measures, we recommend the use of consistent, evidence-informed lead indicators relating to service quality, quantity, participation and integration. Developing these indicators in consultation with priority populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, and those facing geographic and socioeconomic disadvantage, would help ensure this initiative can identify need and monitor reach, participation, equity and progress. Lead indicators enable progress to be monitored before outcomes become fully visible, enabling early learning and continuous improvement at both local and system levels. They are essential for data-driven decision-making, which can help to identify inequities and guide timely action.

Evidence from Restacking the Odds shows that lead indicators are critical for reducing inequities and enabling real-time, evidence-informed action.[xvi] When embedded at the service level, supported by dashboards and continuous improvement tools, this approach empowers frontline workers and strengthens local solutions. At the government level, it enables monitoring of equity, outcomes, and system performance, while fostering collaboration across services through shared goals and language.

To support place-based decision-making, data collected should be returned to communities in a timely and meaningful way. System-wide delivery also requires that services are equipped with the tools, resourcing, and capability needed to routinely collect, interpret, and act on data, and to embed lead indicators within ongoing quality-improvement processes.  This also requires information sharing across services, both deidentified and consent-based, to ensure that data can be meaningfully integrated and used to inform local and system-wide reporting. We also encourage government to share relevant datasets and service mapping so that communities are not spending time and resources collating this information.

### Build capability to support new ways of working

We welcome the trialling of relational contracting to emphasise long-term relationships, trust, and collaboration to reach meaningful community outcomes, rather than strict adherence to detailed, prescriptive terms in a contract. To ensure success, we recommend that this approach be co-designed with the sector and subject to ongoing evaluation to refine the model.

For these new ways of working to succeed, investment in capability building is essential. Departmental staff and service providers who are new to this way of working, must be supported to adopt relational practices. This includes ensuring DSS staff have the authorisation and skills to assess grants under the new approach and be able to support service providers on the ground to adopt relational practices in both service delivery and reporting. Reporting requirement must align with intent and effectively capture outcomes and impact.

## 4. Leverage Hubs to deliver integrated, locally responsive support

**4.1: Support integrated, locally responsive service delivery by embedding the new program within established Hubs**

**4.2 Consider funding and expanding Child and Family eHub, as part of Stream 1 'national programs and information' as part of the rollout of the new program**

### Leverage Australia's existing Hubs to deliver integrated, locally responsive support

Hubs are ideally placed to support integrated, locally responsive ways of working and deliver on all three activity streams of child and family support Their long-standing commitment to integrated, holistic, child-and-family-centred practice positions them as a ready-made platform for this new approach. With more than 470 Hubs nationwide, supported by the National Child and Family Hubs Network (Network)[1], this extensive

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[1] The Network brings together service providers, community organisations, advocates, researchers, policymakers, and leaders across Australia. Together, we aim to build capacity, reduce fragmentation, and identify best practice to strengthen and scale integrated Child and Family Hubs nationwide.

social infrastructure provides a strategic platform to build and grow locally tailored, place-based solutions across all three streams of support.

Hubs already enable seamless and coordinated support for children and families, by integrating universal services (such as antenatal care, child and family health nurses, early childhood education and care, primary schools, primary care and social care) with tiered supports that range from prevention and early intervention to more intensive family services, both within and beyond the Hub. While each Hub is tailored to its local contexts, their existing mix of child and family services aligns closely with the intent of the Families and Communities program streams.

Hubs are already being used to deliver DSS programs under these reforms. For example, at Our Place Frankston North, the Family Mental Health Support Services and Communities for Children initiative is being delivered onsite working collaboratively with partners to support children and families in that community. There is an opportunity to look to and learn from these examples.

Embedding DSS programs within integrated hub settings helps ensure strong connections to the community and leverages existing partnerships. With dedicated investment, these hubs could be further utilised to support and strengthen the local delivery of programs—building on current infrastructure, partnerships, governance structures, and the relationships that are already in place.

By offering access to a continuum of integrated services and fostering social connections, Hubs are able to identify and respond to broader issues affecting children and families, including poverty, family violence, and mental health challenges. As trusted places in their community, they are uniquely positioned to reach families with the highest needs and to intervene early, before problems become entrenched.

### Use eHubs to support Stream 1 'National programs and information services'

Families are often overwhelmed by the volume of information available online and are seeking simple solutions to help them solve issues relating to their child's health and wellbeing concerns, including reassurance, practical tips or connections to local services. The Child and Family eHub is a user-friendly, equitable online portal co-designed with families to meet these needs.[xvii] It provides locally tailored access to evidence-based resources, parenting programs, social connection opportunities, and service links. Built on a replicable digital infrastructure, the eHub leverages trusted platforms like Infoxchange's health directory and the Raising Children Network. eHubs complement physical Hubs by offering low-stigma, high-reach support, especially valuable in areas with limited services, such as rural and remote communities. They could be funded and expanded as part of the rollout of the new program to support Stream 1 'national programs and information services'.

eHubs can provide a pathway to physical Child and Family Hubs for more comprehensive, integrated care. They can also serve as a "hub in your pocket," helping families access support without needing to attend in person or to maintain connections to services and relationships built through place-based Hubs. With national expansion, eHubs can help families navigate support systems for children more easily, wherever they are.

# 5. Align investment to maximise outcomes for children and families

**5.1 Align funding and policy across government initiatives to create a connected, locally responsive system that maximises outcomes for children and families, reduces duplication, and makes full use of existing service infrastructure**

Significant reforms and investments are underway across multiple government portfolios, including the Building Early Education Fund and Thriving Kids, many of which aim to support the same children and families as the Families and Communities program. This policy environment creates an unprecedented opportunity for driving a more connected, equitable and locally responsive service system for children and families.

The efforts to streamline services within the Families and Communities program are a very positive step. However, there is an opportunity to take this further by considering how a more integrated approach could be adopted across portfolios. Aligning funding and policy settings across government initiatives would maximise the impact of current investments and help avoid inefficiency, duplication and further system fragmentation. A coordinated approach offers a clear pathway to a more inclusive and effective early childhood development system that supports every child to thrive.

Within this broader reform environment, the existing network of Hubs can play an important role in supporting more connected, local delivery. By aligning funding and policy settings across portfolios, and making better use of existing service infrastructure, government can improve outcomes for families while also achieving more efficient administration, smoother referral pathways and better utilisation of services.

# Conclusion

Providing families with equitable access to quality services and early intervention supports can help break cycles of disadvantage and enable children and families to thrive. The review of the Families and Children Program presents an opportunity to embed this vision by delivering integrated supports that are responsive to the needs of children and families.

Realising the full potential of these changes will require robust grant processes to ensure services are truly connected to community, funding that reflects the true cost of integrated service delivery, and investment in building the capability of both

departmental staff and service providers to operate effectively in this new way of working.

The existing network of Hubs is already delivering integrated supports to children and families and can be used as a local service delivery mechanism for these streams of support. In addition, there is enormous opportunity to leverage other investments to deliver improved outcomes for Australia's children and to strategically position Hubs as the cornerstone of a place-based support system that enables prevention, early intervention, and more equitable outcomes.

## National Child and Family Hubs Network

The National Child and Family Hubs Network is dedicated to strengthening Child and Family Hubs Australia-wide. The Network unites families, service providers, community-based organisations, advocates, researchers, and policymakers to build the capacity of Hubs to ensure children and families can access the supports, services, and connections they need to thrive. The Network is generously supported by The Ian Potter Foundation, Minderoo Foundation, and Paul Ramsay Foundation.

**Website: www.childandfamilyhubs.org.au**

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

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