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4 December 2025

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Dear Ms Plibersek

**RE: Department of Social Services Consultation - A New Approach to Programs for Families and Children**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on *A New Approach for Families and Children*. Outcare welcomes the proposed vision and priorities and appreciates the Department of Social Services' commitment to improving outcomes for children, young people, and families. We are also appreciative of the Department's commitment to consulting with the sector on the proposed changes to give voice to our programs, staff and the communities we serve. Below is our feedback addressing six key areas.

**Vision and Outcomes**

The proposed vision and outcomes broadly align with what Outcare envisages for children and families. However, despite young people being acknowledged in the overarching vision, they are missing from the outcomes, creating a disconnect. It is important that young people are explicitly included in each outcome to ensure consistency and inclusivity. Furthermore, services for young people differ significantly

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from those designed for children, and as such, they must be recognised as a distinct cohort with unique needs and priorities.

Outcare believes in a future where all children and young people are *safe*, *connected*, and *thriving*. We feel this language better reflects our aspirations compared to the current emphasis solely on “healthy and resilient” and should be reflected in the outcomes.

We encourage the Department to consider developing a subset of outcomes for each stream to provide greater clarity and structure around expectations. While the current two outcomes are aspirational, they are very broad and required to cover a wide range of services under each stream. Developing subset outcomes would ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for each stream to respond to unique and local needs.

### **Program Structure**

The services and activities that Outcare delivers fits within the proposed service streams. For a single, national program to be effective and to help organisations and communities overcome current challenges, the program must allow for greater flexibility and adaptability to respond to rapidly changing community needs, particularly given the proposed five-year nature of contracts. Over this period, community needs can shift significantly, and service structures must be designed to accommodate and respond to these changes. Rigid frameworks risk limiting the ability to address emerging issues effectively.

### **Prioritising Investment**

Overall, the priorities are heading in the right direction, however, Outcare's view is that the priorities do not capture some key areas, including:

- Lived experience co-design: Programs should be shaped by those who have direct experience, ensuring relevance and cultural safety. Whilst the priorities identify that services must be informed by community needs, it is also important to distinguish between community lived experience and individual lived experience. Both perspectives matter and need to inform service design.
- Self-advocacy: Empowering parents, caregivers, and young people to advocate for themselves is essential for long-term wellbeing. This should be explicitly embedded in the priorities and service streams, not just implied.



- Sustainable long-term outcomes: Investment should focus on approaches that create lasting change rather than short-term fixes. This includes capacity-building within communities and services systems and clearly defining true, early intervention across the sector – focusing on prevention and support before issues emerge, rather than at the point of crisis.

### **Improving Family Wellbeing**

The proposed focus areas align with the needs and priorities of our service. Outcare supports individuals facing challenges such as intergenerational trauma, mental health issues, family and domestic violence, and systemic barriers. While we have deep expertise in the justice and child protection systems, our work extends beyond those sectors to meet people where they are, when they need it most. Our programs include prevention and diversion from justice, housing support, Aboriginal throughcare, career development, youth justice and Out of Home Care for young people.

Across these programs, Outcare works with adults and families with children and young people who often fall through the cracks and remain invisible within the current service system. These are individuals who do not fit neatly into existing eligibility criteria or program streams, leaving them without adequate support within the community and to services. We believe it is critical to recognise and respond to this group to ensure they grow into connected, safe, and thriving young people. A whole-of-family system and continuum of care approach is essential to provide integrated, consistent support across life stages rather than fragmented, short-term interventions.

As previously discussed, Outcare also strongly recommends an emphasis on building self-advocacy skills among parents and caregivers. Empowering families to confidently seek support and navigate systems is essential for long-term wellbeing and resilience.

### **Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families**

Outcare recommends that the grant process incorporate flexibility in service model design to enable Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to develop culturally responsive, community-led solutions tailored to local needs across all service streams. Furthermore, the process should actively promote and highly value genuine partnerships, alongside initiatives that build capacity and capability within ACCO and non-ACCO partnerships.



## Measuring Outcomes

Outcare would benefit from data that is practical, relevant, and proportionate to service delivery. Baseline social and emotional health data for regional areas would be extremely valuable, as it is currently challenging to understand starting points for wellbeing and measure progress effectively. Sector-wide data showing how people interact with different services in a region, combined with opportunities to explore the reasons behind these patterns, would also support better coordination and identify gaps.

Additionally, outcome measures and reporting requirements should correspond to the size and scope of programs, avoiding overly complex formulas that create unnecessary administrative burden. In short, data should be meaningful, accessible, and simple enough to enable organisations to track impact and continuously improve without complicating the process. Outputs remain important and should be balanced with outcomes and client feedback to provide a complete picture of service impact.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to the development of *A New Approach to Families and Children*. Outcare welcomes the outcomes of this consultation process and looks forward to participating in the next steps.

