

OUTLOUD SUBMISSION

Response to the DSS Discussion Paper: A New Approach to Programs for Families and Children

I have responded to each question and added more text below to provide feedback not captured in the questions.

1. Vision and outcomes

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

Broadly, yes. Outloud supports a vision in which all children grow up healthy, resilient and supported by strong families. However, the vision would benefit from explicitly acknowledging **cultural safety, identity, belonging and community connection** as foundations for resilience, particularly for children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), migrant, refugee, and LGBTIQ+ communities.

Are the two main outcomes appropriate? Why/why not?

These outcomes align with our work, but the framing risks overemphasising individual behaviour change rather than social, cultural and structural factors. Outloud's RESPECT (since 2011) and UNITY (since 2023) programs demonstrate that resilience is not just a family-level outcome, it is also shaped by:

- racism and discrimination
- gender inequality
- social cohesion
- cultural identity
- settlement stress
- community belonging

Primary prevention programs that address these broader determinants must be explicitly recognised within these outcomes.

2. Program structure

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

Potentially, if the structure clearly includes **arts-based, creative, preventative and community-driven programs** under Stream 2 (Prevention and Early Intervention). However, the proposed streams emphasise counselling, casework and crisis support. This creates uncertainty for RESPECT and UNITY, which focus on:



- gender equity and respectful relationships
- identity, belonging and confidence
- arts-based early intervention
- school engagement and wellbeing

These are core early intervention outcomes, but not reflected in typical therapeutic models.

Does your work fit within one of the three funding streams?

Partially.

Our programs align with **Stream 2: Prevention and Early Intervention**, but the current language does not explicitly include arts-based, culturally safe, strengths-based or gender equality programs. Without explicit inclusion, programs like RESPECT and UNITY may be considered out of scope.

Are there other changes that would help your organisation overcome current challenges?

Yes:

1. **Explicitly include arts-based early intervention and gender equality programs in Stream 2.**
2. **Allow alternative outcomes frameworks** where DEX is culturally unsafe.
3. **Create specialist tender streams** to prevent displacement by larger NGOs.
4. **Assess community trust and partnership history** as a core criterion, not an optional narrative.

3. Prioritising investment

Are the four priorities on page 4 the right areas?

Broadly yes, including early intervention and integrated services.
But two essential priorities are missing:

- **Cultural safety and social cohesion** as prevention and wellbeing strategies
- **Gender equality and respectful relationships education** as key drivers of long-term wellbeing and safety

Other priorities DSS should focus on:

- Community trust building (especially in communities affected by government surveillance)
- Youth-led program design
- Prevention of gender-based violence
- Creative engagement for early development and identity formation



- Support for migrant, refugee, queer and intersectional cohorts who do not access mainstream services

4. Improving family wellbeing

Do the proposed focus areas match the needs you see?

Partially. Outloud does work with:

- children aged 0–12 through schools
- families experiencing vulnerability

However, our work extends further, addressing:

- gender inequality in early adolescence
- the effects of racism and cultural dislocation
- preventing future violence through peer education
- building confidence and belonging through creativity

These needs are not captured in the proposed focus areas.

Other groups or approaches DSS should consider:

- Children from migrant and refugee backgrounds
- Culturally isolated or faith-based communities
- Queer young people in households where disclosure may be unsafe
- Programs using arts, storytelling and co-design to enhance wellbeing
- Gender equality strategies beginning before adolescence

5. Connected, co-located, and integrated services

Beyond co-location, what connects services effectively?

Outloud sees strong impact through:

- shared governance structures
- long-term school partnerships
- co-design with families and young people
- creative collaboration across disciplines
- specialist cultural brokerage
- collective referral and pathways mapping
- peer-led education models (as used in RESPECT and UNITY)

These approaches strengthen community connection without requiring physical co-location.



What would you highlight in a grant application to demonstrate community connection?

- 20 years of relationship with Bankstown's CALD youth and families
- Deep collaboration with faith-based communities and local elders
- Long-standing school partnerships (RESPECT has run in many schools for over a decade)
- Trust built through co-designed creative processes
- Youth advisory structures
- Local workforce with lived experience
- High program retention from families who are historically wary of government services

What should applicants be assessed on?

- Demonstrated community trust and cultural safety
- History of safe engagement with marginalised groups
- Evidence of shared governance with community partners
- Local leadership representation
- Co-design processes
- Not simply organisational size or ability to write competitive tenders

6. Responding to community need

What other factors beyond locational disadvantage should be considered?

- Experiences of racism and discrimination
- Cultural and linguistic isolation
- Visa insecurity
- Gender norms and inequity
- Lack of culturally safe local services
- Fear of government systems (e.g., surveillance, child removal)
- Limited access to mainstream mental health supports due to stigma or cultural mismatch

Best way for organisations to demonstrate they meet community need:

- Long-term partnerships and repeat engagement
- Evidence of youth-led or community-led design
- Qualitative case studies demonstrating trust and belonging
- Testimonials and governance involvement from community leaders
- Workforce that reflects the demographics of the community
- Delivery models adapted to cultural norms (e.g., separate gender-based groups)

7. Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families



How can grant processes support more ACCO-led services?

- ACCO-first tender streams in communities with large First Nations populations
- Weighted assessment criteria favouring ACCO governance and design
- Longer lead times for ACCOs to develop proposals
- Funding backbone or partnership roles to support ACCO-led systems design

What else should be built into program design?

- Co-design with Elders and community-controlled organisations
- Cultural safety benchmarks for all non-Indigenous organisations
- Requirements for genuine, not nominal, partnership agreements
- Resourcing for ACCOs to take the lead while allowing culturally safe non-Indigenous partners to play supporting roles where invited

8. Measuring outcomes

What data helps Outloud understand its impact?

- Changes in gender attitudes and respectful relationships understanding
- Behavioural shifts in peer interactions
- School engagement and confidence
- Social cohesion and belonging indicators
- Narrative case studies and creative outputs (songs, stories, videos)
- Youth self-assessment tools
- Community-level trust measures

What information is valuable to share with DSS?

- Youth stories and artworks demonstrating attitudinal change
- Community testimonials about cultural safety
- Longitudinal engagement outcomes from RESPECT
- Pre/post program measures aligned to respectful relationships and wellbeing

What templates or guidance would help prepare strong case studies?

- Flexible narrative templates rather than rigid categories
- Prompts around identity, belonging, confidence, and community connection
- Options for multimedia submissions
- Guidance acknowledging that qualitative data is legitimate, rigorous evidence

9. Working together

What does relational contracting mean to Outloud?

Relational contracting requires:

- trust
- continuity
- long-term partnerships
- shared goals
- honest communication
- cultural safety
- flexibility to adapt to emerging needs

RESPECT and UNITY have operated relationally for years through co-design with families, schools, Elders and community leaders.

What criteria should be included in relational contracts?

- Demonstrated long-term community relationships
- Cultural safety and lived experience representation
- Co-design with young people
- Flexibility in delivery methods (including arts-based approaches)
- Local governance structures
- Stability of workforce and partnerships

How should DSS decide who receives relational contracts?

Not by scale or previous DSS contract size.
Instead:

- quality of relationships
- evidence of trust
- culturally safe practice
- history of collaboration
- outcomes that reflect community priorities
- specialist expertise in hard-to-reach communities

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

Yes - strongly.

Relational contracting aligns with how Outloud already works.

However, relational contracting is **incompatible with a destabilising competitive tender process** that risks removing specialist, trusted providers.

Relational contracting must not be “competitive contracting with a different name.”

10. Other considerations

What else should DSS understand?

1. **DEX is harmful** for many CALD and refugee communities; mandatory use will reduce engagement and distort outcomes.



2. **Arts-based early intervention must be explicitly included in funding criteria**, or programs like RESPECT and UNITY may become ineligible.
3. **Competitive tendering risks displacing small, specialist, culturally embedded organisations** that communities trust.
4. **Community trust is an outcome** and should be recognised as such.
5. **Backbone functions (coordination, cultural brokerage, partnership building) must be funded**, otherwise relational approaches cannot succeed.
6. Reforms must not assume clinical or case-management models are the only legitimate forms of family support.

1. Introduction

Outloud welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department of Social Services' (DSS) discussion paper, *A new approach to programs for families and children*.

Outloud is a youth arts organisation based in Bankstown, working for over 20 years with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), refugee, migrant, and LGBTIQ+ young people, families, and communities. Our programs use creativity, co-design and community partnership to address structural inequity, social cohesion, and primary prevention of gender-based violence.

Two of our flagship programs are:

- **RESPECT** (est. 2011): A long-running, award-winning arts-based respectful relationships program for boys and young men, developed in partnership with Our Watch, and local communities and elders.
- **UNITY** (est. 2023): A creative primary prevention program for girls aged 10–12 focused on gender equity, body autonomy, leadership, confidence, and storytelling.

RESPECT and UNITY is co-funded by The Smith Family and supported by DSS through existing program mechanisms.

These programs have shaped national best practice in engaging CALD youth in gender equality, violence prevention and early intervention. They are deeply community-embedded and co-designed with families, schools, service providers, faith communities and local networks.

Outloud strongly supports the intent behind DSS' reform: increased flexibility, reduced administrative burden, relational approaches, and a stronger outcomes focus. These aspirations reflect how Outloud has worked for many years.

However, the proposed redesign also introduces serious risks that could destabilise specialist prevention programs like RESPECT and UNITY, reduce trust in communities that have historically faced state surveillance, and create barriers for small, place-based and culturally specific organisations.



Our submission outlines these concerns and proposes constructive solutions.

2. Support for the Intent of the Reform

We support the goals articulated in the Discussion Paper, including:

- Streamlined reporting arrangements and reduced administrative burden
- Support for evidence-informed prevention and early intervention (Stream 2)
- A stronger emphasis on community need and local partnerships
- Greater flexibility and relational contracting approaches
- Prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services where appropriate
- Consolidating multiple grant agreements into a single system, which may reduce fragmentation

These principles align strongly with Outloud's practice: long-term community relationships, strengths-based approaches, culturally informed work, and youth-led, evidence-based design.

3. Core Concerns

3.1. DEX reporting frameworks are harmful and culturally inappropriate

Under the proposed model, all providers delivering direct client services would be required to report outcomes in DEX.


This requirement is deeply problematic for the communities Outloud serves.

Key issues include:

- **Historical trauma and state mistrust:** Many families, particularly refugee and migrant communities have lived experience of government surveillance, child removal, visa risk, or punitive systems. Intrusive DEX questions reduce trust and participation.
- **Inappropriate personal data categories:** DEX requires disclosure on safety, housing, independence, mental health, social participation, and family functioning. These are highly sensitive topics that many families will not answer truthfully or safely.
- **Outdated and narrow CALD and disability classifications:** Current DEX fields do not reflect community self-identification, intersectional identity, culturally specific understandings of disability, or non-Western understandings of family structures.
- **Damage to trust relationships:** RESPECT and UNITY rely on safety, rapport, trust and consent. DEX and SCORE undermine these foundations by forcing categorisation and quantitative measures that do not reflect the nature of arts-based primary prevention.

Compulsory DEX reporting will therefore undermine program participation, weaken community trust, and threaten the viability of non-clinical early intervention models.

A new program design should not repeat these legacy issues.



3.2. Lack of clarity on whether arts-based primary prevention (RESPECT & UNITY) will be eligible or competitive

The Discussion Paper defines Streams 2 and 3 primarily in terms of:

- counselling
- targeted casework
- child protection risk
- mental health interventions
- intensive wraparound support

These descriptions do not explicitly acknowledge **creative, narrative-based, strengths-based or cultural safety programs** that address:

- gender inequality
- identity and belonging
- respectful relationships
- social cohesion
- wellbeing
- empowerment through creative expression
- early social and emotional development

RESPECT and UNITY produce measurable improvements in attachment to school, social connection, resilience, peer relationships, gender-equitable attitudes, and reduced risk factors for violence, all central to DSS outcomes.

Yet under the current wording of the streams, these programs could be interpreted as:

- insufficiently “clinical”
- not “intensive”
- not “information services”
- outside the scope of traditional service delivery

This ambiguity creates risk: Outloud may become **ineligible, non-competitive**, or may be assessed by panels unfamiliar with arts-based outcomes measurement.

A program that has delivered over 12 years of effective primary prevention for CALD communities should not be placed at risk due to definitional gaps.

3.3. Open competitive tendering will disproportionately disadvantage small, specialist and place-based organisations

The Discussion Paper proposes a fully open competitive process for all activities under the new program, with no protection for small or specialist providers.

National, competitive, non-community based procurement:

- pushes the system away from relational practice
- disadvantages small organisations
- can lead to collapse of place-based capability
- diverts staff time to tender-writing rather than service delivery
- favours large organisations with bid-writing teams
- risks losing culturally-specific or community-controlled organisations

These risks apply directly to Outloud.

Outloud's competitive strength is not volume, scale or clinical service delivery, it is deep, long-term engagement with specific marginalised communities through collaborative arts practice.

If the tender environment rewards scale, generic programs, and traditional therapeutic models, then RESPECT and UNITY could lose funding despite delivering sector-leading outcomes.

3.4. The proposed system lacks a mechanism for assessing genuine community connection or cultural safety

The Discussion Paper repeatedly emphasises the importance of being "informed by and responding to community need" and prioritising organisations connected to their communities.

However:

- No method for assessing community connection is provided.
- Letters of support and partnership MOUs are easily produced by larger organisations.
- FAMs and DSS staff often do not hold the deep local knowledge needed to meaningfully assess cultural safety or trust relationships.

Outloud's programs only succeed because schools and families trust us. Trust that has been built slowly, respectfully, and through collaboration with families, community leaders, and schools.

That trust cannot be replicated through paperwork, and it cannot be fairly evaluated by assessors without local knowledge.

3.5. Relational contracting is incompatible with a destabilising transition process

DSS rightly aims for relational contracting. But relational contracting is only possible when:

- there is long-term stability
- existing relationships are preserved



- backbone and coordination roles remain funded
- communities are not forced into competition

Removing place-based coordination structures dissolves the “operational glue” that makes relational work possible.

If Outloud must compete with large national organisations for the same pool of funding, the conditions needed for relational work – trust, continuity, stability, and local networks will be undermined.

4. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The new program must explicitly include **arts-based primary prevention programs** as eligible and competitive within Stream 2.

Recommendation 2: Replace or substantially redesign DEX reporting for CALD communities in partnership with youth-led, migrant, disability, and multicultural organisations.

Recommendation 3: Develop a community trust and cultural safety assessment framework that values:

- long-term relationships
- community endorsement
- culturally informed practice
- local governance
- youth co-design

Recommendation 4: Create small-organisation and specialist-provider tender streams to prevent displacement by larger NGOs.

Recommendation 5: Fund backbone and coordination functions to maintain system coherence and community trust during and after reform.

Recommendation 6: Ensure that prevention programs addressing respectful relationships, gender equity, cultural identity, belonging, and social cohesion are recognised as early-intervention priorities.

Recommendation 7: Guarantee transition stability and workforce protections so specialist programs like RESPECT and UNITY are not disrupted.

6. Conclusion

Outloud supports DSS’ goals of strengthening outcomes for children and families through simplified, flexible, and relational approaches.



However, for communities like Bankstown – culturally diverse, structurally disadvantaged, richly resilient, reforms must acknowledge the central role of trust, cultural safety, creative engagement and community-led prevention.

We urge DSS to ensure that:

- arts-based prevention is explicitly valued
- DEX reporting is not mandated in harmful ways
- small, specialist and community-embedded organisations remain competitive
- relational contracting is implemented in practice, not only in principle
- transition processes do not destabilise local systems or vulnerable communities

Outloud stands ready to continue working with DSS to design approaches that truly reflect the lived experience, strengths, and aspirations of young people and families in our community.

