



SUBMISSION TO DSS: Families and Children Program Reform Direction

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1. Introduction

Pathways to Resilience welcomes the Department of Social Services' commitment to strengthening outcomes for Australian children and families through a merged program structure, flexible funding, and relational contracting principles. These intentions align strongly with emerging national and global research, including my doctoral work on place-based leadership, as well as the evidence-informed, neuro-ecological practice frameworks used by Pathways to Resilience Trust across Queensland. The reform direction presents critical risks as well as welcomed opportunities. This submission outlines how DSS can achieve its goals while safeguarding and strengthening the relational, place-based ecosystem that CfC has established.

Pathways to Resilience supports DSS's commitment to improved outcomes through streamlined, flexible, and relational funding structures. The proposed shift to relational contracting aligns with our evidence-based practice in trust-based, co-created partnerships, where collaboration and flexibility produce lasting change in child and family wellbeing. I write this submission both in my role as Executive Director and with my professional history with both Communities for Children and place-based working over 25 years, both in Australia and internationally.

My Background

I have been working in collective action and integrated place-based working for the past 25 years. My experience includes:

- PHD in place-based leadership Griffith University which studied leadership in CfCs, Collective Impact and other place-based programs.
- I was the First Sure Start Children's Centre Co-ordinator in the Sheffield Local Education Authority (2002-2005), and head of the Early Excellence Centre Manor (2000-2002)
- I was the First Program Manager of the Logan Communities for Children site (2005-2013)
- We set up the Logan Child Friendly Consortium with Qld Health Centre for Child Wellbeing Giselle Olive and Benevolent Society Susan Cary to expand our reach and embed our collective vision. This was based on the UN Child Friendly Community Model. The consortium formed a trust which remains as part of the backbone in the Logan Together Collective Impact Movement.
- I have led Children's Voice Work for over 25 years for place-based movements of collective action working with multiple CfC sites across Australia.

Communities for Children (CfC) as an internationally recognised model was designed to be community-led, place-based, and relational. If the new national program is not intentionally designed to preserve these characteristics, we risk losing the 20 years of infrastructure of trust, local insight, and workforce capability that enable sustained transformation in children's lives.

2. CfC Already Embodies the Reform Intent

The DSS priorities of collaboration, community voice, outcomes-focus, and flexible responses are already embedded in the CfC model. CfC sites:

- Work relationally across sectors
- Use outcomes-based community plans
- Broker collaborations between small grassroots organisations and larger NGOs
- Deliver services tailored to local ecological, cultural and socio-economic realities
- Build local capability, not dependency
- Utilise evidence-informed practice across early years, family support, and community wellbeing

We encourage DSS to explicitly recognise this alignment so CfC is not inadvertently destabilised by the reform process.

3. Place-Based Leadership: Evidence From My Doctoral Research (2022)

My PhD research at Griffith University found that place-based leaders act as *bridges* between national policy and local context. Effective place-based change requires:

- Relational trust, not positional authority
- Require investment into place-based leadership to build and sustain community capacity, creating an understanding of relational contracting and all aspects of collective action from ethics to funding accountability, transparency to iterative design
- Understand relational contracting as shared reflection and deep listening, not compliance-driven interaction. It is a legal agreement with high expectations of data sharing, ethics and open communication that co-design principles, make visible the values of community and hold accountable all involved.
- Embodied co-regulation and safety, enabling communities to participate fully
- Contextual intelligence, allowing national frameworks to be interpreted for local realities using a tiered approach based on the capacity and location
- Intentionalise differentiation so that services, information are not homogenous but rather bespoke to context and tailored to communities, organisations and individuals. This includes joint commissioning and co-commissioning and moving community participation to co-determination.
- Funding for small organisations to release staff to attend development and capacity building sessions
- Time to seed and grow change

These findings parallel DSS's relational contracting aspirations. But relationality cannot be administratively mandated it must be supported, resourced, and protected.

In particular, smaller grassroots organisations often the relational backbone of place need explicit pathways into the new system.

4. Nomadic Placemaking: A Framework for Sustainable, Equitable Local Change

Drawing from my research and Pathways to Resilience's practice experience, I propose Nomadic Placemaking as a model that supports DSS's reform while protecting community autonomy, builds trust and works with an asset-based approach.

Nomadic Placemaking is:

Place-based: beginning with the ecology, history, culture, and lived experience of each community.

Place-making: is a living, iterative process of co-design, responsiveness, and reflection where shared decision making and accountabilities reside with all involved, and across each phase.

Nomadic: leaving a light footprint, strengthening existing systems rather than importing new ones.

Investment is iterative, flexible and built over time but focus's on existing assets, rather than innovation for innovation's sake.

Equitable: designed to uplift communities most impacted by early adversity, using minimal resources for maximum relational impact.

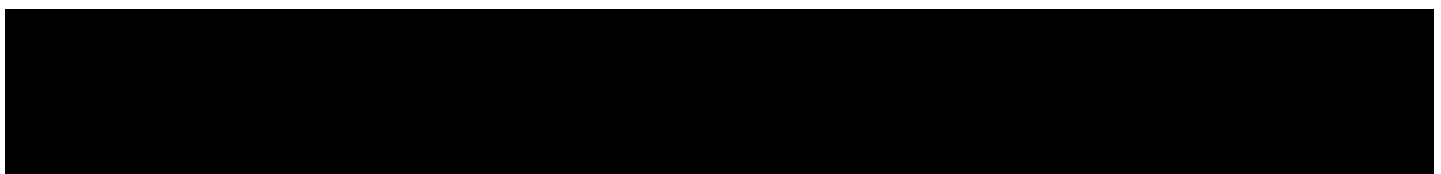
Nomadic Placemaking invites thought leaders and knowledge champions into community—not to deliver programs, but to:

- Co-create tailored local responses through relational contracting
- Bring in all community from First Nations to Children's Voice and embeds them into the whole process from co-initiation to co-evolving practices
- Merge research knowledge, professional knowledge, and lived experience
- Build community-owned solutions that remain after the external support has moved on
- Evaluates relationships and impacts not just outcomes data

It is a model fully aligned with DSS's goals if relational contracting explicitly values co-creation and local governance.

5. Mapping the DSS Reform to Scharmer's Five Movements of Collective Action (Theory U)

Pathways to Resilience uses Scharmer's framework as a roadmap, this is an example for how DSS can design reform that strengthen, not erodes place-based systems. The approach is an example of how we empower families, challenge marginalisation of groups and people; and co-create a collective vision of children's wellbeing.



Movement 1: Co-Initiating

DSS reforms should begin by preserving the CfC principle of starting with place, and a program that understands holistically how children, families and communities work together to keep children healthy, connected and safe. This place-making approach requires relational contracting that funds listening, story-gathering, and trust-building. Leaders must be able to have time to build connections and trust to mobilise a collective movement.

Movement 2: Co-Sensing

Nomadic Placemaking deepens co-sensing by bringing together:

- Evidence-based practice
- Local professional knowledge
- Using existing frames such as the ARACY Nest as a lens
- National and Local evidence-based and evidence-informed programs
- Openness for innovation when needed by not just for innovation sake
- Lived experience and community voice from children, Elders, families, and frontline workers

This produces place-based wisdom, which cannot be generated through a national template.

Movement 3: Presencing

Communities must have space to pause, reflect, and sense emerging possibilities.

This requires neurobiological safety, predictable relational processes, and co-regulation, not rigid compliance.

Movement 4: Co-Creating

This is the heart of CfC.

Prototyping, real-time iterations that are always adapting, and tailoring services to place is essential.

Nomadic Placemaking ensures:

- Flexible, lightweight prototypes
- Use of existing community assets
- Minimal service duplication
- Genuine co-design (throughout the cycles of collective action)

Movement 5: Co-Evolving

DSS's national ambition can be realised through:

- Capability transfer to local leaders
- Distributed learning networks
- Reflective practice cycles
- Community-led stewardship

Nomadic Placemaking offers DSS a sustainable, equitable model for delivering national reforms that remain deeply rooted in local wisdom. It aligns fully with Scharmer's Five Movements of Collective Action, ensuring that merged programs and relational contracts do not dilute place-based leadership but amplify it. By centering co-initiating, co-sensing, presencing, co-creating, and co-evolving, DSS can protect what works in CfC while building a future-fit national program capable of holding complexity, diversity, and community-led innovation. This is how CfC has historically operated and should inform how the new system can succeed and shift the dial for children and family wellbeing.

6. Risks to Small Partners & Safeguards Required

Under merged national contracting, smaller grassroots organisations are at risk of being lost. Yet they hold the relational capital and cultural credibility that allow CfC to function.

We recommend:

1. Nested governance: national → regional → local. Backbones and Facilitating Partner organisations keep neutrality and equity and therefore vital to creating social justice within communities.
2. Relational sub-contracting: where lead agencies mentor, not replace, local partners.
3. Equitable evaluation: include relational measures (trust, collaboration, safety).
4. Pathways for small partners to participate without prohibitive administrative burden.
5. Funding for reflective practice and community learning loops embedded into every phase

7. Measuring Impact in a Neuro-Ecological, Place-Based System

DSS's outcome focus is welcome, but only if measurement reflects the complexity of community change.

Pathways to Resilience and Wings 2.0 demonstrate that impact must be measured at multiple layers:

- Child wellbeing and regulation
- Educator capability and retention
- Parent confidence and participation
- Community relational networks
- Cross-sector collaboration
- Cultural integrity and safety

These align with DSS, CfC, and UNCRC frameworks.

8. Recommendations to DSS

To ensure integrity, sustainability, and alignment with contemporary research, we recommend that DSS:

- Embed "Place-Based and Relational Practice" as a core principle of the new national program.
- Preserve CfC functions within the new model, recognising its alignment with reform priorities.
- Fund relational contracting explicitly (listening, co-design, reflection).
- Protect small community partners through nested governance and equitable contracting.

- Recognise Nomadic Placemaking as a mechanism for sustainable, non-extractive, evidence-based community-building.
- Include relational and ecological metrics in evaluation frameworks.
- Allow co-creation cycles (prototyping, iteration, local responsiveness) within contract design.
- Create a list of AIFS evidence-based program that are agile and can be tailored for diverse communities.

8. Leveraging the existing evidence-based of program and avoiding ‘innovation for innovation sake’.

It is important to ensure that existing AIFS evidence-based models that have been designed to be bespoke to place, such as Wings to Fly 2.0 and that are proven to support children and families, do not become end up as another example of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’.

9. Conclusion

The DSS reform direction presents a rare opportunity to build a future-fit national system for children and families one that is relational, responsive, and informed by strong policy, social justice, contemporary neuroscience, place-based leadership theory, and community wisdom. By grounding the reform in:

- Robust models of collective action (eg Scharmer’s Five Movements or other robust place-based models) including CFC, Logan Together and other successful models.
- Nomadic Placemaking that joyfully disturbs the status quo around what is not working, whilst simultaneous working together for high quality integrated service provision, that where possible, is co-located, operates under the principles of local governance, with community connectors and social pedagogues that foster collaboration with children, families and community
- Maintains the spirit of CfC’s proven community-led model of a neutral facilitating partner
- Neuro-ecological research
- Is woven with First Nations ways of knowing and being
- Shared learning and reflective practice
- Relational Impact as well as Program Outcome
- DSS be part of the perspiratory processes of community

DSS can create a national program that is truly flexible, effective, and equitable, while strengthening the very communities that hold children’s futures but comes with the risk of more innovation for innovation sake.

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