



SEED Futures Submission to the Department of Social Services

A New Approach to Programs for Families and Children

Introduction

Established in 2024, SEED Futures provides policy solutions and problem-solving to governments by gathering real-time evidence directly from communities. Our vision is that all Australian families in the first 1,000 days receive the help they need, when they need it, so that future generations can flourish and be more productive. Our mission is to convene willing hearts and minds to make systems work better for the people they serve.

We are experts in Primary Prevention. We achieve this through ongoing engagement with our local stakeholders at all levels. We convene roundtables of stakeholders focusing on local service providers, to learn from their 'frontline experience' as well as living experience and policy makers to help translate and share these learnings into action. We also convene an advisory council of leading technical experts to ensure our work is not only best practice but also makes a unique contribution to the social policy space. We see a critical role for SEED in bringing diverse stakeholders together, learning from them and amplifying their voices, and working together to develop and promote a National Primary Preventative Framework (NPPF) to drive tangible and meaningful change for children and families in the first 1,000 days.

Our thought leadership has quickly been established. We have already developed the NPPF, working with the University of Sydney. This framework is due to be launched publicly at a celebration event by the Governor General, Her Excellency Sam Mostyn AC, in February 2025. We are also the architects of the inaugural SEED Futures Incremental Reform Catalogue (IRC), which provides immediate, practical and feasible guidance to policy makers on the actions that could be taken today to drive sustainable impact for children and families. We present these two tools with this submission, as we feel that these could be instrumental in the transformation envisaged with this new approach to Programs for Families and Children articulated by the Department of Social Services (DSS).

SEED aims to be an active partner in such changes - we work with all levels of government alongside philanthropy, NGOs, and communities to inform and co-design policy, strategy, and investment that improve outcomes for children from conception through their first 1,000 days. We report directly to intergovernmental committees at a Commonwealth and Tasmanian State level, which sets our blueprint ready for replication and scale-up by other states/ territories. By listening to families and communities at the local level, we identify what is and isn't working at the service and policy level. Our unique value add is combining the local engagement with quality policy research and analysis to propose incremental reforms. Our approach creates a strong evidence base for feasible, incremental reforms that deliver immediate benefits for the most vulnerable and address systemic failures driving entrenched disadvantage.

Our approach also develops scalable, replicable models for local stakeholder engagement to support a more responsive government policy, in alignment with the changes proposed by the DSS here. Our work also identifies gaps and opportunities to shape the philanthropy agenda, with the goal of uptake across Australia and internationally, helping to ensure that all actors and funders are working in concert towards lasting improvements for children and families – filling the current gaps. We leverage this expertise to drive investment in primary prevention, motivate action to reduce family distress, and improve the operating environment for frontline services.

Beyond Australia, we aim to be global thought leaders on how governments, philanthropy, and communities can work together to strengthen the first 1,000 days for children and parents, contributing to a global movement for primary prevention and greater opportunity for families everywhere.

SEED Futures welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the new national program for families and children and to work with DSS to deliver this change. Our submission focuses on redesigning systems to improve outcomes in the first 1,000 days, strengthening prevention, and ensuring equitable access to holistic, place-based support.

1. Support for a New, Integrated National Program

SEED Futures supports DSS's recognition that the current system is fragmented, siloed, and often reactive. Bringing multiple programs together into one national approach is an important step toward a more coherent ecosystem of support for children and families. We recommend that the new program be underpinned by the following principles:

- **Prevention first**, especially in the earliest years of life, where the smallest investment can have the biggest impact.
- **Lived experience must be central**, particularly of families experiencing entrenched disadvantage and service providers who work with them.
- **Place-based design and decision making**, which tailors services to the local context of children and their families and caregivers and empowers those at the front line to make rapid decisions in alignment with current and emerging needs.
- **Long-term, relational investment**, not short-term cycles that create insecurity of funding for service providers and disruptions to services to those who need them most.
- **Equity and inclusion**, with a focus on First Nations children and families experiencing entrenched disadvantage.

2. Strong Emphasis on Prevention and the First 1,000 Days

We strongly support DSS's shift towards prevention and early intervention. The first 1,000 days are a critical developmental period, and investment here delivers the highest social and economic returns. This also directly links to the Productivity Commission's interim report, recommendation three - [implement a Primary Preventive Investment Framework](#).

We recommend that Stream 2 (prevention and early intervention) be treated as the central pillar of the new national program, protected with long-term funding and dedicated commissioning strategies. Towards this point, SEED Futures is convening its 10th bi-annual Advisory Council meeting in December 2025, where we will address the following questions:

- What grant criteria do we need to consider for a primary preventative investment stream, including equity (getting to the right people whilst not marginalising – universal/ proportionate universalism), and what evaluation metrics might we recommend are important?
- What underpinning conditions and principles do we need to consider for a primary preventative investment stream? Should we also include in this maximising the timing and delivery of funds, not just new funding streams, but principles about funding toward primary prevention?
- What safeguards would we need to have in place to ensure primary preventative investments are truly preventative and accountable?

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the outcomes of this discussion further. Moreover, our CEO has recently returned from travel supported by a Churchill Fellowship, working to address the question - *How can governments fund primary prevention, between the commonwealth and the states/territories, with philanthropy*. The full report and recommendations of the Fellowship will be published in early 2026. However, building on the work undertaken so far, we also make the following recommendations to DSS on how Primary Preventative funds can be identified and mobilised, building on successful models noted from various government agencies across the world, that could feasibly be adapted and adopted to our Australian context:

- [Better Start](#) (England, UK): Primary Prevention is funded using dormant bank holdings.
- [Future Generations Commission](#) (Wales, UK): Funding is mobilised through a review of federal and state budget line items; pooling relevant funds for prevention work.

- [Early Intervention Investment Framework](#) (Victoria, Australia): Provides a local model for Australia, Matthew Donoghue, who was a leader in the establishment of this fund, has contributed to the SEED Futures NPPF.
- [Intergovernmental Agreements](#) (Canada): Shared funding strategies and intergovernmental agreements have been established between jurisdictions in social policy that could be used in primary prevention.

Building on our thought leadership in this area, our CEO was also invited to input to the Centre for Policy Development's Wellbeing roundtable, with senior government officials on 28 November 2025. These recommendations were also shared via this platform, including more specific information on the Canadian process of cross-jurisdictional agreements in social policy. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss such approaches with you in more detail and share the final Churchill Fellowship report with DSS.

3. Proposed Three-Stream Architecture

We strongly endorse DSS's three-stream approach – for each stream, we recommend the following:

- **Stream 1 – Universal Information & Support:** National messaging and universal supports are valuable, but they must be evidence-based, culturally safe, trauma-informed, and co-designed with the families that they intend to support and service providers that will be expected to deliver these outcomes. Universal information should be connected to local pathways so families can easily access tailored support (“one door”) within their local area, from people who will better understand their circumstances and needs. Our CEO will be addressing several successful universal parenting programs in her upcoming fellowship report and working with international experts in this space, for example, Ben Perks, author of Trauma Proof.
- **Stream 2 – Prevention & Early Intervention:** This stream aligns directly with SEED's mission and reflects our [National Primary Prevention Framework](#) (NPPF) developed in collaboration with the University of Sydney. Our NPPF seeks to shift Australia's social supports from reactive crisis-response to proactive prevention, especially during the critical “first 1,000 days” of a child's life (conception to age 2). The framework seeks to embed lived experience, community voices and place-based consultation at the heart of policy design — using real stories and community input to shape supports, funding and services. It aims to create a holistic, systems-wide reform (not just discrete programs – these are a part of the NPPF): simplifying and re-imagining how government, philanthropy and community organisations coordinate so families get the right support at the right time.

Based on the NPPF, our expertise and experience, we recommend that the DSS priorities should include:

- First 1,000 days of development.
- Parental well-being, attachment, and caregiving capacity.
- Local community prevention infrastructure.
- Supports addressing social determinants such as housing stability, safety, and connection.
- Incremental reform via an iterative process.
- Restoring hope and trust with Australian families.
- Developing a national vision where Australia is the greatest place in the world for a child to grow up, and a parent to grow in.
- Valuing the power of storytelling in data collection for incremental reform purposes.
- **Stream 3 – Targeted Wrap-Around Support:** Intensive services must be holistic, relational, and connected to universal and preventive layers—not delivered in isolation. Providers working with highly vulnerable families need flexible and reliable funding, culturally safe models, and the capacity to build trusting, long-term relationships. Funding should be prioritised for place-based solutions that can mobilise various resources to achieve a holistic approach. Funding should be invested to ensure that all these outcomes are achieved, rather than a focus only on service delivery and a pure focus on ‘numbers’ served.

4. Funding Approach & Contracting

We support the move toward relational contracting, which fosters genuine partnership and shared outcomes. To realise this vision, we recommend that DSS should:

- Introduce **multi-year (5–7 year) funding cycles**.
- Provide **flexible, place-based funding** pools.
- **Invest in capacity-building** for smaller and community-controlled organisations.
- **Encourage collaboration** across portfolios, such as health, education, housing, DV, and disability, reflecting the interconnected nature of child wellbeing and the need for an integrated approach that allows multiple entry points, but still achieves a holistic approach to care and support for children and families.

MOST CRITICALLY – we advise funding for ongoing, **place-based community consultation** mechanisms so local families, parents, caregivers, and children can regularly share lived experience and feedback on the real-world impact of policy and services. This should be considered a core and funded function, not an optional or unfunded expectation. This should also be seen as a core way to learn what works and what doesn't work, and funding should encourage active use of the findings to drive a continuous cycle of learning and improvement.

To achieve this, we recommend **consideration of our [Incremental Reform Catalogue](#) (IRC)**. The Incremental Reform Catalogue (IRC) is a core component of the SEED Futures and the University of Sydney NPPF. It provides a structured, evidence-based pathway for governments to reform the early childhood and family support system gradually, sustainably, and with community input.

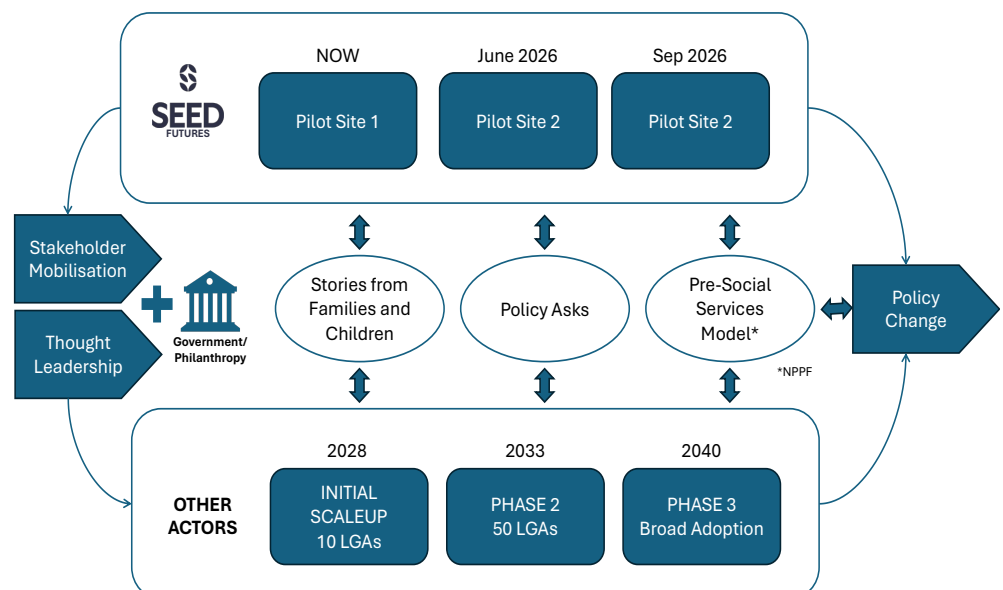
The IRC is essentially a menu of actionable, evidence-backed opportunities for improvement of policy that build from our local stakeholder engagement. It is continuously updated through a structured feedback loop that brings together place-based community consultation with children and families, lived experience insights, and local qualitative and quantitative data, together with policy research and analysis, towards suggesting incremental changes that could offer significant improvements for children and families.

The suggested policy reforms will be gathered from our qualitative and quantitative data (including storytelling in the community), themed and then tabled with state and federal cross-departmental committees. We will then work with relevant Departments to respond to these recommendations to shift policy outcomes so that we are meeting the needs of families. We will test in real communities whether the policy shift has caused a successful outcome; it will then be further refined before being proposed to relevant policymakers and decision-makers for uptake and action more broadly.

This iterative process ensures the Catalogue remains a living tool—evolving as new evidence emerges and as families, children, and frontline practitioners identify what is working and what needs to change. It also creates a live feedback loop to see how the incremental policy changes that have been actioned have an impact at the local level of children and families. Creating a tangible, replicable, scalable and reliable feedback loop from policy to lived experience and back again.

By incorporating continuous local consultation, real-world data, and iterative evaluation, the Catalogue becomes a living tool that

guides improvement over time, ensuring reforms are grounded in what children, families, and communities need. This continuous feedback loop is a key innovation in our IRC, and we recommend further consideration of embedding such a model as part of this DSS reform. We envisage that this model of local engagement driving incremental policy reform could be adopted for replication in other locations across Australia.



5. Outcomes, Data & Reporting

SEED supports shifting to outcomes-focused reporting that enables providers to spend more time supporting families and recognises all aspects of care, not simply the number of people supported. We recommend:

- **Balanced quantitative and qualitative outcome measures** that provide the full picture of quality service delivery and ensure impact where it is needed.
 - Valuing the power of storytelling in data collection, for incremental reform purposes
- **Varied measures** that reflect all aspects of child development, parental well-being, relational health, and safeguarding.
- **Streamlined reporting** templates and reduced duplication, which ensures service-providers can maximise the time available for care and not on compliance requirements.
- **Data infrastructure support** for providers with lower administrative capacity, to ensure that the best quality providers are available to support families.
- **Dedicated funding for participatory, community-led evaluation**, where insights from families and children are systematically collected and used to refine and improve the program over time.

We firmly believe that local, lived experience should directly shape *continuous policy improvement*, and feedback loops should be built into program evaluation cycles – once again, we advocate for a model such as our IRC, which ensures that reform of policy and services is coherent, cumulative, and guided by evidence of what families want and need, rather than reactive or politically driven, but tabled with the decision makers to leverage what they can to meet the needs directly

6. Equity, Access & Priority Populations

We note that the new DSS program must intentionally address inequities faced by families at greatest risk of poor outcomes. To achieve this, SEED recommends:

- **Specific strategies for families experiencing multiple systemic barriers** (poverty, homelessness, family violence, trauma).
- **Trauma-aware practice** across all streams.
- **Place-Based Support** for communities to design, govern and evaluate local solutions.
- **Strengthened investment in First Nations children**, guided by self-determination and cultural leadership.
- **Proportionate Universalism**, begin by working with Local Government Areas that need the most support first. (Our CEO gives international examples of success in her forthcoming report)

7. Place-Based Approaches

SEED Futures strongly endorses place-based design that harnesses local strengths, relationships and context. We recommend that DSS:

- Support **local co-design with families**, community leaders, and people with lived experience
- Fund **structured, ongoing place-based consultation processes** to understand how policy and services are working on the ground, particularly for diverse and underserved communities
- Embed mechanisms for **child and family voices to inform incremental policy adjustments**
- Invest in **integrated “one door” models** that simplify access
- Enable local service innovation using flexible funding rather than prescriptive program rules

This ensures the national program remains responsive, adaptive and grounded in real-world experience. Our IRC model provides a unique opportunity to achieve this – the approach is being piloted in Tasmania, but we intend to share our success and learning with other actors, to support immediate roll-out to other locations. We have established partnerships with communities and researchers to ensure that our model is robust, replicable and scalable. We aim to see this model embedded in all communities, but particularly those with high levels of vulnerability, and families experiencing entrenched disadvantage, to support prevention, quality and targeted service provision and rapid, tangible change.

8. Transition, Implementation & Stability

To avoid disruption to children and families, we recommend:

- **A clear transition plan**, including timelines and expectations.
- **Bridge funding** for organisations affected by structural changes.
- **Phased implementation** with pilot communities.
- **Transparent communication** throughout the transition period.

Conclusion and Summary

SEED Futures welcomes DSS's commitment to a more coherent, prevention-focused, and family-centred program. The inclusion of funded, place-based community consultation and lived-experience feedback loops will ensure the new national program evolves in response to end-user needs and delivers sustainable improvements for children and families. We recommend further consideration of our National Primary Prevention Framework (NPPF) and Incremental Reform Catalogue (IRC) as evidence-based approaches that can support this reform. Bernadette Black's fellowship report will also be available once published.

We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate further as the program design progresses.