

Response to the Department of Social Services ‘A new approach to programs for families and children’ discussion paper, 5 December 2025

Executive Summary

The Bryan Foundation is pleased to provide a response to the Department of Social Services (DSS) on a new approach to programs for families and children. We support DSS’ intention to transition to more integrated ways of working, greater flexibility, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO)-led service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and an outcomes-focussed approach and alternative ways of commissioning that responds to community needs.

We believe DSS can extend the reform ambition to create a more joined-up, equitable and community-led system of services and supports that delivers better outcomes for children and families and much better bang for buck. We recommend that DSS:

1. **Strategically deploy the grants** available in the new families and children program by resourcing co-ordinated packages of initiatives from networks, consortia and place-based organisations.
2. **Integrate and co-ordinate** the families and children program reforms with services and reforms delivered by other Commonwealth departments and levels of government.
3. **Take a staged and differentiated approach** to move towards a system of co-ordinated, collaboratively commissioned and community-led child and family services and consider DSS’ role in stewarding that system.

1. Strategic deployment of grants

Rather than continuing to fund individual service providers, DSS can utilise these reforms to fund integrated and community-led approaches that create better outcomes for children and families, especially those experiencing disadvantage. By building upon the strengths of current programs and effective integrated service models, including leveraging DSS’ investments in place-based initiatives such as Stronger People Stronger Places (SPSP), DSS could:

- **Resource local plans developed through community-led initiatives**, with local place-based organisations (including some of those funded by SPSP) presenting packages of initiatives involving multiple services providers that give life to the aspirations set out in their local plans.
- **Deploy grants across networks of hubs and integrated service models** to build out the service offerings of existing hubs or combine with other lines of investment (such as the Building Early Education Fund) to create robust new hubs.
- **Resource consortia or networks that focus on integrated and community-led approaches for specific cohorts**, such as young parents, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families.

2. Integrate and co-ordinate across government services and reforms

We recommend the changes to the families and children program are co-ordinated with programs and reforms across the Commonwealth and, where possible, State and Territory Governments.

There is a unique opportunity to leverage other important investments afoot across the Commonwealth right now, including the Building Early Education Fund, the Inclusion Support Program and Thriving Kids. Practically, this could involve:

- Offering the Building Early Education Fund, Inclusion Support, Thriving Kids and the new families and children program in a **combined grant round**, inviting communities and networks to develop scaled proposals integrating all these investments into coherent offerings.
- Considering ways to **pilot this kind of approach** if it cannot be offered nationally in the short to medium term, which may involve leveraging existing mechanisms, such as creating a ‘carve-out’ with government and philanthropic co-investment run via IDAC mechanisms and or trialling this approach in 20-30 place-based initiatives.
- Establishing some form of **joint oversight** to oversee implementation of the combined grants.

In the longer term, there are a range of other ways to move towards co-ordination of state and federal funded services to drive system integration. DSS could create a roadmap to outline how the families and children program changes will be co-ordinated with major reforms in related service system.

3. Taking a staged and differentiated approach

Time and support are needed to build a new approach to co-ordinating and commissioning community-led, integrated child and family services. Taking a differentiated and staged approach can build capability and capacity both inside DSS and in communities, as well as reduce operational risk.

DSS could start with organisations with experience in integrated, community-led approaches – at a minimum, these organisations should be the first to be grant funded as consortia, networks and mature place-based initiatives. Preferably, they should be the first to pilot collaborative commissioning and or combined grant rounds. At the same time, DSS should provide support for other organisations to build their capability and capacity in these areas.

As capability is built, DSS should move from a granter to a system steward, overseeing system policy, funding, co-ordination and capability building, including through cross-portfolio work and governance. This transition could look like:

Current system Grantmaker	Transition phase Strategic deployer	Future state System steward
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund individual service providers across five separate programs to support children and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund co-ordinated packages of initiatives to support children and families including mature place-based initiatives, networks and consortia • Support emerging place-based initiatives and other communities to build capacity and capability • Conduct pilots to build capability in new ways of working: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative commissioning in mature place-based initiatives • Joined-up grant round across FAC, Thriving Kids, BEEF and ISP for selected communities and or via IDAC mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steward of the system focussing on high-level policy, funding, co-ordination and capability building • Oversee network of cross-portfolio regional commissioners • Support national combined grant rounds across FAC, Thriving Kids, BEEF and ISP • Establish permanent cross-portfolio governance to oversee effective design and implementation of child and family services and supports across portfolios and levels of government

Introduction

The proposed new approach to programs for families and children is a significant opportunity for the Australian Government to improve outcomes for children and families and deliver on ambitions identified in the [Early Years Strategy](#), [Targeting Entrenched Disadvantage](#) and the [Community Sector Grants Engagement Framework](#).

This reform can help build a child and family service system where communities are engaged and empowered, providers work in collaborative and integrated ways to meet community needs, and different levels of government provide integrated governance and oversight.

We are pleased to provide this response to DSS' proposal as outlined in the discussion paper entitled 'A new approach to programs for families and children'. Our response is informed by our experience delivering two integrated, school-based child and family hubs in South East Queensland (FamilyLinQ) and a number of our partners and collaborators including service providers and intermediaries at the local, regional, state and national level.

The vision for a more joined-up and community-led approach to better support children and families

We support DSS' reform intent, especially the emphasis on integrated ways of working, greater flexibility, and an outcomes-focussed approach that responds to community needs. We strongly support the move towards alternative ways of commissioning and strongly endorse the prioritisation of ACCO-led service delivery in communities with significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

We think the ambition can go further to create a more joined-up, equitable and community-led system of services and supports that delivers better outcomes for children and families and much better bang for buck.

Deploying the families and children grants strategically to create a more joined-up and community-led system

DSS can utilise these reforms to fund integrated and community-led approaches that create better outcomes for children and families, especially those experiencing disadvantage. Rather than continuing to fund individual service providers, DSS could build upon the strengths of current programs and effective integrated service models to fund networks and consortia to deliver co-ordinated packages of initiatives to respond to community needs, especially in communities with high levels of disadvantage. This includes funding place-based initiatives which would leverage DSS' existing place investments such as SPSP.

We recommend that the grants available through the new families and children program are deployed strategically and intentionally, which could be as follows:

- **Resource local plans developed through community-led initiatives**, leveraging DSS investments in initiatives such as SPSP. Local place-based organisations should be able to present packages of initiatives potentially involving multiple service providers that give life to the aspirations set out in their local plans.

- **Deploy grants across networks of hubs and integrated service models**, especially those that leverage universal settings where families regularly attend such as schools and ECEC services, to build out the service offerings of existing hubs or combining with other lines of investment (such as the Building Early Education Fund) to create robust new hubs.
- **Resource consortia or networks that focus on integrated and community-led approaches for specific cohorts**, such as young parents, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families, where additional, targeted supports and sharing cohort-specific practice can strengthen the likelihood of better outcomes.

Creating more joined-up government services and reforms

DSS has the opportunity to collaborate across levels of government and with different government portfolios to better integrate services on which families and children rely. The grants available through the new families and children program can leverage and be leveraged by the other important investments afoot across the Commonwealth right now, including the Building Early Education Fund, the Inclusion Support Program and Thriving Kids.

Thriving Kids, for example, provides the opportunity for DSS to collaborate with the Department of Health to develop in situ, holistic and better integrated support for children with mild to moderate developmental delay. The Building Early Education Fund is another opportunity for DSS to collaborate with the Department of Education to establish infrastructure to support integrated service delivery via Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings.

We recommend that DSS:

- **Offer the Building Early Education Fund, Inclusion Support, Thriving Kids and the new families and children program in a combined grant round**, inviting communities and networks to develop scaled proposals integrating all these investments into coherent offerings.
- If this is not possible to do at the national level in the short to medium term, there could be ways to **pilot this approach by using selected offerings or ‘carve-outs’** where targeted proponents could bid for money across all of them as part of an integrated package such as:
 - Run a **concurrent national grant round** where organisations experienced in integrated, community-led, service delivery can opt to apply for this combined funding.
 - Create a **‘carve out’ of funding** across all these programs and run it as a **government-led ‘pilot’ or ‘innovation’ grant round** to build insight on how to grant across children and family portfolios.
 - As above, create a **‘carve out’ with government and IDAC philanthropic co-investment and run via IDAC mechanisms**, similar to the IDAC Building Early Education Fund Co-Investment.
 - As above, create a **‘carve out’ that could be trialled in 20-30 place-based initiatives** (which could be part of the IDAC ‘place’ communities and also run via IDAC mechanisms).
- Some form of **joint oversight to oversee effective implementation of the combined grants** across the education, health, social services and disability portfolios that also includes community, First Nations and State and Territory stakeholders, and those with lived experience.

In the longer term, there could be a range of other ways to move towards co-ordination of state and federal funded services to meet community needs and drive service system integration, including setting whole-of-government goals, aligning short- and medium-term departmental objectives with

these goals and structuring accountability processes around these goals.¹ DSS could create a five-year reform roadmap to outline how these changes will be co-ordinated with major reforms in related service systems.

Outcomes, program structure and prioritising investment

We support the overall vision, outcomes, program structure and investment priorities as outlined in the discussion paper with the following recommended enhancements:

- **Expand the program vision** to include community as a critical factor in supporting thriving children and families, for example, “All children and young people are supported by strong families and communities who have the skills and confidence to nurture them”. Communities play an essential role in child development and healthy family dynamics.²
- **Expand the program outcomes** to include a holistic and multidimensional view of wellbeing and child development and recognise the important role that the system and communities play as follows:
 1. Families to be empowered, supported and connected to raise healthy, resilient children.
 2. Children are supported to grow and develop into healthy, resilient adults.
 3. Include strong, engaged communities as a driver of child and family outcomes—either as a third outcome or within Outcome 1.
- **Add to the program structure** to ensure that it explicitly includes and funds:
 - Community strengthening (capacity and capability building, infrastructure, governance, backbone support), especially for local communities without mature place-based backbone organisations.
 - Integration, co-ordination and navigation functions.
 - Capacity building for ACCOs and smaller providers.
 - The co-design and implementation a robust evaluation approach that measures the effectiveness of the rollout of the changes; supports continuous improving and learning at the service, community and system level; and builds the evidence base for more joined-up, equitable and community-led ways of working across Australia.
- **Strengthen the four priorities as follows:**
 - Recognise the difference between prevention and early intervention and ensure there is sufficient investment in prevention.
 - Prioritise connected, co-located, integrated and culturally safe services that work together to meet family needs. Cultural safety is critical to a family accessing services and for providing the holistic support a family needs.
 - Incentivise services to do more than be informed by and respond to community needs – they should incorporate community voice, co-design with community and move to community leadership. DSS should support capability building to grow more community-led approaches.
 - Expand the scope of the goal regarding number of ACCOs to incorporate broader aims of sustainability, capacity and capability of ACCOs to operate with impact.
- Consider adding the following **principles about funding adequacy, indexation and prioritisation:**
 - Target investment to communities most in need.

- Support flexibility in how funding is used, so that services can determine how to best meet the needs of their local communities.
- Provide adequate funding to cover operational costs of delivering quality services, including rent, IT system 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' is recommended to ensure adequate funding including funding for research to build evidence and innovation to improve services and supports.³
- Provide funding for integration including the people, relationships, infrastructure and systems ('the glue') that make integration and co-ordination mechanisms possible and avoid fragmentation (see below).
- Index funding, especially multi-year funding, to ensure the financial value of the grant is not reduced over time.
- Extend funding to 5 + 5 years funding (subject to satisfactory performance and community endorsement), especially in relation to relational contracting where there is a community-led approach (see below).

Connected, co-located and integrated services

We strongly endorse DSS' intention to encourage service providers to co-locate services so families can get help in one place and look favourably upon applications that show strong local partnerships, co-location of services or genuine integration. Integration of services across sectors and providers is essential for better outcomes for children and families, especially those experiencing disadvantage.⁴

We encourage DSS to prioritise applications that offer genuine integration, including those leveraging integrated child and family hubs, especially in communities with high levels of disadvantage.

Why hubsⁱ?

There is a growing body of evidence to support the impact of hubs on improving outcomes for children and families.⁵

Hubs are already being used to deliver DSS-funded families and children programs. 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.

Supported playgroups -- another example of a type of activity funded by DSS -- are also often delivered in hub settings and are used to provide strong family engagement and soft entry points to link families to additional services, such as allied health, when needed.⁶

Insights from these examples should be leveraged to inform the design of DSS' new approach.

ⁱ Hubs can be of various types and sizes -- from additional services provided in multipurpose rooms in universal settings such as schools and ECEC services to a comprehensive offering of services in purpose-built infrastructure -- but all provide a welcoming place for children and families to build relationships and seamlessly access multiple services and supports.

Co-location alone, does not guarantee integration of services or a seamless experience for families. Intentional allocation of time, funding and expertise is required to consistently create connected and integrated services that respond to the needs and context of the community that house them – this work does not happen spontaneously or without dedicated resourcing. Cultural safety is also critical to a family accessing services and for providing the holistic support a family needs.⁷

We recommend the following in relation to connected, co-located and integrated services:

- **Prioritise applications from consortia of local organisations or networks of organisations (such as networks of hubs)** that clearly outline the roles of each organisation, governance structures to enable effective collaboration, and strategies for enabling shared outcomes. If connected, co-located and integrated services are the goal, contracts must enable a non-competitive environment. Consider the experience of organisations in working together to deliver integration, which may be evident in existing child and family hubs as well as communities where Connected Beginnings, Empowered Communities, Justice Reinvestment, SPSP and Community for Children Facilitating Partners (CfC FP) have been collaborating.
- **Leverage integrated child and family hubs (also called Community Hubs) as a preferred delivery mechanism for child and family services in communities experiencing significant disadvantage.** Hubs are experienced at working with community and integrating various services and supports for children and families, including early learning, health, family support services and other community supports.
- **Prioritise co-locating families and children services within universal, non-stigmatising settings where families frequent -- such as schools and early childhood education and care services.** Providing families and children services through universal settings and services provides the ability to respond to a wider range of children and families, supports prevention and early intervention as early as possible in a child's life and builds long-term trust with families.⁸
- **Resource the time, funding and expertise ('the glue') required for genuine integration at the local level** including:
 - Allocate dedicated flexible funding for partnership-building activities
 - Resource integration management and leadership, such as Partnership Managers and Hub Leaders/Co-ordinators, to support collaboration between partners; shared governance, evaluation, learning and accountability; information sharing; joint planning and multidisciplinary professional development and workforce supports.
 - Invest in staff who build strong relationships between families, services and partners such as Community Connectors (based in child and family hubs or Community Hubs), Service Navigators and top-up other frontline staff roles to support warm referrals, collaborative work and continuity of care across services.
 - Provide funding for operational systems and processes that enable integration – such as cohesive referral processes and IT platforms, shared data systems and joint case management.
 - Provide additional funding for community outreach and language translation work for First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities to support culturally safe connection and support.
 - Allow funding for room hire or infrastructure costs to support co-location, including in shared or universal locations.
- **Invest in structured governance at a local and cross-portfolio level** to navigate cross-silo tensions such as data sharing and shared planning (see [Our Place's lessons from creating shared](#)

[governance](#)).⁹ These regular forums should include community, government, services and other partners to come together to monitor activities across the community (or hub location) and identify system gaps or issues.

- **Require and support services to develop local protocols and processes that enable proactive sharing of relevant information to support families more holistically.** Safe, consent-based information sharing, with authorisation at the highest levels, is essential for effective integration.
- **Include willingness and potential for service integration as success criteria in grant application and look favourably upon applications that include:**
 - Willingness and authorisation to undertake integrated planning, work in an integrated way and share data.
 - An understanding of the local service system, including available services and referral pathways.
 - Demonstrated capability and experience in working in an integrated way, such as evidence of connected partnerships with services, joint planning and reflection, integrated family-centric and culturally responsive practice, and child-centred, multi-disciplinary frameworks. 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.

Responding to community need

We endorse the need for services to be informed by, and respond to, community need and suggest that this approach needs to go further to incorporate community voice, co-design with community, and move to community leadership including local governance, decision-making and commissioning to ensure services reflect community needs.

Effective approaches to prevention and early intervention are community-led and place-based.¹⁰ Community leadership is the key to improving outcomes for children, families and the communities that support them. This requires:

- Community engagement through voice collection, a community collective plan or co-design
- Building trust through investing time and resources in relationships
- Collective governance including community
- Shared decision making at all stages from design, delivery and reporting
- Asset-focus building on what exists and is already working in communities.

A number of community-led organisations, such as place-based organisations, CfC Facilitating Partners, and backbone organisations are doing the important work of driving local service system integration across the variety of child and family services funded by different levels of government. This work, including existing investment by DSS in place-based initiatives such as SPSP, should be leveraged as part of the reforms to the programs for families and children.

We recommend the following in relation to community leadership:

- **Take a community-led approach to distributing grants by resourcing local plans.** Local place-based organisations should be able to present packages of initiatives potentially involving multiple service providers that give life to the aspirations set out in their local plans. This will

leverage the local leadership and relationships that exist in communities and support genuine integration of services and supports for children and families.

- **Take a differentiated approach to empowering community leadership** based on the maturity of collective decision making in each community as follows:
 - Mature place-base initiatives (including some Stronger Places Stronger People (SPSP), Empowered Communities and Connected Beginnings sites) and CfC FP sites with strong community leadership should lead and be entrusted to design and deliver solutions in partnership with local providers.
 - Emerging place-based initiatives should be engaged in local co-design of program delivery and supported to continue to build their capacity for shared decision making and adaptive governance to build on community-shaped approaches.
 - Communities without place-based initiatives should be consulted on service design and supported to build capability to organise community-led governance, with providers adopting place-focused, community-shaped approaches to delivery.
- Provide **dedicated and flexible funding to enable community engagement, relationship building and capability building to do this work**. This investment should be targeted to communities most in need, with flexibility and ability to tailor approaches to different communities. This includes funding communities that demonstrate potential but are in the early stages of building local connection to build their leadership capacity.
- **Require that all grant applicants demonstrate community co-governance models, clear mechanisms for consulting with community, and processes for monitoring and evaluating** the impact of their activities and how they will identify and respond to changing needs or emerging opportunities in their communities.
- **For community-led applicants, assess organisations on:**
 - Experience co-designing with community
 - Experience capturing and adopting community voice to inform action
 - Reference to a community collective plan
 - Demonstrated authentic engagement with community through culturally responsive approaches
 - Shared governance models and demonstrated shared decision making
 - Knowledge of the local service system e.g. a comprehensive service needs analysis, barriers faced by families in accessing services
 - Processes for collectively monitoring and evaluating the impact of their activities
 - Strong existing relationships and endorsement from local providers and community leaders
 - Or, where these are not yet in place, what relationships exist with the local community and a plan to support communities to build their leadership capacity.
- In addition to the government data sources suggested in the discussion paper (SEIFA, AEDC, census data, child protection engagement rates), **consider using indicators of complexities of a community** that can identify additional needs such as:
 - The cultural diversity of a community. For example, a community can appear to have adequate services based on the population, but if services are not culturally safe, or interpreters are not available in the community, services can be under-utilised, and families are left without support.
 - Measures of community cohesion. The [Social Cohesion Compass \(Scanlon Foundation\)](#) provides insights into social cohesion and democratic resilience for each Local

Government Area (LGA). The ABS indicators under Cohesive in the Measuring What Matters Framework, could also provide insights if they were available to DSS at the LGA or SA2 level.

- Qualitative insights from communities and providers as to the availability and accessibility of services and supports including gaps and opportunities at a local level, and complexities facing families and children and their level of need.

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

We welcome DSS' ambition to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families by supporting and increasing the number of ACCOs delivering services to children and families.

DSS should adopt the six recommendations outlined in SNAICC's 2024 report 'Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families' report¹¹:

1. Embed community-led decision-making at every stage of funding development and allocation
2. Prioritise ACCOs as providers of children and family services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families
3. Invest in the growth, development, and sustainability of ACCOs through core-functions funding
4. Reduce administrative burdens across the system
5. Increase investment in and support for ACCO-led research and evaluation
6. Build government capacity to work better with ACCOs.

Building upon these recommendations, we suggest the following in relation to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families as part of DSS' program reforms:

- **Require and resource First Nations governance, co-design and co-delivery of services and cultural capability** to be embedded in ways of operating in services that are supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Incentivise (and resource smaller) community service organisations to invest in the cultural competency of their workforces and prioritise effort required to build strong and trusting relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders and families.
- **Prioritise the direct funding of ACCOs** to lead the provision of children and family services in communities with high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, including ensuring that application and tender requirements are not so onerous that they disadvantage smaller ACCOs.
- **Provide adequate and sustainable support for ACCOs** to operate services for children and families across Australia, including funding for capability and capacity building and flexibility in funding models to allow adaptation to local contexts.
- **Consider the lessons from initiatives that have a history of building ACCO and government capability and capacity** to operate with impact including Connected Beginnings, Justice Reinvestment, Empowered Communities and SNAICC Early Years.
- **Plan how to undertake a transition from non-Indigenous organisations to ACCOs** in communities with high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that do not have an ACCO with the capacity to immediately take over service provision. This may involve supporting grant applications from consortia of non-Indigenous organisations and ACCOs or

short-term contracts for existing non-Indigenous organisations in that community while funding capacity building for local ACCOs.

- **Co-design evaluation approaches, outcomes measurement and reporting tools that are culturally responsive** by working collaboratively with ACCOs and adopting the guidance in the frameworks such as the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.¹²

Measuring outcomes

We support DSS' focus on outcomes reporting to understand who is receiving support, track what's working and improve services to better meet the needs of communities. We endorse DSS' aim to collect qualitative data to show the real impact of services on children and families.

More broadly, DSS should establish an effective learning system that focusses on what matters to children, families and communities which:

- Recognises that people, families and communities know what matters for them
- Invests in learning how to strengthen the system at all levels
- Actively involves people, families and communities in innovation, learning, and policymaking
- Measures the wellbeing impacts that matter for individuals, families and communities.

We recommend the following in relation to measuring and utilising outcomes for improvement:

- **Require community participation in developing outcomes and measures and ensure data is returned to communities** in a timely and meaningful way to enable local leaders to review progress, share learning, and adapt their approach as needs change.
- **Include holistic, child and family centred outcomes measures** that are:
 - Meaningful to the local community from national, state and local government data as well as community data.
 - Assessed using both quantitative and qualitative insights, such as surveys and stories from families, to ensure a full understanding of impact.
 - Incorporate relational outcomes, such as families feeling safe, respected and involved in their community, as well as changes in community perspectives.
 - Include information from multiple partners and community such as annual surveys of service leaders on the quality of the partnership; front line staff on their ability to refer between services; and families on their confidence in accessing services (refer to [Our Place's Emerging Findings Report 2024](#) for further information on this approach).¹³
- Include **measures of how the service is implementing priorities** of the new families and children program including:
 - How organisations are providing connected, co-located and integrated services and supports to families and children including evidence of collaborative ways of working and formal partnerships.
 - Evidence of connection to community including amount of community co-design, regular consultation or governance with community, and adaptations as a result of community input or need.
 - Information on how funding is spent to provide transparency and accountability.
- **Incentivise the use of evidence-informed lead indicators relating to service quality, quantity, participation and integration** to monitor performance and inform early learning and

continuous improvement at both local and system levels. Evidence from [Restacking the Odds](#) shows that effective use of indicators can empower frontline workers and strengthen local solutions, whilst enabling collaboration and monitoring of equity, outcomes and performance at the system level.¹⁴

- **Regularly review and share impact reporting, case studies and other lessons learned and iteratively adjust the program's approach using feedback gathered** from providers, communities, children and families to ensure the program is flexible, responsive and supportive to community needs and context. This may include adjusting the outcomes, measures and indicators that providers report on based on their feedback to ensure these are pragmatic, within the control of providers and ultimately influence family and community wellbeing.
- **Provide system-wide capability building and resourcing** to support organisations with the capacity, tools and expertise to routinely collect, interpret, and act on data, as part of ongoing quality improvement processes.
- **Leverage existing frameworks including the ARACY NEST framework**, which provides a holistic way to understand and act for child wellbeing and to guide monitoring, evaluating and reporting on children's outcomes. The NEST is currently used across Australia in many place-based initiatives.

Relational contracting

We strongly welcome DSS' commitment to offer alternative ways of commissioning including relational contracting in the new national program, in order to support trust-based partnerships, long-term outcomes and flexibility to adapt program design and delivery to local context.

Good commissioning needs to adopt four key principles¹⁵:

1. Centring the need to build relationships and trust
2. Elevating the role of communities in planning and delivery
3. Embedding learning and flexibility to allow for experimentation, reflection and evolution
4. Rethinking funding models to invest in people and communities.

We recommend the following in relation to alternative ways of commissioning:

- **Prioritise communities where there are significant challenges**, such as entrenched disadvantage, equity and low participation, where a place-based and integrated way of working can make the most difference to families and children experiencing complex issues.
- **Require an explicit commitment to strengthen community leadership and relationships** including accountability to and engagement with community leadership in both the development of proposed outcomes and ensuring reporting of outcomes to community; an explicit focus on building community capacity; a focus on co-ordinating and integrating local service systems to meet community needs; and a commitment to shared decision-making including local structures and processes.
- **Prioritise collaborative commissioning that builds upon trusted relationships and local leadership**: look favourably on organisations working in partnership to plan, procure, co-ordinate and evaluate services for their local communities, where those organisations can demonstrate genuine relationships with the local community and ability to work in culturally responsive ways.

- **Allocate the appropriate amount of time, capability and investment** to implement alternative ways of commissioning:
 - **Train government contract commissioning and management teams** on formal relational contracting and how to work differently with communities. Investment needs to support DSS' teams and systems to support alternative ways of commissioning.
 - **Ensure government contract management staff have the capacity, role retention and authorising environment** to form genuine relationships with providers and the freedom necessary for truly flexible relational contracting.
 - **Support organisations** who need to build their capability to participate in alternative ways of commissioning, especially smaller organisations and ACCOs, and enable sharing of lessons across providers.
 - **Fund the work to design, commission and co-ordinate services.**
 - **Extend funding to 5 + 5 year funding**, subject to satisfactory performance and community endorsement, to give community assurance of consistency and support providers to invest in flexibility to adapt to changing contexts, continuous improvement, deepening relationships, and workforce continuity.
- **Use a staged approach to implement alternative ways of commissioning:**
 - **Leverage the expertise and experience of organisations that operate in this way to help grow national capability for collaborative commissioning and relational contracting.** These organisations include Primary Health Networks (PHNs) that have expertise in working with communities to commission and co-ordinate place-based responses; the National Indigenous Australian Agency (NIAA) who share decision making with Indigenous communities including through Empowered Communities; and community sector organisations that support place-based initiatives or deliver strong community-informed Facilitating Partner roles (noting that relational commissioning and contracting is best performed by an organisation this is not delivering services in a local community).
 - **Start with mature-place based initiatives** including some SPSP, Empowered Communities and CfC FPs sites with strong community leadership.
 - **Support those communities with emerging place-based initiatives and other communities to develop their capability** while operating under a more traditional contract and then transition all communities to a more relational, community-led approach when they are ready.
- **Collaborate across DSS, Australian and State and Territory Government portfolios, and stakeholders across the system to share learnings and support capability shifts to work more relationally, empower communities and share decision making** including organisations such as PLACE, the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children (IDAC), Thriving Queensland Kids Partnerships (TQKP), ARACY, the Strengthening Communities Alliance and The Possibility Partnership.
- **Invest in the data systems and associated capability** required to support alternative ways of commissioning and ensure data collection and interpretation can be designed and managed by community where there is capacity.
- **Evaluation:** Appoint and fund an external learning partner to support ongoing learning, evaluation and improvement around the process.

DSS should transition from its current role as a grant-maker to operate as a system steward focussing on high-level policy, funding, co-ordination and capability building. This could look like:

- DSS identifies the communities in need of integrated family and children services. This would include communities benefiting from the current five programs, identified IDAC communities, and additional communities based on other quantitative and qualitative evidence
- DSS identifies the lead commissioning partner for each community, either through an open or closed grants process, looking for organisations that have:
 - Strong relationships with the community – as evidenced by alignment to the community collective plan, use of co-design, participation in joint governance structures, demonstrated commitment to hearing community voice and using it to guide ways of working.
 - Experience in commissioning, relational contracting and service coordination.
 - Commitment to community led, place-based approaches.
- DSS enters into relational contracts with each commissioning partner to work with each community to design, coordinate and deliver services. This contract could focus on high-level outcomes, expectations and service parameters, noting that each community's journey will look different. There should be a balance between continuity of existing services and supports while transforming to a more community-led, integrated service system over time.

Eventually the governance of this kind of approach could involve a network of cross-portfolio regional commissioners with the capability to work in relational ways with local communities, providers and all levels of government.

About The Bryan Foundation

The Bryan Foundation's vision is to support and empower young Queenslanders to change their lives through meaningful education. The Foundation supports organisations whose education and training programs creatively address the challenges of vulnerable young Queenslanders, with a particular focus on early childhood education.

In partnership with the Queensland Government, The Bryan Foundation delivers two school-based integrated child and family hubs in South East Queensland entitled 'FamilyLinQ'. FamilyLinQ aims to enhance life outcomes of Queensland children and their families by bringing together early years learning, education, wrap-around health and community services – all under one roof.

The Bryan Foundation is a philanthropic partner of the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children (IDAC) and the Queensland Kids Funders' Alliance (QKFA).

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