Submission

A new approach to programs for families and children

November 2025

Acknowledgements

The Working with Women Alliance (WwWA), the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA), the National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) and the Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance (AMWA) acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future. We value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge. We extend our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who for thousands of years have preserved the culture and practices of their communities on country. This land was never surrendered, and we

acknowledge that it always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. We acknowledge that Australian governments have been complicit in the entrenched disadvantage, intergenerational trauma and ongoing institutional racism faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must lead the design and delivery of services that affect them for better life outcomes to be achieved.

We support the submission and recommendations made by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) to this consultation. NATSIWA play a pivotal role as the national peak in representing the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women.

About WwWA

The Working with Women Alliance (WwWA) represents two key portfolios: National Women's Safety (NWS) and National Women's Equality (NWE). The WwWA connects the critical areas of gender-based violence prevention and the advancement of women's economic equality and leadership, bridging these important policy fields for greater impact. We work with members and stakeholders, including the Australian Government, to provide expertise and advice on gender equality and women's safety.

About AMWA

The Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance (AMWA) is led by the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), the national peak body representing Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in partnership with Settlement Services International (SSI) and Media Diversity Australia (MDA). The Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance is the national voice for multicultural women. AMWA advocates for gender equity, representation, and inclusion across all facets of Australian society. Our work is informed by lived experiences, community insights, and evidence-based research to ensure that systemic barriers are addressed, and opportunities for women are unlocked. As an intersectional alliance, we aim to empower women from all multicultural backgrounds to thrive and contribute fully to Australia's prosperity.

About NATSIWA

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) is the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Australia. The leadership team of Directors are Indigenous women each representing States and Territory across Australia. NATSIWA is funded by the Australian Government to bring together the issues and voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's organisations and individuals across Australia.

About NRWC

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) is a grass roots organisation, established in 2002, that works to support and grow vibrant rural, remote, and regional communities throughout Australia. We are a coalition of five peak rural alliances comprising the Australian Local Government Women's Association, Australian Women in Agriculture, National Rural Health Alliance, Women in Seafood Australasia and Transport Women

Australia Limited. For over 20 years, we have worked to ensure better social, economic, and environmental outcomes for women in rural townships, in rural communities and in primary production throughout Australia. NRWC provides a collaborative, powerful national voice for women living in rural, regional, and remote Australia through:

- Representing the diverse views and voices of women in rural, regional, and remote
- Australia
- Providing advice to the Australian Government on policy issues relevant to the views, circumstances and needs of rural women
- Contributing to building a positive profile of rural women, their achievements, and their issues.

We believe it is important that the unique views of rural women who reside in the numerous rural, remote, and regional communities throughout Australia as farmers, businesswomen, community leaders and volunteers, have substantial input into consultations about their communities, industries, needs and issues, including any matters relating to women's rights, gender equality and discrimination.

Executive Summary

The Working with Women Alliance (WwWA), the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA), the National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) and the Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance (AMWA) (further referred to as the Alliances), are grateful for the opportunity to consult on the Department of Social Services' (the Department) reforms to Families and Children Activity programs. We endorse the Department's proposal to consolidate the five Families and Children Activity programs and to provide services under three defined streams. We also support amendments to grant agreements that will ensure government funds are leveraged to deliver critical services most effectively.

The Alliances emphasise these reforms as an opportunity to embed culturally safe, community-led, accessible and trauma-informed practices in the provision of services that support families and children. While the proposed reforms will improve service delivery through reduced fragmentation and administrative burden, we highlight the critical need for systems that support diverse families including those with disability and those from multicultural communities, rural areas, LGBTIQA+SB, and First Nations communities. Embedding cultural safety, multilingual access and lived-experience governance is critical to ensuring the reform delivers equitable outcomes across diverse communities. In addition to this, we highlight considerations relevant to transitional arrangements.

Supporting Service Provision

The Alliances support initiatives that will enable organisations to provide support services most efficiently and effectively for all clientele. A reduction in the administrative burden placed on service providers will support this objective, allowing funding and resources to be spent addressing specific and emerging community challenges. Prioritising investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) will also support effective service delivery, improving outcomes for First Nation's children and families who require tailored, culturally appropriate services.

In conjunction with these initiatives, the Department should support organisations to develop inclusive and culturally safe practices. This includes mandating culturally safe practices and supporting ACCOs in responding to increased service demand and transitioning into the Families and Children Activity.

This must also include ensuring mainstream organisations can partner effectively with multicultural and settlement services, utilise bicultural workers, and implement culturally responsive models that address the specific needs of migrant and refugee families.

Without explicit consideration of language, migration status, and system navigation barriers, many multicultural families will remain under-served in consolidated program structures.

The Alliances also support ensuring services are informed by, and respond to, community needs. This commitment needs to go further and provide feedback and input avenues for local communities on service planning. Additionally, this commitment needs to include consideration of not only metropolitan areas but the needs of regional and remote communities. As described in the consultation documents, rural areas are some of the most disadvantaged and require additional resourcing, especially for early intervention and prevention. The Alliances support the statistical assessment of community need to shape grant allocations.

Recommendations

- Funding for capability building and data collection to support service providers in evaluating their programs.
- Allocate additional funding and support to ACCOs to ensure they can meet demand.
- Encourage and facilitate ACCOs to report on outcomes and collect data in a culturally appropriate way.
- Embed and fund trauma-informed and cultural safety training in all service provision, ensuring that safe practice is a mandatory standard.
- Embed cultural safety and lived-experience governance as mandatory components of funded programs.
- Replace pilot funding cycles with long-term funding with a minimum of five years for community-led service provision.
- Commit to addressing service delivery need in all geographical areas, including regional and remote.
- Fund travel for continuous, reliable and safe face-to-face services to access rural, regional and remote communities, and for clients to travel to services, if services are not place-based.
- Ensure co-location of services does not reduce face-to-face services provision in regional and remote areas.
- Explicitly recognise CALD, migrant and refugee families as priority cohorts across all streams.
- Fund culturally and linguistically specific services, including bicultural workers and translation of resources.

- Protect diversity in service ecosystem by resourcing small–medium multicultural and disability organisations.

Grants, Reporting, and Data

The alliances support the Department's proposal to grant funding according to community need and a variety of data sources, including qualitative data. Grant agreements must account for the limited standardised data that is disaggregated by priority populations and location.

For multicultural communities, the current lack of disaggregated cultural data—particularly on language needs, visa categories, migration pathways, digital exclusion and experiences of racism—makes accurate assessment of need and outcomes difficult. This is particularly relevant for the child protection sector and out of home care services, where cultural data is either missing or poorly collected. AMWA recommends DSS mandate data collection centrally for all services catering to families and children, rather than relying on individual organisations to generate it.

The alliances also endorse relational contracting, noting that additional support to service providers will be required to assist with cultural change and capability building.

AMWA also notes that relational contracting must ensure small and medium multicultural and refugee-serving organisations are not disadvantaged. These organisations hold deep community trust but often lack the administrative capacity of larger providers. Any relational contracting model must therefore include capability-building, fair pricing, and governance structures that value cultural expertise and lived experience.

Recommendations

- Conduct comprehensive service needs analysis and mapping in partnership with the sector.
- Improve the evidence-base for operation costs. The ABS should collect more comprehensive data on service provision including disaggregation by location and price, and delineation between social assistance and healthcare.
- Upfront investment by DSS to support professional development, capability building and cultural change.
- Establish a steering committee to provide oversight and guidance of the relational contract trial.
- Require disaggregated cultural data collection (language, visa type, migration or settlement pathway, religion, ethnicity, digital exclusion, racism experiences).

Supporting Families and Children

First Nations Families

Mainstream services fail and even exacerbate harms to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children. Mainstream services remain culturally unsafe, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) are underfunded and overcrowded. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have complex and intersecting experiences of relationship stress, family violence, economic insecurity, housing instability and engagement with child protective services. These are both causes and outcomes of generational trauma and racism, with solutions to be found in self-determination and strengthened support for ACCOs.

The Alliances commend the Department for prioritising investment in improving outcomes for First Nation's children and families by increasing the number of ACCOs delivering support services.

We also acknowledge that in tandem with priority funding for ACCOs, mainstream service providers must be responsible for delivering culturally appropriate services. This should include collaborative commissioning, active partnerships with ACCOs, cultural competency training and embedding specialist First Nations' roles within programs and governance.

Multicultural Families

Migrant and refugee women and families require explicit recognition within the reform. Many face structural barriers including racism, visa precarity, language barriers, low digital literacy and limited system navigation support. These inequities compound socio-economic stress and can lead to delayed help-seeking or disengagement from services. Culturally safe, community-led and linguistically accessible service models—delivered in partnership with multicultural organisations and bicultural workers—must therefore be embedded throughout the new program.

In addition, many multicultural families—including recently arrived migrants, humanitarian entrants, women on temporary visas, and families separated by migration pathways—experience specific vulnerabilities that are not well understood within mainstream service systems. These include trauma histories, limited social networks, extended or multigenerational household structures, cultural norms around parenting and care, and

experiences of discrimination or exclusion. Without deliberate attention to these factors, consolidated service systems risk unintentionally widening gaps in access and outcomes.

To ensure equitable access and participation, the program design should:

- Recognise multicultural, migrant and refugee families as priority cohorts requiring targeted early intervention, culturally tailored supports and specialist pathways.
- Resource bicultural/bilingual workers, community connectors and peer-led programs, who play a critical role in bridging cultural, linguistic and trust gaps.
- Fund interpreter services across all touchpoints, including family services, disability supports, health services, and early childhood.
- Support specialist multicultural women's, settlement and refugee services, particularly small and medium organisations that hold deep community trust but are often under-resourced.
- Acknowledge the intersection of visa status, migration history, racism and gendered disadvantage, which affects parenting confidence, safety, help-seeking and service engagement.
- Ensure mainstream providers demonstrate cultural capability, active partnerships with multicultural organisations, and lived-experience governance.
- Incorporate qualitative insights, such as lived-experience narratives and culturally informed case studies, into outcomes measurement frameworks.
- Address digital exclusion, recognising that many families require in-person supports, translated resources and system navigation assistance.

Embedding these considerations across the reform will strengthen early intervention, reduce barriers to service engagement, and ensure migrant and refugee families are able to access support that is culturally safe, trauma-informed, linguistically accessible and responsive to the diversity of family structures and needs within multicultural communities.

Single Mother Families

With the highest rates of housing stress, single mother families experience an elevated risk of economic insecurity, housing instability, and poverty.[1] Single mothers are also disproportionately exposed to intimate partner violence.[2] Further, there are more lone parent concentrations in regional areas where service provision is worse than in metropolitan areas.[3] Additionally, there are more adolescent births in rural areas.[4] These rural single mothers face compounded disadvantage with lower incomes, higher barriers to services and housing stress.[5] Inadequate social security services increase the risk of poverty and exposure to violence: The interaction between child support payments and

family tax benefits allows perpetrators to weaponise the Child Support system, intentionally causing debt for their ex-partner.

LGBTIQA+SB Families

LGBTIQA+SB families face barriers in accessing mainstream services that are designed with underlying cisgender, heteronormative assumptions about the family model. These assumptions perpetuate the exclusion of diverse families who may fear discrimination based on gender identity, sexuality or family structure when seeking support. There are few LGBTIQA+SB specialist services providers, leaving families without an alternative means for seeking support.

Primary Carers and Families with Disability

Women with disability experience physical, attitudinal and informational barriers to accessing mainstream services, and are poorly served by both disability and health systems.

In addition to this, primary carers, people with disability and families with disability experience an increased risk of relationship stress, family and domestic violence, economic insecurity, and housing instability as a result of systemic discrimination. Consequentially, families with disability often have frequent engagement with social security and welfare services.

Rural, regional and remote families

As the DSS consultation findings identify programs need to respond to local communities, and local needs should be determined through shared decision making. This is particularly important in rural areas where regional and remote communities that do not have locally based services responding to their needs. Although telehealth and online services provide valuable supports, face-to-face services are still preferred by rural communities and recommended by medical experts.[6] Those providing these locally based and online services need to have an understanding of rural areas and their unique challenges.

To do this rural workforces need to be developed. Workforce development being critical to reliable and broad service delivery was also a key finding of the consultation document. The workforce in regional and remote areas needs to be developed so there are viable organisations applying for government grants.

Further, co-location of services has been recommended yet this cannot be at the cost of providing locally based services. Co-location of services in regional and remote areas is often provided in the form of regional hubs. If hubs are used to provide services, consistent, reliable and safe outreach services are needed. Transport links to regional hubs are also needed for clients.

Additionally, these co-located services need to be coordinated not only from the grant administrative side but through their client liaison. For example, a client should not have to repeat their traumatic circumstances or story to each service if these services are administratively linked.

Recommendations

- Transition delivery of children and family support services to ACCOs where possible.
- Encourage collaborative commissioning to increase access to specialist services for families that require culturally appropriate and accessible support that is not offered by mainstream services.
- Expand funded interpreter services across primary, acute, disability, and aged care.
- Require mainstream service providers to demonstrate active partnership with local ACCOs and LGBTIQA+SB, multicultural, disability, and single mother organisations.
    - Including shared governance, decision-making, and funding allocation for ACCOs and mainstream services.
- Embed specialist cultural support roles within the national program for Aboriginal, LGBTIQA+SB, multicultural, and families with disability.
- Provide regional and rural areas with workforce development to ensure there are effective organisation applying for government grants.
- Develop regional and rural workforces to ensure service providers understand rural contexts and build trust.
- Ensure all rural needs are considered at a community level rather than a regional level.
- Ensure regional hubs have consistent, reliable and safe outreach services, and transport links from surrounding areas.

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