

3 December 2025

To whom it may concern,

Department of Social Services Consultation: A new approach to programs for families and children

National Disability Services (NDS) writes to highlight the opportunities for alignment and integration across current the current government reform agenda to improve programs for children and families.

NDS is Australia's peak body for disability service organisations, and Australia's biggest and most diverse network of disability service providers. Our valued members collectively operate several thousand services for more than 300,000 Australians with disability and employ a workforce of more than 100,000 people.

NDS is committed to a sustainable and diverse disability service sector, underpinned by the provision of high-quality, evidence-based practices and supports that strengthen, safeguard, and provide greater choice for people with disability in Australia. Services for children with disability or development concerns must integrate and ensure smooth transitions in and out of mainstream, NDIS, and other services such as the DSS funded programs.

Reforms underway include the current Department of Social Services (DSS) proposal for a new approach to support families and children through a single national program, as well as the current disability reform work led by the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing under the Thriving Kids initiative for children with developmental concerns, delays, or autism who have low to moderate support needs.

Consultation on design and implementation is currently occurring in both these areas of reform, creating a not to be missed opportunity to design a more effective and easily accessible service system for consumers. Children, young people and their families are less concerned with where and how services are funded and are rightly focused on seamless systems that provide information and navigation to enable them to find the right services at the right time.

Opportunities for Alignment

NDS and our members have been involved in design discussions relating to Thriving Kids and broader mainstream and foundational supports reform at national and state levels. We bring this expertise and experience with our advice in this letter. We believe that there is a

significant opportunity across these two reform initiatives to align design and implementation considerations so that synergies can be leveraged for children and families in Australia.

The DSS consultation discussion paper identifies three proposed activity streams under one national program:

- National programs and information services – making sure families across Australia have access to trusted advice and resources, wherever they live.
- Prevention and early intervention – supporting families early, before challenges escalate.
- Intensive family supports – for families who need more targeted, wraparound support.

This cohort will include those children with development concerns and autism and their families which are the focus of Thriving Kids. The current Inquiry into the Thriving kids Initiative [Inquiry into the Thriving Kids initiative – Parliament of Australia](#) and the national Thriving Kids Advisory Group [Thriving Kids Advisory Group | Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing](#) tasked with providing expert advice to government are likely to make their recommendations on design and implementation of Thriving Kids by the end of 2025.

The work is running on similar trajectories with design work currently occurring and with the following milestones:

- Thriving Kids: current consultations and design and implementation work. Tender and commissioning approach and timeline to be confirmed. Phased rollout of services to commence July 2026.
- DSS Child and family programs: current consultations and design and implementation work. Tenders to be released early 2026 and services to commence February 2027.

We appreciate the consultative approach taken by DSS as the new program design is being shaped and were pleased to participate in the Town Hall meeting on 14 November. We also note that the Minister's opening address identified that one of the policy drivers for this DSS reform was that more children were being identified with developmental vulnerability. We also welcome the assurance provided in the consultation session that DSS are considering the synergies across the reform initiatives and see alignment particularly in Stream One: National programs and information services.

DSS reform proposals

NDS is pleased to note and highlight key elements in the DSS consultation paper, some of which are new ways of working that NDS and our members strongly support. These include:

- Evidence-informed approach including research, professional expertise and lived experience.

- Building on good practice already existing and the opportunity to support and expand that work across Australia.
- The opportunity to make it easier for providers to deliver sustainable outcomes including:
 - longer-term funding agreements of up to five years
 - one grant/contract approach including delivery across multiple streams.
 - flexibility in how providers deliver services
 - simplified reporting systems
 - meaningful outcomes-based reporting.
- The opportunity for relational contracting.
- Strong local partnerships, co-location of services or genuine integration will be looked at favourably.

NDS also recommends that the following are important considerations in the approach:

- **Funding:** The funding should account for all costs to deliver high quality services. Appropriate funding levels should be available for overheads and indirect costs that enable organisations to invest in critical capabilities (please see [Paying what it takes report - Social Ventures](#)). This includes staff development and supervision, investment in continuous quality improvement and auditing, ICT renewal and innovation.
- **Contractual arrangements:** Enabling arrangements that encourage integration and collaboration. This is often spoken about as ‘the glue’ – investment in people, infrastructure and systems. This includes activities such as collaborative regional meetings, communities of practice, professional development for cross-disciplinary ways of working, and building referral pathways (please see [Making integration stick: investing in the ‘glue’ - Social Ventures](#))

Key success factors and enablers

In our submissions and discussion with government around Thriving Kids we have identified four critical success factors for the program to achieve its desired outcomes. We believe they are also of significance for the success of the DSS child and family program reforms:

1. **Embed best practice and enable early access** through delivery in natural settings and functional assessments—not delayed by diagnosis and service delivery gaps.
2. **Commission quality providers** with proven expertise and inclusive practices – we’ve already got great providers in the sector, and we should be working to maintain and grow that capability. Providers must demonstrate best practice, strong governance, inclusive practices, and a history of collaboration with families, government and community systems. Commissioning must maintain and grow sector capability.

3. **Ensure** clarity of roles and responsibilities across states, territories and the Commonwealth programs and leverage existing systems. This is of urgent importance for the current design of the DSS reformed child and family programs and the Thriving Kids programs. A nationally consistent integrated system building on existing quality services is paramount. Children and families expect to experience seamless and integrated systems across mainstream, foundational supports, Commonwealth programs and NDIS supports.
4. **Genuine partnerships – or risk failure.** Families must lead system design in partnerships with providers and government. Partnering with families and providers will ensure that programs are trusted, and responsive.

Our submission outlines these success factors and recommendations in more detail [NDS Submission: Inquiry into the Thriving Kids Initiative](#).

NDS thanks DSS for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed reforms for children and family services. We look forward to future engagement as the new program design takes shape. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the recommendations outlined in this letter at any time.

Kind regards,

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