# DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES CONSULTATION

## *A NEW APPROACH TO PROGRAMS FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN*

SUBMISSION BY YWCA AUSTRALIA

DECEMBER 2025

YWCA Australia

Opening Doors.
Building Futures.

# YWCA Australia's Submission to the Australian Government Department of Social Services Consultation on *A New Approach to Programs for Families and Children*

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# YWCA Australia's Acknowledgement

YWCA Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of this land.

We recognise First Nations peoples as the custodians of the lands and waters, and carriers of cultural knowledge.

We recognise the more than 65,000 years of caring for Country as the longest continuing culture in the world.

YWCA Australia acknowledges the past, present and continuing leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in advancing the rights of women and children to safety and security across the country.

# A. About YWCA Australia: Our National Operations and Commitment to Best Practice Service Delivery for Families and Children

### YWCA Australia's National Footprint

YWCA Australia ('YWCA') is a national not-for-profit organisation that has specialised in supporting women for over 140 years. With over 200 employees across 17 locations, YWCA provides housing, support services and leadership pathways that enable women and gender diverse people and their families to find stability and feel safe and secure, so they can build the future they want.

YWCA provides specialist homelessness support services, domestic and family violence support services, and services for children and families. Within this context, YWCA works with families and children to support their individual needs around positive family functioning, safety, and child development.

YWCA is also a leading national women's housing provider in Australia. YWCA's dedicated community housing subsidiary, YWCA National Housing, is a Tier 2 Community Housing Provider with a rapidly growing portfolio of 500 social and affordable homes nationally.

We are a key advocacy voice for gender-responsive housing and service delivery, informed by the voices of sector and service delivery experts as well as young women and gender-diverse community members.

### Communities for Children, Northern Rivers - New South Wales

YWCA partners with the Australian Government Department of Social Services on wrap around Communities for Children (CFC) services across the Northern Rivers in Lismore and Murwillumbah, New South Wales. YWCA has delivered CFC for over 20 years, learning, evolving and innovating in partnership with services and community. CFC has a proven record of success in improving community connections and wellbeing of children and families across the Lismore and Murwillumbah regions through holistic service provision around early childhood development and child and family support programs. This is supported by YWCA's leadership towards community engagement and sector training and development across the Lismore and Murwillumbah regions.

Communities for Children in Lismore and Murwillumbah develops and facilitates a whole of community approach to support and strengthen local service networks that contribute to child and family wellbeing. Communities for Children partner with local service providers to improve access for children and their families to the support they need to thrive. Our Community Partners provide prevention and early intervention programs that support positive family functioning, and safety and child development. As the Facilitating Partner, YWCA has a key focus on strengthening service capability, collaborative leadership and integrated delivery across the region. This includes an agreed Story of Change that guides shared focus, continuous improvement and practice development.

With our partner programs, we work towards three key outcomes for children and families across the Lismore and Murwillumbah regions:

i. Children and young people are supported in safe, secure homes.

ii. Services are integrated, culturally informed and accountable to deliver better outcomes with children and families.

iii. Children and families are celebrated, valued and lead in communities.

As the Communities for Children Facilitating Partner in the Lismore and Murwillumbah, we co-ordinate the network of services providing prevention and early intervention supports to children and families across the regions. Together, this network provides specialist service delivery for the diverse needs of children and families including to support children with disabilities and to provide culturally led care for First Nations children. The value of the Northern Rivers model is clearly demonstrated, with 95%+ of clients providing a positive satisfaction rating in our services across both Lismore and Murwillumbah. (Detailed outcomes data is outlined in the Case Study at Appendix A). This is further exemplified by a parent/carer's reflection that, *"The support that staff from the Lismore Transition Program have given us is above and beyond. We are thankful for the program and the educators who love and support us as a family."*

A Case Study of our Communities for Children Service Delivery model and its impacts is included as an **Appendix** to this submission. This Case Study includes a feature on our CFC Transforming Relationships project which is a sector

capacity-building initiative that emphasises First Nations self-determination, sector leadership development, and evidence-based program design and delivery.

The Communities for Children Program, YWCA's work as a CFC Facilitating Partner and our Transforming Relationships Project has been funded by the Federal Government through the Department of Social Services' current program for Children and Families.

### KIDS 4 LIFE Supported Playgroups, Lismore – New South Wales

In addition to our Communities for Children Program, YWCA also delivers the KIDS 4 LIFE Supported Playgroups in Lismore. Our Supported Playgroups deliver age-appropriate activities that prioritise child developmental milestones for children aged 0 to 5 years old.

We offer supported playgroups for families, and one Goori group for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that offers culturally safe and specific activities. As a Supported Playgroup, we connect families in the region with local support services for financial, legal, counselling, childhood development, and other supports. Many local services attend playgroup to support with this – meeting families where they are at.

The KIDS 4 Life program is funded by the NSW Government Department of Communities and Justice.

### Sydney Young Parents Program, Sydney – New South Wales

The Sydney Young Parents Program is delivered by YWCA's Specialist Homelessness Services team in Sydney. The Program provides flexible and holistic case management support, and safe, medium-term supported accommodation to young parents in the Inner West who are pregnant, have children in their care, or are working towards restoration, and experiencing homelessness.

The Sydney Young Parents Program is funded by the NSW Government Department of Communities and Justice.

### YWCA Early Intervention Program, Sydney – New South Wales

The Early Intervention Child and Family Support Program supports young parents who are pregnant and/or have accompanying children aged 0-12 years old, with connections to the Sydney, St George and Randwick areas.

Support is provided to improve parenting skills and behaviours and enable a greater understanding of and connection to services and resources within their community to meet family needs. The program provides comprehensive advice, referral, information and case management to families requiring support, and aims to intervene early to reduce the need for more intensive support services.

The Early Intervention Program is funded by the NSW Government Department of Communities and Justice.

### Connected Families, Darwin – Northern Territory

YWCA also provides children and families specific services in Darwin, Northern Territory through the Connected Families Program. The Program supports parents up to the age of 25 years old, providing them with holistic supports. These supports include peer connection groups and activities within the local Darwin and Palmerston area, young parent learning and education groups, individual parenting support to access services and provide advocacy, pathways and referrals to education, employment and training opportunities, and pathways and referrals to tailored client individual needs such as medical appointments, legal advice, housing referrals and advocacy.

The Connected Families Program is funded by the Northern Territory Government.

### Summary of Additional YWCA Services Across the Country Supporting Children, Youth and Families

In addition, we have extensive experience across Australia, delivering specialist homelessness, trauma-informed domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) support services. These include Community and Family Support programs in Southern NSW and Specialist Homelessness Service programs and DFSV services across metro Sydney and Greater Darwin. Our accredited, intensive case management programs provide holistic and tailored support through safety planning, case coordination, brokerage, warm referrals, advocacy and information. Recognising the intersection between homelessness and DFSV, YWCA services support women, gender diverse people and families impacted by gender-based violence, to develop safety and stability, wellbeing, agency and influence.

We also offer youth mentoring and leadership programs which work with at-risk young people, often from out-of-home care, child protection or youth justice backgrounds to develop independence, living skills, confidence and pathways to work and/or engagement with school and training.

## YWCA's Commitment to Best Outcomes for Children and Families

YWCA is committed to best practice service delivery for children and families to be supported, safe and celebrated in their communities. We are wholly committed to working alongside the Department of Social Services (the Department) to ensure that the proposed new approach to programs for families and children produces meaningful outcomes for the communities that we service and for families and children across the nation. Accordingly, team members across YWCA have contributed to the Department of Social Services Webinars and Town Halls both online and in-person and supported sector peaks and community organisations to provide productive feedback to this important consultation process.

YWCA is also a member of the peak body Family & Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) and has contributed towards FRSA's consultations as part of this process. We extend our support for the work of FRSA towards supporting and informing the new national program for children and families.

**YWCA would welcome the opportunity to continue contributing to the design, implementation and monitoring of the Government's new approach, including sharing practice insights from our work with children and families.**

The Department of Social Services and the Australian Government are working to transform programs for children and families in communities across the country. We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the Department's discussion paper and hope the perspectives outlined in this submission assist in informing the design of the new program.

As an organisation with a long history of service delivery and on the ground experience, YWCA is well placed to support ongoing engagement throughout this process. For further engagement regarding this submission, YWCA's advocacy team can be contacted at advocacy@ywca.org.au.

# B. YWCA Australia's Priority Recommendations

YWCA recognises the time available before the Department commences the tender process under the new program. In that context, we have outlined four priority areas where further clarification would support a smooth and transparent process for both applicants and decision-makers.

These points focus on the tender mechanism and the program's funding objectives. Clear parameters will assist the sector to respond effectively and will promote consistency and fairness in assessment.

The specific areas requiring clarification are outlined below and are expanded on throughout this submission in response to the consultation questions, alongside broader recommendations to strengthen the overall design and impact of the new program for children and families.

**The four priority areas requiring clarification from the Department are:**

1. **The Department of Social Services clarifies that the intended age group for service delivery under the new program extends to 0 to 18 years.**

The first priority area of that would support a smooth tender process is clarification that the age group for service delivery extends to 18 years. We encourage this clarification to ensure funding for programs and services reflets the needs of children and young people up to the age of 18.
This clarification would support program design across key developmental stages, from birth to infanthood, early years, middle years, adolescence, and early adulthood. Whilst we understand this may be the Government's intention, some references could be interpreted as focused on children to 0 – 5 years old. The current drafting as such will have unintended consequences to undermine confidence for program design and delivery and tender approvals across the lifespan for children and for children 6 – 18 years old.

We value the Government's prioritisation towards funding early intervention supports and primary prevention. We agree with the importance of early intervention supports in the early years of a child's life (0 – 5 years old). However, it is critical that Government does not unintentionally overlook, dismiss or exclude young people in their adolescence and middle years.

It is essential in the formative years of adolescence, and the middle years that early intervention and primary prevention supports are provided to young people before they become young adults. Young people across the childhood spectrum from 0 to 18 must be supported. This includes primary prevention and early intervention and, where necessary, tertiary responses for higher needs cases.

Whilst early intervention is essential in the early years it is also required across the childhood and youth life course. We note the Government's reference to the data that the costs to the Australian economy of late intervention for children and young people experiencing serious issues was $22.3 billion in 2024.[1] We note that if early intervention and primary prevention is not prioritised up until 18 years old, that cycles can carry through an individual's adult life and the associated costs to the Australian economy will carry through.

2. **The Department of Social Services develops a Resource Allocation Model (RAM) determined against a service system map and metrics of highest need, which is developed from latest comprehensive data and informed by sector and community leader expertise.**

We recommend that the Department considers embedding a Resource Allocation Model informed by a service map and metrics of highest need, developed by comprehensive data and sector expertise. We suggest a Resource Allocation Model that applies metrics to determine areas of highest need, mapped against current service provision, to support evidence informed allocations across service types and locations. This would assist providers to understand what activities are within and out of scope under the program's streams.

We recommend incorporating expertise from the sector and community leaders to help account for data gaps, such as under-reporting by marginalised groups such as First Nations communities and women and children experiencing domestic and family violence who are at risk of homelessness. Sharing key elements of the service map and resource allocation model, prior to tendering would support consistent understanding.

Clarification of priority locations for service delivery under the new program, supported by comprehensive, up-to-date data, and flexibility for community and sector place-based expertise, would be helpful.

[1] O'Connell, M. 2025, *The Cost of Late Intervention 2024*, The Front Project, Melbourne.

We note three parameters referenced in the consultation materials for assessing community need:

i. The first reference to using key data sources, including:

- Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) – to identify areas facing disadvantage.
- Australia Early Development Census (AEDC) – to understand how children are developing in different communities.
- Census data - including how many children and families live in an area, and how many young people are not in education, employment, or training (NEET).
- Child protection engagement rates – to highlight where prevention and family support services may be most needed.

ii. The second reference is to community need based on the 235 communities in Australia that, together, comprise the top 10 per cent of disadvantage in Australia.

iii. The third reference is to consideration on whether similar services already exist in the area, and how high the demand is for support in that community.

We appreciate the intention to assess community need and suggest transparency regarding postcode or region prioritisation.

We recommend that the Department use a relational and data informed approach to identify priority service locations. As a starting point, this should include a mapping process that overlays current service provision with data driven indicators of need.

In that mapping process, the Department must prioritise data that reflects disproportionate barriers for First Nations families and for women and children experiencing domestic and family violence who are at risk of homelessness. Additional data sets should be incorporated to reflect systemic disadvantage, including:

- *First Nations populations* who experience a gap in outcomes for children and families as represented by the data collected through the National Partnership on Closing the Gap, and

- *Women and Children experiencing domestic and family violence who are vulnerable to and/or experiencing homelessness*. We note that the number one driver of homelessness for women and children in the nation is domestic and family violence. Women and children are faced with the realities of remaining in an unsafe home or facing housing precarity and homelessness. This does not support positive outcomes for children and their mothers and can lead to increased rates of child removal. The types of data being captured towards this by region, by way of example in NSW, are: Housing and Homelessness data hosted by DCJ and Homelessness NSW and NSW Trends in Domestic and Family Violence – Quarterly Reports hosted by BOCSAR. Services such as YWCA must be consulted as part of this process to ensure that the needs of women and their children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are also accounted for. This is important given the gendered and hidden nature of women's homelessness which is less likely to be rough sleeping or rooflessness and more likely to look like couch surfing and staying at a boarding house or motel or living in a car.

It is important in this mapping exercise to not only highlight where there is data driven need and a lack of service provision, but also locations where services exist which have a positive impact to reduce or keep need at bay. This exercise will map for the Department the impact on communities should services be defunded through this reform.

Effective mapping will help avoid unintended consequences, including potential defunding of successful programs that currently keep need at bay. Maintaining investment in proven services reduces the risk of creating avoidable gaps that later require rebuilding at higher cost.

The priority areas for service delivery can be a strong space for relational modelling and contracting with the sector. Respect for the place-based and community expertise of the sector in identifying areas of need for specialised service delivery will be essential. For example, there will be areas that may have higher need due to community under reporting such as systems mistrust within marginalised communities. There may also be areas that have higher need for specialised service delivery for community, such as First Nations communities and migrant communities, and where service support is delivered or needed for people with disabilities, members of the LGBTIQASB+ community, and for victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual abuse. Determining these needs must be community led and informed by local service providers.

Current data should be used where possible, and sector consultation should shape both the mapping exercise and need identification. For example, the Department's evidence paper draws on 2021 data which predates the 2022 Northern Rivers floods that significantly worsened disadvantage in that region.

3. **The Department of Social Services provides clear timelines and processes for commissioning to the sector as a priority.**

We urge the Department to release a recommissioning roadmap that includes time frames, transitional arrangements, and lead indicators so organisations can plan and prepare. While we understand existing contracts will be extended until January 2027, the sector requires clarity on:

i. When new contracts will be awarded and when new programs will become operational, including whether this will occur concurrently with existing contracts being wound down.

ii. The Department's plan for communities where long standing programs may cease. Defunding embedded services risks negative impacts on the health, wellbeing and stability of children and families.

iii. The Department's proposed approach and time frame for working with existing providers through transition.

4. **The Department of Social Services embeds a feedback loop for continuous program improvement.**

Given the short time frame for major reform to children and family services, open communication channels will be essential. This is particularly important during change management processes and where consultation windows are limited.

We recommend formal, ongoing feedback loops between the Department, service providers, and communities, including service recipients. As a Communities for Children Facilitating Partner, YWCA regularly connects the Department, organisational partners and local families, and we view this model as well positioned to support continuous improvement.

# C. YWCA's Responses to the Department's Consultation Discussion Paper Questions

## 1. VISION AND OUTCOMES

### a. Does the vision reflect what we all want for children and families?

We acknowledge the proposed vision: *"All children and young people are supported by strong families who have the skills and confidence to nurture them."* We respectfully suggest that the vision encompasses a more holistic focus on *"building and strengthening relationships"* which is at the core of all families. We also see value in articulating a community level impact with collective intention that all service providers will feel connected to.

Once adopted, we encourage consistent use of the vision language throughout the program materials. Some sector representatives have noted mixed terminology in the current proposal, which may create uncertainty around purpose and intent. A consistent vision will help unify and guide implementation across the sector.

We suggest a reconsideration of use of the term "strong," as it may unintentionally imply a deficit for families who are still building skills and confidence. A strengths-based approach can acknowledge diverse experiences, and it may also be useful to consider language that recognises children and young people as active participants, not only recipients of support.

In addition, incorporating references to inclusivity, flexibility, place-based delivery, and community design may more fully reflect core elements of the new program. YWCA proposes that the Department could consider adopting language around *building* and *strengthening* safe and quality relationships within families and communities. Our experience suggests that safe, connected relationships provide protective factors for children, parents and kinship networks.

We also recommend referring to kinship, so the vision is culturally relevant for First Nations children, families and carer networks. In our service delivery work, we have seen the central role of kinship, particularly First Nations grandmothers, in supporting children, families and communities. We would welcome the Department co-designing this language with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to ensure it reflects cultural strength and practice.

While approaches may vary across regions, a relationship centred vision could offer a strong unifying purpose for services supporting children, families, kinship networks and communities.

**We propose that the Department of Social Services considers the following Vision:**

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*"Vision – All families are supported in building and strengthening quality and safe relationships so that children and their parents, caregivers and kinship thrive in their communities."*

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### b. Are the two outcomes what we should be working towards for children and families, why/why not?

<u>The Outcomes:</u>

We note that the outcomes proposed by the Department are: "Outcome 1: Parents and caregivers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children" and "Outcome 2: Children are supported to grow into healthy resilient adults."

As currently framed, the outcomes distinguish between parents and caregivers on the one hand and children on the other. While this distinction is understandable, it may unintentionally encourage siloed service responses and underplay the interconnected nature of families, kinship networks, and communities. A whole-of-family approach recognises that children's wellbeing is intrinsically linked to the wellbeing, capacity, and relationships of the adults and communities around them.

The outcomes proposed below are modest refinements that maintain the intent of the Department's original framing, while more clearly reflecting a whole-of-family, kinship, and community lens. They remain population-level

outcomes, with the first primarily focused on parents, caregivers, and kinship, and the second primarily focused on children.

**YWCA Australia recommends that the Department of Social Services consider refining the program outcomes as follows:**

> **Outcome 1 – Communities, parents/caregivers and kinship are supported to raise children who thrive.**
>
> **Outcome 2 – Children grow and thrive through supported, safe and secure relationships with parents/caregivers, kinship and community.**

These suggested refinements are informed by YWCA Australia's experience in delivering services to children and families, as well as by insights gained through collaboration with the sector during this consultation process. They are intended to strengthen, rather than redirect, the Department's proposed outcomes, with a continued focus on parental and caregiver capability and children's growth and development.

In relation to **Outcome 1** – The concept of empowerment is often understood as the ability to make meaningful choices. In practice, however, families experiencing disadvantage may face constrained choices due to broader social and economic factors, including poverty, housing insecurity, and exposure to violence. In these contexts, empowerment is most effectively enabled when it is supported by access to connection, knowledge, skills, resources, and practical supports.

Services play a critical role in working alongside parents, caregivers, and kinship to strengthen their skills, confidence, and self-determination, and to support connection to culture and community. By focusing on support rather than empowerment alone, this outcome better reflects the role of services in building safe and secure relationships around children. In doing so, parents and caregivers are strengthened in their roles, and children are surrounded by stable, connected, and supportive environments.

In relation to **Outcome 2** – The current framing of Outcome 2 focuses on children growing into healthy, resilient adults. While this long-term aspiration is important, it risks shifting attention away from children's experiences in the present. Measuring success based on adulthood outcomes is also inherently challenging, particularly given the Department's strong focus on early childhood from birth to five years.

Evidence from early childhood and developmental frameworks highlights the importance of recognising children not only for who they will become, but for who they are at each stage of development. Concepts of being and belonging are foundational to later becoming, and outcomes are most meaningful when they reflect children's current developmental needs and contexts.

For this reason, we propose framing Outcome 2 around children's ability to grow and thrive through supported, safe, and secure relationships. This approach allows outcomes to be measured at relevant developmental stages, and across key periods of growth and transition. These periods may include conception and birth, infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. By ensuring services are responsive to children's needs at each stage, children are better supported to thrive over the life course.

The suggested refinements to Outcomes 1 and 2 are intended to align closely with the proposed program vision that: *All families are supported in building and strengthening quality and safe relationships so that children and their parents, caregivers, and kinship thrive in their communities.*

This vision is reinforced through population-level outcomes that focus on supporting families and communities, alongside children's growth and development through strong and secure relationships. Together, the vision and outcomes clearly articulate the role of the services sector in supporting parents, caregivers, and kinship networks to build the relationships that underpin positive outcomes for children.

In this context, **the Department may also wish to consider a complementary outcome that recognises the importance of a strong, capable, and sustainable child and family services sector.** Such an outcome would acknowledge the role of the sector in delivering high-quality supports that enable communities, families, and children to thrive.

<u>Enabling the outcomes through a program logic and outcomes framework with indicators:</u>

We encourage the Department of Social Services to consider how the proposed population-level outcomes may be operationalised through the programs that government funds. In particular, there may be value in articulating how

different parts of the system interact to enable these outcomes in practice. To support this, **YWCA Australia recommends that the Department consider expanding the population-level outcomes into a Program Logic and Outcomes Framework for each Stream.** Such a framework could guide program design, measurement, learning, and reporting, and may also be a useful inclusion in future tender documentation. As part of this approach, the Department may wish to consider the following indicators within a Program Logic and Outcomes Framework for each Stream.

**Indicator 1 – Children and families engage with support services to enhance their health, wellbeing, and safety through strong and secure relationships.**

**Indicator 2 – Children and families can access culturally informed, integrated, and flexible services that respond to their needs and that support the child's development.**

**Indicator 3 – Children and families participate in service design and development, ensuring that service delivery responds to local community needs.**

**Indicator 4 – Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are resourced and supported to lead in their communities.**

These indicators provide an additional layer of detail at the service delivery level and are intended to support achievement of the overarching population-level outcomes of the new national program. They are informed by YWCA's experience in service delivery, our understanding of barriers to access and effectiveness, and the importance of measurable and meaningful indicators of change. Importantly, the proposed indicators also align with, and would support, the Department's four priority areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families, as discussed further in Part 3 of this submission.

In our view, these indicators would assist in accurately reflecting and measuring the change envisaged through the consultation process and evidence summary. This approach may also support continuity between the outcomes achieved under existing program streams and the streamlined structure of the new program.

**Indicator 1** aligns with the Department's proposed focus on empowerment. In practice, one of the most effective and empowering supports services can provide to parents, caregivers, and kinship is the capacity to build strong, safe, and secure relationships for the benefit of themselves and their children. Services can work alongside parents and caregivers to strengthen skills and knowledge, support personal development and self-determination, and facilitate connection to culture and community. By focusing on relationship-based support, parents and caregivers are strengthened in their roles, and children are surrounded by stable, supportive, and connected environments. This indicator underpins the proposed outcomes by supporting the relational foundations that enable children to thrive.

**Indicator 2** reflects the Department's focus on children's growth and development. As outlined earlier in this submission, supporting children to thrive is most effective when services respond to children's needs at each stage of development, with attention to who children are in the present as well as who they will become. This indicator seeks to ensure that children and families can access well-rounded, culturally informed, and flexible supports that respond to their needs and support children's development across childhood. It underpins the proposed outcomes by focusing on the service responses required to support children to grow and thrive at each stage of their lives.

**Indicator 3** embeds the evidence-based principle that children, families, and communities should inform the design of services intended to support them. This indicator reflects a shift from government-led decision-making toward community co-design and community-led approaches, which have been shown to deliver more effective and responsive outcomes. By including this indicator, the Department would have a clear mechanism to support whole-of-family and whole-of-community approaches to service design that respond to place, culture, and local context. Community-led design also supports the identification of service gaps and strengthens connections between services, enabling more integrated and collaborative delivery. This approach aligns strongly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander models of being, doing, and knowing. The indicator recognises the leadership of First Nations communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in identifying and responding to community need. We encourage the Department to recognise and support this leadership through both the establishment of this indicator and appropriate resourcing to enable best practice community-led approaches.

**Indicator 4** reflects the principle of self-determination in service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Achieving improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families requires explicit recognition of the role of culture in health and wellbeing. This indicator aligns with the priority to invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and supports efforts to close the gap in outcomes. By embedding this indicator, the program would acknowledge the importance of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations being resourced and supported to lead responses in their communities.

Overall, the indicators proposed for the Department's consideration are grounded in an approach that supports children, families, and communities, and that promotes coherence across the new program. Together, they create a clear line of sight from the overarching vision and population-level outcomes through to program-level indicators, while remaining aligned with the Government's stated priorities for investment.

## 2. PROGRAM STRUCTURE

### a. Will a single national program provide more flexibility for your organisation?

As currently proposed, Stream 1 appears more prescriptive than Streams 2 and 3. It is perhaps best understood as a defined activity for delivery, rather than a flexible service stream for development and adaptation. In practice, Stream 1 appears most suited to universal access to programs and information services, delivered nationally or across regions, and designed to be accessible to all families with few or no eligibility restrictions.

This raises a broader question about whether a single national program will provide sufficient flexibility for children and families to access the supports they need, when they need them. Based on community feedback and sector experience, a more nuanced approach may better support flexibility. In particular, a stream explicitly designed to support low-barrier, universal access to programs and information services within communities may better reflect how families engage with support.

Our experience is that children and families benefit from being supported to understand what services are available in their community and how to access them. Families value choice, timely access, and the ability to work with services and practitioners they know and trust. To sustain these relationships, the sector has consistently called for flexibility in both delivery models and locations, enabling services to respond to local context and need.

If the Department were to prioritise a national approach over a universal access approach, there is a risk of unintended consequences. For example, tendering arrangements may favour organisations operating at a national scale, potentially excluding smaller, place-based organisations with deep community knowledge and established local relationships. There is also a risk that nationally standardised models may struggle to respond to the diverse and place-specific needs of communities, which could affect both outcomes for families and the value of public investment.

We therefore encourage the Department to consider a framing that emphasises universal access rather than national access. This is particularly important given that not all children and families can readily access online or digital resources. Approximately one in five people across Australia experience digital exclusion, and this rises to two in five First Nations people.[2] A universal access approach that includes place-based delivery would help ensure equitable access to information and support.

There appears to be scope for Stream 1 to support universal access to programs and information services delivered both nationally and across place-based regions. This would help ensure that children and families, regardless of location, have access to government-supported services that lower barriers to entry and support early engagement.

**We make the following recommendations:**

1. **The Department of Social Services clarifies the scope of flexibility within Stream 1, including whether the Stream lends to a CFC model.**

2. **The Department of Social Services considers expanding Stream 1 to explicitly support universal access to programs and information services nationally or across regions.**

### b. Does the service or activity you deliver fit within one of the three funding streams?

The primary Australian Government funded service model we deliver for children and families is our Communities for Children Facilitating Partner model on Bundjalung Country in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. While this model spans elements of all three streams, it most strongly aligns with Stream 2, Prevention and Early Intervention, and also aligns with Stream 3, Intensive Family Supports, through the eight Community Partner programs funded under our model.

[2] Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Ormond-Parker, L., Morrison, K., Rea, H., & Ganley, L. *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index*. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.

We note the Government's position that providers will nominate the stream that best aligns with their services, and that successful applicants will receive a single grant agreement under the new program, even where services operate across multiple streams.

To support effective implementation, the Department will need to provide clear guidance to the sector regarding flexibility across streams, including how services delivering across multiple streams are expected to report outcomes through DEX. Guidance will also be required on how grant reporting will be simplified in partnership models, particularly with the introduction of qualitative reporting requirements.

**c. Do these streams reflect what children and families in your community need now and what they might need in the future?**

As outlined above, we encourage the Department to consider expanding the flexibility and function of Stream 1 to operate as a low-barrier, universal access stream for children and families across the nation and within communities. Whether the proposed streams meet current and future community needs will depend largely on how they are funded, structured, and implemented in practice, including the nature of relational contracting between Government and service providers.

We note that the Department has advised the sector that the streams are intended to function as an assessment framework for tendering. However, further details have not yet been provided regarding assessment criteria beyond the high-level stream descriptions. The extent to which the streams provide a clear blueprint for service delivery will depend on this additional guidance, including clarity around what activities are in scope and out of scope.

Meaningful flexibility within relational contracting arrangements will be crucial. Effective service models support a continuum of care, enabling families to move from universal support through to more targeted and intensive interventions as needs change. Our Communities for Children model on Bundjalung Country reflects this approach. As the Facilitating Partner, we map services against community need, identify gaps, strengthen service connections, and adapt delivery over time. This is a dynamic and ongoing process that responds to whole-of-community needs.

**d. Are there other changes we could make to the program to help your organisation or community overcome current challenges?**

There are several changes that we recommend the Department consider, both within the program design and through the transition process, to support communities, organisations, and the broader sector in addressing current and emerging challenges. We reiterate our four minimum recommendations for implementation of the new program.

**In addition, we recommend the following:**

**1. A phased transition to the new program over two years**

i. Continue funding existing services that align with identified needs, while supporting the development of transition plans toward the new program specifications.
ii. Provide structured exit planning for services that are no longer meeting community need or are not aligned with the new program's locations, delivery models, or priorities.
iii. Identify regions where investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations is preferred and work collaboratively with existing services and ACCOs to transition service delivery in a well-resourced and community-led manner.
iv. Provide guidance on grant reporting for the service sector. Specifically, to enable a level of flexibility in reporting under DEX to accommodate service delivery across the Streams and to clarify reporting processes for partnership approaches and qualitative reporting options.

**2. Indexation of longer-term grant agreements**

We support the certainty offered through grant agreements of up to five years. To ensure these agreements remain viable, we recommend the inclusion of annual indexation to reflect the increasing costs of service delivery and to future-proof service sustainability.

**3. Stronger cross-government collaboration**

We recommend that the Department support stronger connections and collaboration between funded services and government departments responsible for Health, Disability, Housing, and Education.

At a local level, barriers often arise from limited cross-departmental engagement and inflexible service models. Services invest significant time and resources maintaining relationships across systems to advocate for children and

families. Embedding stronger engagement practices across core government departments would reduce this burden on services and improve outcomes for families.

4. **Recognition of housing as a foundational enabler of outcomes**

Safe, secure, and affordable housing is fundamental to achieving positive health and wellbeing outcomes for children and families. We encourage the Department to work alongside Treasury and the Minister for Housing and Homelessness to strengthen alignment between housing policy and service delivery, across both prevention and early intervention and intensive support responses.

We also emphasise the importance of applying a gender-informed lens to housing and homelessness. Domestic and family violence remains the leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Australia. Women and children have the right to safe housing and integrated supports that enable safety, security, health, and empowerment.

## 3. Prioritising investment

a. **Do you agree that the four priorities listed on page 4 are the right areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families?**

We note that the four priorities currently proposed by the Government are as follows:

> **Priority 1:** Invest early to improve family wellbeing, break cycles of disadvantage, and reduce the need for later interventions – like child protection.
>
> **Priority 2:** Prioritise connected, co-located, and integrated services that work together to meet family needs.
>
> **Priority 3:** Ensure services are informed by, and respond to, community needs.
>
> **Priority 4:** Improve outcomes for First Nations children and families by increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (also called ACCOs) delivering supports in locations with high First Nations populations.

In principle, we support these priorities as appropriate and necessary areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families. As outlined earlier in this submission, our recommendations regarding the program vision and outcomes are intended to provide a clear line of sight between the priorities and their practical implementation. We encourage the Department to consider the vision, outcomes, and priorities as an integrated framework, ensuring alignment and cohesion across the program design.

In relation to the proposed priorities, we offer the following considerations:

1. **Clarifying the intent of "invest early" in Priority 1**

We recommend that the Department provide further clarity on the intended meaning of "invest early" in Priority 1. This term may be understood as a focus on the early years, which is well supported by evidence demonstrating long-term benefits for children and young people. It is also important that "invest early" is understood more broadly as a commitment to prevention and early intervention, alongside timely investment in intensive family supports when needed. Priority 1 should therefore encompass responses to the broader factors that may shape experiences, including violence, social isolation, poverty, disability, and housing insecurity.

2. **The Department of Social Services focuses on the principles of culturally informed responses and the safety and security of children and families in Priority 1.**

We recommend that Priority 1 be amended to explicitly point towards systems level change supporting safety and security. The wording should be, **"Priority 1: Invest early in culturally informed responses to improve family wellbeing, *safety and security,* to break cycles of disadvantage, and to reduce the need for later interventions – like child protection."**

We acknowledge and welcome the Government's whole-of-system intent across the four priorities. We encourage the Department to build on this by articulating clearer conditions, practices, and measurable outcomes that will support systems-level change. At the service delivery level, this includes working with providers and communities to ensure culturally appropriate and age-appropriate supports that keep children and families connected to culture and community. At a broader level, this requires coordination across government, including with agencies responsible for women and children's safety, domestic, family and sexual violence responses, housing and homelessness, health and disability, and education.

Reducing child removal rates requires a clear commitment to shared responsibility and action across systems. This includes meaningful co-design with communities and strengthened capability within government, particularly in relation to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and kinship systems. Investment in culturally informed practice alongside sustained resourcing of Aboriginal community elders and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, is essential to protecting the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Meaningful reductions in harm to children and in child protection involvement will not be achieved without significant whole-of-system reform and investment, including in social and affordable housing. This is particularly critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and for women and children who are victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence.

Research by Palawa woman Dr Kyllie Cripps highlights that difficulty accessing stable, long-term housing is a significant driver of child removal and a major barrier to reunification. Dr Cripps' work demonstrates that shortages of emergency and long-term housing can leave Indigenous women with limited options but to return to unsafe environments, increasing the risk of child protection intervention, particularly in regional and remote areas. Legislative timeframes for permanency decisions further compound these risks, creating profound pressure on families experiencing housing instability.[3]

Dr Cripps also highlights the deep intergenerational impacts of housing insecurity and child removal, noting the ongoing legacy of the Stolen Generations and the resulting distrust of systems

As academic research by Dr Habibis further emphasises, effective responses must include culturally appropriate, Indigenous-led or co-designed approaches that have been demonstrated to work in practice. Integrating housing targets into government strategies is essential. These principles are equally relevant to the reform of children and families programs and outcomes.

### 3. Introducing a fifth priority focused on workforce capability

We recommend that the Department consider introducing an additional priority:

> **Priority 5: Ensure services are well resourced to build, retain, and strengthen a quality workforce through capacity building and professional development, supporting culturally informed, trauma-informed, and integrated service delivery.**

Workforce capability is foundational to the success of all service responses, from universal programs and information services through to prevention, early intervention, and intensive family support/s. A dedicated priority would support sector-wide capacity building and recognise the importance of investing in people to achieve improved outcomes for children and families.

We recommend that this priority be supported by sector uplift case studies facilitated by the Department and made available for shared learning, potentially through the DSS Grants Service Providers Directory. As a Communities for Children Facilitating Partner, YWCA has supported workforce uplift across eight services on Bundjalung Country in Northern New South Wales. Our case study, including the Transforming Relationships project, is provided in the Appendix as an example of effective sector-led capacity building.

Establishing a shared repository of leadership and practice examples would support continuous improvement across regions and help translate policy intent into practical, place-based impact.

## 4. Improving Family Wellbeing

**a. Do the proposed focus areas – like supporting families at risk of child protection involvement and young parents – match the needs or priorities of your service? Are there other groups in your community, or different approaches, that you think the Department should consider to better support family wellbeing?**

**We recommend that the Department of Social Services recognises service partnerships and models that promote flexibility within and between partnerships as a core approach to supporting family wellbeing.**

The Communities for Children Facilitating Partner model on Bundjalung Country in Northern New South Wales has helped create the conditions for strong, wraparound service responses, supporting consistent quality and continuity of care for children and families. The model connects services with shared values and commitments, and from that foundation enables collaboration to respond to system changes while minimising disruption for families.

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[3] Cripps and Habibis, *Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous victims and families,* (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute - AHURI, 2019) available at: https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/320 and associated Media Report, Nazaroff, *Indigenous mothers and children often have no choice but to return to an unsafe home,* (UNSW Newsroom, 2019) available at: Indigenous mothers and children often have no choice but to return to an unsafe home

For example, partner services have been able to step in and maintain support during periods of uncertainty associated with recommissioning and system restructuring. In another example, a mainstream organisation and an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation have partnered to deliver a Family Support Program that provides additional supports and strengthens cultural responsiveness for First Nations families in community.

Overall, our experience is that family wellbeing outcomes improve when community services are connected, integrated, and able to adapt to changing community needs and changing system settings. The strength of the CFC partnership network on Bundjalung Country provides a practical example of these benefits.

## 5. Connected, co-located, and integrated services

### a. What are other effective ways, beyond co-location, that you've seen work well to connect and coordinate services for families?

#### Strategic partnership models and the Facilitating Partner function

To support effective service delivery, we suggest the primary emphasis be on connection, collaboration, and integration, with co-location considered where it is appropriate and feasible. Co-location can be valuable, but it can also raise privacy and safety considerations. It also requires alignment across organisational values, culture, processes, and practice, which takes time and dedicated resourcing.

Strategic partnership models and consortium arrangements can be highly effective, particularly where there is an explicit and funded partnership facilitation function within the collaborative structure. This function is critical to building and maintaining the conditions needed for integration and coordination across stakeholders. One example in practice is an early learning centre operating as a central access point, with wraparound services introduced through coordinated partnerships with key local providers.

Our experience demonstrates the value of investing in these enabling conditions. We refer to the Appendix case study and Transforming Relationships project as an example. Based on this work, the conditions that support effective collaboration and coordination include executive sponsorship, non-competitive relationships grounded in trust and transparency, designated and distributed leadership, shared goals and joint planning, resource sharing, shared accountability, diversity of experience and capability, and meaningful inclusion of lived experience across the model.

Feedback from a Community Partner during this consultation process included support for *"…all efforts to have relationship building as a funded practice."* Consistent with this, they reflected that: *"The best outcomes will be those where the funding bodies work collaboratively with those on the ground and where the funding is responsive to need driven by the reality of what is happening in each of the communities."*

In our view, a commitment to service connection and collaboration should sit at the heart of the new model. In practice, this involves building trust-based relationships across the sector, developing a shared regional vision, strategy and goals in partnership with community representatives, and ensuring executive sponsorship and authorisation. Based on our experience, the Facilitating Partner function is a particularly effective mechanism to enable this work in place-based contexts.

## 6. Responding to community need

### a. Beyond locational disadvantage, what other factors should the Department consider to make sure funding reflects the needs of communities?

#### 1. Mapping Government Reform Impact and Receiving Ongoing Feedback

We reiterate our earlier recommendation on the importance of service mapping, alongside sector and community consultation, to understand existing service coverage and identify where services may need to be introduced or expanded to reach underserviced communities.

In addition, we recommend that the Department of Social Services maps the intersections and impacts of other government reforms, across Commonwealth and state and territory levels, with input from the sector, to ensure funding settings reflect community need.

The new program will operate within a broader policy environment, including cross-government reforms that have material implications for children and families and for service delivery. For this reason, ongoing feedback loops with

the service sector and communities during rollout will be important to ensure the program remains responsive to emerging and changing needs.

Examples raised during this consultation process include reforms affecting the NDIS and the Thriving Kids program. Other relevant interactions include changes to the Family Law system and, at a state level, the Family Preservation program in New South Wales. A structured mapping exercise that considers these reforms, alongside mechanisms for ongoing input from sector, communities, and families, would support effective implementation.

### 2. *"Funding the Glue"* of Service Collaboration and Community Engagement

In ensuring funding reflects community need, the Department may also wish to consider the staged work required to strengthen relationships between service providers and to support meaningful community engagement. This includes adequately resourcing the relational work that makes collaboration possible, sometimes described as "funding the glue." The scale and nature of this work is reflected in the Appendix case study and Transforming Relationships project.

As outlined in the case study, YWCA's collaboration with our Lismore and Murwillumbah CFC Community Partners in the design of our CFC program involved a staged process across four phases: Planning and Design, Procurement, Implementation and Review, and Evaluation. The benefits of this approach have included movement toward relational contracting, increased funding and support for Aboriginal-led and designed programs, resource sharing and stronger partnerships, greater integration of services, and increased access to supports for children and families.

In 2022, the Northern Rivers region experienced the largest floods on record. During the crisis, child and family services sustained support for children and families through significant uncertainty. In the period following the immediate emergency, services identified the value of the collaborative ways of working that had emerged. In response, YWCA established Transforming Relationships as a sector-led project to co-design stronger participatory and collaborative practices.

The project review identified key conditions and practices that support successful systems change. Eight organisations participated, forming a collective across health, early years education, child and family support, and community services. The review suggests that the combination of cultural competency, leadership development, and collaborative action is supporting more integrated and inclusive systems capable of responding to complex needs.

Overall, YWCA's presence on Bundjalung Country has evolved from delivering a CFC program, to acting as the Facilitating Partner, and then leading a sector transformation initiative. This has supported movement along a continuum of participatory practice, first within the sector and then increasingly in engagement with community members and service recipients.

### 3. Introducing a Model Continuum of Participation

Across program design, grant application, funding distribution, monitoring, and evaluation, we recommend that the Department consider implementing a continuum of participation tool. This could support a scaled, measurable, and deliberate approach to:

i. Strengthening service engagement and co-design with community, and

ii. Supporting services to take on facilitation roles across local partners to improve integration and outcomes.

For participation and collaboration to be meaningful, funding needs to be available for the relational work with community members and between services, supporting movement toward stronger community participation and coordinated delivery.

<u>Examples to Support the Design of a Model on a Continuum of Participation</u>

An international standard for reference in developing this tool is the IAP2 *Spectrum of Public Participation*.[4] That model supports groups to define the public or community role in engagement processes. The Spectrum begins at the first level of Informing and moves through the participation spectrum to increase the impact on decision-making to Consulting, Involving, Collaborating and finally Empowering. The first stage of 'Informing' could look like informing community of the introduction of a new service, without any sector collaboration or community involvement, the final stage of 'Empowering' could look like a full commitment to designing and resourcing a

[4] International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), *IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation,* available at: https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars

service as determined by members of a local governance structure that involves community leaders and people with lived experience from the region.

Another respected model is the Think Local Act Personal *Ladder of Co-Production* which works towards 'Co-Design' and 'Co-Production' as the final stages of engagement moving from the action of "Doing to" people as passive recipients of a service to "Doing for" by engaging and involving people and finally "Doing with" in an equal and reciprocal partnership of Co-Design and Co-Production. These principles are supportive to the design and delivery of best practice service models with a collaborative sector and an engaged community.[5]

A third model is the *Participation Ladder* which goes the step further to look at the power sharing that occurs by moving through the continuum. At the first level, government and sector hold the power and value their own expertise most of all. At the final level, people have power over the services they need and use – acknowledging that consumers have a unique expertise which is the most valuable for determining the services that will best meet community need.[6]

A visual of the three models is available at Appendix 2 to this submission.

<u>The Department of Social Services' embedding of a Model on a Continuum of Participation</u>

The Department could embed a participation continuum within relational contracts, using it as a readiness assessment and continuous improvement tool. It could support clearer shared expectations, assess preconditions for relational contracting, and evaluate commitments and progress over time. This would also help clarify the resourcing required to strengthen partnerships, support volunteer and community involvement, and establish effective local governance structures.

It is important that community engagement is recognised as skilled work that requires adequate resourcing. It should not be treated as a compliance exercise. When done well, the benefits of community and lived experience participation in program design and service delivery are well evidenced. However, meaningful engagement also requires safe conditions and appropriate practice.

Services need tools, guidance, and funding to ensure engagement is respectful, culturally safe, and designed to avoid leaving people with lived experience feeling unseen, unheard, or disempowered. Given increasing demand pressures and constrained resources, investment is required to ensure consultation processes are beneficial for both community and the service system and ultimately improve outcomes for children and families. Further discussion of these considerations is reflected in peer reviewed literature, including AHURI Final Report: *Lived experience participation and influence in homelessness and housing policy, service design and practice* (2024).[7]

Embedding community engagement through relational contracting would also address the practical constraints of short tender timeframes and limited opportunities for services to build meaningful engagement processes within those windows. Instead, community engagement would become a core feature of ongoing delivery and continuous improvement under the new program.

This approach would support stronger follow-on contracting, and enable the Department to identify, celebrate, and share examples of effective community-led and participatory practice. It would also provide an opportunity to recognise and learn from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation leadership in this domain.

YWCA Australia reiterates our commitment to ongoing collaboration with the Department in the design and implementation of the new program, drawing on our service delivery experience and the outcomes achieved through our Facilitating Partner model.

**b. What is the best way for organisations to show in grant applications that their service is genuinely meeting the needs of the community?**

From our experience as service providers, including as a Communities for Children Facilitating Partner in a regional community, we suggest the following practical ways organisations can demonstrate in grant applications that their service is genuinely meeting local community needs:

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[5] Think Local Act Personal, *Ladder of co-production,* available at: https://thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/resources/ladder-of-co-production/ and as used by way of example by the UK Government Department for Work & Pensions, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ssac-occasional-paper-25-how-dwp-involves-disabled-people-when-developing-or-evaluating-programmes-that-affect-them/how-dwp-involves-disabled-people-when-developing-or-evaluating-programmes-that-affect-them-occasional-paper-25

[6] Indigo Daya, The Participation Ladder – A Consumer/Survivor Lens (2020) available at: https://www.indigodaya.com/wpcf7_captcha/2020/10/Participation-ladder_consumer_survivor-lens-2.pdf

[7] Martin, R., Stubbings, J., Corrone, C., Cataldo, M., David, C., Edwards, K., Fisk, L., Jarldorn, M., Lovett, D., Maihi, A., Martin, S., Matthews, H., Nipperess, S., Thirkell, C., Watson, J. & Zufferey, C. (2024) *Lived experience participation and influence in homelessness and housing policy, service design and practice*, AHURI Final Report No. 433, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/433, doi: 110.18408/ahuri5332501.

I. Include a community consultation and engagement plan as part of the application.
II. Describe a community-led decision-making or governance structure, and, where relevant, outline how this aligns with program specifications.
III. Provide references or statements of support from service recipients, community members, cultural leaders, elders, ACCOs, and other key community stakeholders.
IV. Provide letters of support from partner services, detailing how the applicant service engages with community and collaborates locally.
V. Provide evidence of relevant processes and practices delivered previously, for example, the development of YWCA's Communities for Children Community Strategic Plan for the Northern Rivers.
VI. Where a service is not yet being delivered and an organisation is proposing a new or innovative program, undertake and present a community needs assessment, either as part of the application or as an early deliverable once funded.
VII. Consider incorporating interviews with service providers as part of the tender process. This can support deeper understanding of local context and service operations and can also create stronger foundations for relational contracting.

We highlight the importance of point (vii), including as raised by our local Community Partners on Bundjalung Country. This sits within a broader discussion about designing tender processes that are fair, equitable, and transparent, and that enable place-based organisations to compete effectively. Feedback shared through this consultation process suggests that traditional grant and tender approaches, despite best efforts, can tend to advantage organisations with national reach and thereby greater resourcing. Our Community Partner described the Facilitating Partner approach as *"the best of both worlds,"* by combining the capability of a larger funding partner to manage multiple local providers with the strengths of embedded, place-based services.

In our context, YWCA brings experience in evidence-informed practice and reporting capability, including the ability to measure outcomes and demonstrate value for money to government. At the same time, we work alongside local community organisations and representatives who have longstanding relationships and deep knowledge of children and families in their communities, including what supports work best and why. This local social capital has also been particularly important during periods of acute need, including during climate disasters such as the 2022 Northern Rivers floods, where coordinated service delivery and strong partnerships were critical.

## 7. Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

### a. How could the grant process be designed to support the increase in the number of ACCOs delivering services to children and families?

We recognise that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders, leaders, community members, and children and families themselves are best placed to guide this work. Any approach to grant design should be grounded in their leadership, expertise, and self-determined priorities.

With this as a foundation, we recommend the Department of Social Services consider the following approaches to grant process design to support an increase in ACCOs delivering services to children and families:

#### 1. Dedicated funding allocations for ACCOs and priority regions

Consider stipulating specific funding allocations for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, including targeted investment in regions with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations and where communities have identified a self-determined need for culturally led supports for First Nations children and families.

#### 2. Early engagement through Expressions of Interest

Introduce an Expression of Interest process that enables early, place-based engagement and dialogue with relevant ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders. This approach can support relationship building, shared understanding of local priorities, and more culturally appropriate program design prior to formal tendering.

#### 3. Co-designed and culturally appropriate application pathways

Co-design tendering and grant application pathways with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector to reduce barriers to entry and support culturally appropriate ways of applying for funding, designing program models, and implementing services.

### b. What else should be built into the program design to help improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?

We further recommend that the following elements be embedded within the program design to support improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

#### 1. Alignment with Closing the Gap and related strategies

In consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service sector, map relevant Commonwealth strategies that intersect with the new children and families program, including, critically, the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap.*

#### 2. Explicit alignment with Closing the Gap outcomes

Ensure the new program aligns with and actively contributes to Closing the Gap targets and outcomes, including but not limited to:

- **Outcome 2:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong.
- **Outcome 3:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high-quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.
- **Outcome 4:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.
- **Outcome 5:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential.
- **Outcome 9:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing aligned with their priorities and need.
- **Outcome 11:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system.
- **Outcome 12:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.
- **Outcome 13:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe.
- **Outcome 14:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.

#### 3. Embedding the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms

In consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service sector, consider mirroring the structural intent of the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms within the new federal children and families program, including:

- **Priority Reform 1**: Formal partnerships and shared decision-making.
- **Priority Reform 2**: Building the community-controlled sector.
- **Priority Reform 3**: Transforming government organisations.
- **Priority Reform 4**: Shared access to data and information at a regional level.

#### 4. Tracking implementation and progress

Consider aligning program monitoring with the Closing the Gap Implementation Tracker, enabling transparent reporting on progress against commitments to strengthen the ACCO sector and improve outcomes for children and families.

#### 5. Respecting Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Embed principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty within the program, working in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector and communities to ensure data is collected, stored, shared, and used in ways that are self-determined and culturally appropriate.

#### 6. Culturally informed, safe, and inclusive service delivery

Introduce a requirement for all funded services to demonstrate a commitment to culturally informed, safe, and inclusive practice. This supports high-quality service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and increases meaningful choice in services.

In practice, this could include requiring all services to develop a Cultural Engagement and Action Plan, with local endorsement from First Nations community members and ACCOs as part of the application process. Such a plan might include:

- Understanding of local customs, protocols, and community context.
- Existing and planned relationships, partnerships, and community engagement.
- Cultural training and workforce capacity-building plans.
- A First Nations workforce strategy.
- How culturally informed and inclusive services will be delivered in practice.
- Evidence of self-determining approaches embedded within program design and delivery.

## 8. Measuring outcomes

In the first instance, YWCA Australia reiterates our recommendation that the Government work in partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to embed the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty within the new children and families program. This represents an important opportunity to strengthen respectful, self-determining approaches to data, accountability, and decision-making with First Nations communities and the sector that represents them.

In our view, clarity regarding the purpose of data collection and reporting is a necessary starting point. Once the intent of data use is established, we will be better placed to advise on what data is meaningful, proportionate, and useful. Based on the proposed vision, outcomes, and streams, relevant data themes may include:

- Quantitative and qualitative feedback from children and families engaging with services.
- Changes experienced by children and families as a result of program participation.
- Changes resulting from a shift from government or service-led design toward community-led design.
- Changes in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, kinship networks, and communities associated with increased investment in ACCOs.
- Changes in levels of integration and collaboration between services.
- Increased sector capability, coordination, and transformational leadership.

In light of the above, we recommend the following:

### 1. Provide a clear Theory of Change and Outcomes Framework

We recommend that the Department of Social Services provide the sector with an overarching Theory of Change and Outcomes Framework for the program, linked to a Program Logic and Outcomes Framework for each stream. As outlined earlier in this submission, the Department may wish to consider incorporating the following indicators within those frameworks:

- Indicator 1: Children and families engage with support services to enhance their health, wellbeing, and safety through strong and secure relationships.
- Indicator 2: Children and families can access culturally informed, integrated, and flexible services that respond to their needs and support the child's development.
- Indicator 3: Children and families participate in service design and development, ensuring service delivery responds to local community needs.
- Indicator 4: Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are resourced and supported to lead in their communities.

### 2. Undertake further sector consultation once program specifications are confirmed

We recommend that the Department consults again with the sector on appropriate data measures once program outcomes and specifications are confirmed. This should include targeted consultation on the role, utility, and application of DEX and SCORE reporting.

### 3. Embed program logic and monitoring and evaluation at the contracting stage

We recommend that contracts include a requirement for a program logic model and monitoring and evaluation plan, developed collaboratively between the Department and service providers.

This approach would support a more localised and holistic reporting framework, enabling the identification of relevant indicators, data collection methods, and data use at a program level. DEX and SCORE reporting could then be applied as appropriate components within a broader evaluation approach, depending on agreed outcomes and indicators. This model can be applied across individual services or collectives and aligns strongly with relational contracting principles.

### 4. Building on existing good practice

We also note that there are valuable learnings from current data reporting arrangements that should inform the design of the new program. A positive example is the Department's decision to remove the requirement for Communities for Children Facilitating Partners to report into DEX, recognising that this skewed data and did not meaningfully capture the nature of Facilitating Partner work.

Social Network Analysis offers a way to visually map and assess relationships, connections, collaboration, and integration across services. This approach aligns closely with Priority Area 2, which focuses on connected, co-located, and integrated services. If implemented from the outset, it could provide valuable insights at place-based, state, and national levels.

### 5. Capturing relational and systems-level outcomes

We encourage genuine consideration of how relational outcomes and systems-level change can be captured and reported over time. This includes recognising that building effective stakeholder systems is staged work, requiring planning, implementation, and evaluation across different phases of maturity.

Accordingly, we recommend that the Department embed a staged approach for service providers toward meaningful sector and community collaboration, with progress planned, supported, and evaluated for success.

We welcome the Department's stated intention to introduce more holistic and qualitative reporting. This approach is central to our work as a Communities for Children Facilitating Partner. In our region, Community Partner programs complete an additional Outcomes Report that captures quantitative data, qualitative insights, stories of impact, and evidence of partnerships and collaboration. This provides a richer picture of program impact aligned with our CFC outcomes.

### 6. Embedding evidence-based practice

We note that the discussion paper does not currently specify an evidence-based requirement for the new children and families program. Under existing arrangements, the CFC program includes a requirement that 50 percent of funding be allocated to evidence-based programs. In our experience, this has been a significant strength of the program, supporting quality, consistency, and continuous improvement, while allowing flexibility in application.

In practice, an evidence-based requirement could be supported through:

- A program logic and monitoring and evaluation plan.
- Use of evidence-based frameworks, models, and practices.
- Demonstrated experience delivering evidence-informed programs.
- Continuous improvement processes embedded within governance arrangements.

The effectiveness of this approach is reflected in YWCA Australia's own service delivery outcomes, as outlined in the Appendix through our Service Delivery Case Study and Transforming Relationships project.

## 9. Working together

### Working together through program logic models

We note the Department's intention to move toward a model of relational contracting. We understand this approach may involve regular partnership-based governance, including quarterly meetings to review data, consider emerging community challenges, and discuss potential refinements to program delivery. While activities may be adjusted over time, contracts would remain outcomes-focused, with shared accountability for agreed outcomes.

In this context, we recommend that the Department introduce program logic models as a core feature of the new program. These models can support the identification of outcomes at a place-based level, while aligning local delivery with broader national objectives. This approach would strengthen shared understanding between Government and service providers and support more responsive, outcomes-driven delivery for children and families.

# D. YWCA Australia's Recommendations

This section outlines YWCA Australia's recommendations for the Department's consideration.

**The four priority areas requiring clarification from the Department are:**

i. The Department of Social Services clarifies that the intended age group for service delivery under the new program extends to 0 to 18 years.

ii. The Department of Social Services develops a Resource Allocation Model (RAM) determined against a service system map and metrics of highest need, which is developed from latest comprehensive data and informed by sector and community leader expertise.

iii. The Department of Social Services provides clear timelines and processes for commissioning to the sector as a priority.

iv. The Department of Social Services embeds a feedback loop for continuous program improvement.

**Our further recommendations for the new program for children and families are as follows:**

**1. Vision and Outcomes:**

v. The Department of Social Services considers adopting the Vision to: *All families are supported in building and strengthening quality and safe relationships so that children and their parents, caregivers and kinship thrive in their communities.*

vi. The Department of Social Services considers revising the program outcomes to recognise the role of community. For example,

Outcome 1 – Communities, parents/caregivers and kinship are supported to raise children who thrive.

Outcome 2 – Children grow and thrive through supported, safe and secure relationships with parents/caregivers, kinship and community.

vii. The Department of Social Services the Department may also wish to consider a complementary outcome that recognises the importance of a strong, capable, and sustainable child and family services sector that delivers positive outcomes for communities, children and families.

viii. The Department of Social Services considers expanding the population-level outcomes into a Program Logic and Outcomes Framework for each Stream, with the following indicators:

- Indicator 1 – Children and families engage with support services to enhance their health, wellbeing, and safety through strong and secure relationships.

- Indicator 2 – Children and families can access culturally informed, integrated, and flexible services that respond to their needs and that support the child's development.

- Indicator 3 – Children and families participate in service design and development, ensuring that service delivery responds to local community needs.

- Indicator 4 – Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are resourced and supported to lead in their communities.

**2. Considerations for Program Structure:**

ix. The Department of Social Services clarifies the scope of flexibility within Stream 1, including whether the Stream lends to a CFC model.

x. The Department of Social Services considers expanding Stream 1 to explicitly support universal access to programs and information services nationally or across regions.

xi. The Department of Social Services adopts a transitional approach to introducing the new program across the next two years. The Department may consider the following features to this transitional approach:

- Continue funding existing services that align with identified needs, while supporting the development of transition plans toward the new program specifications.

- Provide structured exit planning for services that are no longer meeting community need or are not aligned with the new program's locations, delivery models, or priorities.

- Identify regions where investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations is preferred and work collaboratively with existing services and ACCOs to transition service delivery in a well-resourced and community-led manner.

- Provide guidance on grant reporting for the service sector. Specifically, to enable a level of flexibility in reporting under DEX to accommodate service delivery across the Streams and to clarify reporting processes for partnership approaches and qualitative reporting options.

xii. The Department of Social Services provides that the longer-term grant agreements of up to five-years include annual indexation to reflect the increasing costs of service delivery and to future-proof service sustainability.

xiii. The Department of Social Services supports stronger cross-government collaboration between funded services and government departments responsible for Health, Disability, Housing, and Education.

xiv. The Department of Social Services recognises housing as a foundational enabler of positive outcomes for children and families.

### 3. Prioritising Investment

xv. The Department of Social Services clarifies the intent of "invests early" in Priority 1.

xvi. The Department of Social Services focuses on the principles of culturally informed responses and the safety and security of children and families in Priority 1 – amending the wording to: "Priority 1: Invest early in culturally informed responses to improve family wellbeing, *safety and security,* to break cycles of disadvantage, and to reduce the need for later interventions – like child protection."

xvii. The Department of Social Services introduces a fifth priority: "Priority 5: Ensure services are well resourced to build, retain, and strengthen a quality workforce through capacity building and professional development, supporting culturally informed, trauma-informed, and integrated service delivery." We recommend that this priority be supported by sector uplift case studies facilitated by the Department and made available for shared learning, potentially through the DSS Grants Service Providers Directory.

### 4. Improving Family Wellbeing

xviii. The Department of Social Services recognises service partnerships and models that promote flexibility within and between partnerships as a core approach to supporting family wellbeing.

### 5. Connected, co-located, and integrated services

xix. The Department of Social Services maintains and resources a dedicated Facilitating Partner function within the new program to facilitate effective connection and coordination of services for families.

### 6. Responding to community need

xx. The Department of Social Services maps the intersections and impacts of other government reforms, across Commonwealth and state and territory levels, with input from the sector, to ensure funding settings reflect community need. Moreover, the Department creates avenues for ongoing feedback loops with the service sector and communities during rollout to ensure the program remains responsive to emerging and changing needs.

xxi. The Department of Social Services, in ensuring funding reflects community need, should consider the staged work required to strengthen relationships between service providers and to support meaningful community engagement. This includes adequately resourcing the relational work that makes collaboration possible, sometimes described as "funding the glue."

xxii. Across program design, grant application, funding distribution, monitoring, and evaluation, we recommend that the Department consider implementing a continuum of participation tool. This could support a scaled, measurable, and deliberate approach to:

i. Strengthening service engagement and co-design with community, and

ii. Supporting services to take on facilitation roles across local partners to improve integration and outcomes.

For participation and collaboration to be meaningful, funding needs to be available for the relational work with community members and between services, supporting movement toward stronger community participation and coordinated delivery.

## 7. Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

We recognise that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders, leaders, community members, and children and families themselves are best placed to guide this work. Any approach to grant design should be grounded in their leadership, expertise, and self-determined priorities.

With this as a foundation, we recommend the Department of Social Services consider the following approaches to grant process design to support an increase in ACCOs delivering services to children and families:

xxiii. The Department of Social Services considers stipulating specific funding allocations for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, including targeted investment in regions with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations and where communities have identified a self-determined need for culturally led supports for First Nations children and families.

xxiv. The Department of Social Services introduces an Expression of Interest process that enables early, place-based engagement and dialogue with relevant ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders. This approach can support relationship building, shared understanding of local priorities, and more culturally appropriate program design prior to formal tendering.

xxv. The Department of Social Services co-designs tendering and grant application pathways with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector to reduce barriers to entry and support culturally appropriate ways of applying for funding, designing program models, and implementing services.

xxvi. The Department of Social Services, in consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service sector, map relevant Commonwealth strategies that intersect with the new children and families program, including, critically, the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap.*

xxvii. The Department of Social Services ensures that the new program aligns with and actively contributes to the Closing the Gap Targets and Outcomes.

xxviii. The Department of Social Services, in consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service sector, considers mirroring the structural intent of the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms within the new federal children and families program, including:

- Priority Reform 1: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making.
- Priority Reform 2: Building the Community-Controlled Sector.
- Priority Reform 3: Transforming Government Organisations.
- Priority Reform 4: Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level.

xxix. The Department of Social Services, considers aligning program monitoring with the Closing the Gap Implementation Tracker, enabling transparent reporting on progress against commitments to strengthen the ACCO sector and improve outcomes for children and families.

xxx. The Department of Social Services embeds principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty within the program, working in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector and communities to ensure data is collected, stored, shared, and used in ways that are self-determined and culturally appropriate.

xxxi. The Department of Social Services introduces a requirement for all funded services to demonstrate a commitment to culturally informed, safe and inclusive practice. In practice, this could include requiring all services to develop a Cultural Engagement and Action Plan, with local endorsement from First Nations community members and ACCOs as part of the application process.

## 8. Measuring outcomes

xxxii. YWCA re-iterates our recommendation that the Government work in partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to embed the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty within the new children and families program.

xxxiii. The Department of Social Services provide the sector with an overarching Theory of Change and Outcomes Framework for the program, linked to a Program Logic and Outcomes Framework for each stream. As outlined

earlier in this submission, the Department may wish to consider incorporating the following indicators within those frameworks:

- Indicator 1 – Children and families engage with support services to enhance their health, wellbeing, and safety through strong and secure relationships.
- Indicator 2 – Children and families can access culturally informed, integrated, and flexible services that respond to their needs and support the child's development.
- Indicator 3 – Children and families participate in service design and development, ensuring service delivery responds to local community needs.
- Indicator 4 – Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are resourced and supported to lead in their communities.

xxxiv. The Department of Social Services consults again with the sector on appropriate data measures once program outcomes and specifications are confirmed. This should include targeted consultation on the role, utility, and application of DEX and SCORE reporting.

xxxv. The Department of Social Services include a requirement for a program logic model and monitoring and evaluation plan, developed collaboratively between the Department and service providers.

xxxvi. The Department of Social Services could retain the exemption for Communities for Children Facilitating Partners to report into DEX, recognising that this skewed data and did not meaningfully capture the nature of Facilitating Partner work. The Department could also investigate implementing a Social Network Analysis of evaluation as a way to visually map and assess relationships, connections, collaboration, and integration across services.

xxxvii. The Department of Social Services embed a staged approach for service providers toward meaningful sector and community collaboration, with progress planned, supported, and evaluated for success.

xxxviii. The Department of Social Services looks to the data capturing approach of YWCA Australia as a CFC Facilitating Partner in the Northern Rivers to the development of data capturing processes under the new children and families program. Such data captures quantitative data, qualitative insights, stories of impact, and evidence of partnerships and collaboration.

xxxix. The Department of Social Services embeds an evidence-based requirement for the new program for children and families. This could be modelled from the current CFC program requirement for 50% of funding to be allocated to evidence-based programs.

## 9. Working together

xl. The Department of Social Services introduces program logic models in the new program for children and families. These models can support the identification of outcomes at a place-based level, while aligning local delivery with broader national objectives. This approach would strengthen shared understanding between Government and service providers and support more responsive, outcomes-driven delivery for children and families.

# Appendix 1: Case Study – YWCA Australia's Operations in Bundjalung Country in Northern NSW and our Transforming Relationships Project

## A. YWCA Australia's Operations in Bundjalung Country, Northern Rivers, Northern New South Wales – A Case Study:

### YWCA Australia's Work as a CFC Facilitating Partner in the Region:

YWCA partners with the Australian Government Department of Social Services on wrap around Communities for Children (CFC) services across the Northern Rivers in Lismore and Murwillumbah, New South Wales. YWCA Australia has delivered CFC for over 20 years, learning, evolving and innovating in partnership with services and community. As the Communities for Children Facilitating Partner in the Lismore and Murwillumbah, we co-ordinate the network of services providing prevention and early intervention supports to children and families across the regions.

In June 2021, YWCA CFC Facilitating Partner (FP) was awarded a five-year CFC FP grant extension to 30 June 2026. This resourcing to facilitate this work has been critical and is deeply appreciated by YWCA Australia and the sector in the Northern NSW region.

YWCA FP facilitated a collaborative strategic planning process with Community Partners and CFC Advisory Committees to plan, implement and evaluate Lismore and Murwillumbah CFC programs across the five-year contract. The process consisted of four phases: Planning and Design; Procurement; Implementation and Review; and Evaluation.

YWCA FP commenced phase one as of 1 July 2021, with phase one due for completion by 30 June 2022. Community Partners were offered a one-year contract to transition to new grant requirements commencing 1 July 2021. During this transitional period, YWCA FP supported and collaborated with Community Partners in preparation for the procurement of CFC programs under a new CFC Community Strategic Plan 2022-2026.

Below is a timeline of the important transition processes towards building a new robust stakeholder network amongst eight community partners.

| **2021-2022: Transition year – Key Milestones** | |
|---|---|
| ***April 2021*** | YWCA Australia invested in building the capacity of our existing community partners with cultural leadership training: Engoori training with MurriMatters.<br><br>This was the foundation for the shift in how we wanted to work in the CFC program across the new contract and provided a culturally informed approach to engagement and collaboration with our community partners and our communities. From this point we focused on building the conditions for a CFC Collective approach. |
| ***July 2021*** | YWCA Australia developed a Theory of Change to inform CFC priorities and outcomes. This included an evidence review, comprehensive needs analysis; sector development needs analysis; child, family and community consultation and consultation with existing Community Partners and Advisory Committees. |
| ***Sept – Nov 2021*** | YWCA Australia held four 4 design workshops with Community Partners to establish our Cultural Action Plan (how we work together – values, behaviours and rituals) and refine CFC Priorities and Outcomes.<br><br>The result was the development of a CFC Collective Program Logic and Monitoring and Evaluation Plan for 2022-2026. This set a foundation for a collaborative and relational approach for the procurement phase, mapping and alignment of each Community Partner program to the CFC outcomes and established our CFC Collective (Facilitating Partner, Community Partner and Advisory Committees). |
| ***Dec 2021 – Feb 2022*** | YWCA Australia led the procurement process for 2022 – 2026 Community Programs.<br><br>During our procurement process our region was hit by the most devasting floods of all time – and all our CFC services were impacted significantly.<br><br>However, because of our collaborative and relational approach we were able to finalise a tender process within our planned timeframe.<br><br>Importantly, because of the relational approach we had established amongst Community Partners, we were also able to maintain and deliver quality services for children and families in the |

| | |
|---|---|
| | region that was adaptive to meet their changing needs due to the impact of the climate disaster. |
| ***March – June 2022*** | Community Partner contract negotiations were held to refine and finalise contract details with Community Providers for a period of four years with contracts commencing as of July 2022. |

## Key Enablers to Building a Robust Community Partnership which meets the needs of Children and Families in the Bundjalung Region, Northern Rivers

YWCA Australia maintained a dedicated evidence-based approach to ensure service quality and relevance.

We asked Community Partners to include partnership and collaboration activities as part of their program logic and service delivery activities, recognising that these activities were critical to support a collective impact approach.

As part of the monitoring and evaluation plan we facilitated six-monthly CFC Collective Review days where we represented as the Facilitating Partner and brought together Community Partners and our Advisory Committees to reflect on our achievements and impacts (utilising DEX/SCORE, quantitative data and qualitative themes), sharing practices, and identifying opportunities for cross-service collaboration as well as areas for continuous improvement.

YWCA Australia invested in capacity building activities across our CFC Collective to build key skills and practices relating to culturally informed practices; co-design; collaborative leadership; addressing complex needs; and evidence-informed program design and evaluation. This added a significant level of sophistication to service co-ordination, collaboration and integration across the region.

YWCA Australia facilitated and participated in sector networks to support sector connection, development and collaboration. This deepened sector collaborative leadership, improved cultural knowledge and understanding, and strengthened wraparound services for the Early childhood education sector.

**Impact of a CFC Collective approach:**

A significant upshot of our CFC Collective approach, led by YWCA Australia, is that our services across the region shifted from a model of competition to one of collaboration. This is reflected in the fact that regional services moved away from traditional contracting towards relational contracting which focused on embedding regular feedback loops and a continuous improvement approach.

Through our collective approach, YWCA Australia also led an increase of funding and support towards Aboriginal-led and designed programs and ACCOs on Bundjalung Country.

The impacts of resource sharing and partnership strengthening between Community Partners within the region is tangible. This collaboration has led to two new collaborative and evidence-informed programs. These programs responded to the place-based needs of children and families in the Northern Rivers after the significant floods in the region. During this time and in support of these new programs, Community Partners wrapped around each other to provide mentorship and coaching to other partners utilising our collective expertise to provide the best services to community in time of need. The result of these strengthened partnerships and programs continues today in the region.

The collective approach also drove an increase in the existence of co-located and integrated services. In particular, Community Provider programs provided the link, connection and integration between Early childhood education services and Primary schools through physical co-location.

Ultimately, because of this robust collective approach, access to services and supports for parents, carers and kinship networks increased. Through a connected network, Community Providers adjusted service delivery models to take services to places where parents/carers were attending. For example, facilitated engagement activities within the primary school bringing parenting support and education services to parents/carers through their child's school. This also supported improved parent/carer engagement with the school.

## Servicing Lismore and Murwillumbah Children, Families, Kinship Networks and Communities: The Quantitative and Qualitative Scope of Impact:

The value of this service delivery model is clearly demonstrated, with 95%+ of clients providing a positive satisfaction rating in our services across both Lismore and Murwillumbah.

This is exemplified by a parent/carer's reflection that, *"The support that staff from the Lismore Transition Program have given us is above and beyond. We are thankful for the program and the educators who love and support us as a family."*

Between July 2022 - June 2025 our Lismore CFC programs had supported 610 individuals, 3082 group participants and delivered 6171 sessions. Of that cohort:

- 546 individual participants were children aged 0-14yrs (89%).
- 257 (42%) identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.
- 168 (27.4%) recorded a disability status.
- 200 (53%) were sole parents with dependents.

The positive impact on the change in the Lismore cohort's circumstances is significant:

- 60% had a SCORE assessment with 62% having a positive change in their circumstances,
- 70% having a positive change in their goals and
- 96% with overall positive satisfaction in our services.

Between Jul 2022 - June 2025 our Murwillumbah CFC programs had supported 1471 individuals, 3260 group participants and delivered 1696 sessions. Of that cohort:

- 713 individual participants were children aged 0-14yrs (50%).
- 748 (51%) identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.
- 211 (14.3%) recorded a disability status.
- 148 (27%) were sole parents with dependents.

The positive impact on the change in the Murwillumbah cohort's circumstances is equally significant:

- 32% had a SCORE assessment with 72% having a positive change in their circumstances,
- 75% having a positive change in their goals and
- 95% with overall positive satisfaction in our services.

The reason Murwillumbah CFC has a significant difference in the number of individual and group clients is primarily due to the delivery of the annual Kinship Festival which has grown from 300 participants in 2015 (when it began) to over 6000 participants in 2025. This significant cultural festival provides an important soft entry for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to access services and ongoing support.

The loss of CFC in our region would have a direct impact on the workforce in our sector. This includes:

- Direct impact to 33 CFC staff across the 9 organisations:
    - 30% of these staff are First Nations people who hold deep cultural knowledge.
    - 36% have children 14yrs and under.
    - 94% are women.

The loss of CFC in our region would also mean a significant loss of targeted sector workforce development with the loss of CFC sector capacity and training opportunities which are delivered at no cost or low cost. The overall impact will be felt most for children and families in the region who are beneficiaries of these programs and the network of strong community-led social infrastructure.

Conversely, ongoing commitment to supporting the YWCA Australia program and the ancillary service organisations across Lismore and Murwillumbah will continue to transform the lives of children, families, kinship networks and communities. The impact of this positive contribution continually builds upon years of investment into sector co-ordination, collaboration and integration.

## B. YWCA Australia's Transforming Relationships Project: A Review of Phase One:

**Transforming Relationships – Project Origin and Summary**

In 2022, the NSW Northern Rivers region experienced the biggest floods on record. The impact was devasting on our community and our services and continues to impact nearly three years on for many children and families throughout our region.

During this time the Child and Family sector found ways, through great uncertainty, to sustain support for children and families during the crisis. Services connected, shared resources and physical spaces, and collaborated to provide ongoing support to children and families. As the region emerged from the initial crisis, services expressed how valuable and important this way of working was during our most challenging time.

At this critical juncture for community and the region, we asked ourselves the following questions:

- What would support a more connected, strong, safe and thriving child and family service sector into the future?

- How do we work together to transform sector relationships and embed child and family-led systems?

- Could we apply learnings from our collaborative partnership development in YWCA's Communities for Children (CFC) program and explore with the sector what would support us to work better together, not only in moments of crisis, to improve outcomes for children and families?

The project emerged as a result of YWCA Australia's existing work with Community Partners and was activated in response to the flood crisis. The project has the benefit of YWCA Australia having long term relationships in place over 20 years of CFC program delivery and most recently a five-year contract in place to be able to resource this work. This resourcing to facilitate this work has been critical and is deeply appreciated by YWCA Australia and the sector in the Northern NSW region.

The project was also focused on building capacity in the sector. We sought and have been effective in embedding collaborative leadership practices across the sector to continue building culturally informed, trauma informed and collaborative service provision. It was driven as a whole-of-sector culture shift in the region.

The child and family sector plays a vital role in shaping the wellbeing of children and families, yet to achieve meaningful impact, collaboration, leadership, and partnership across organisations must be strengthened. YWCA's CFC Transforming Relationships project is a sector capacity-building initiative that emphasises First Nations self-determination, sector leadership development, and evidence-based program design and delivery.

In partnership with MurriMatters, and focused on high expectations, the project built power-sharing and reflective foundations through Engoori leadership training, including cultural action plans, to foster greater understanding and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems and practices. This created a shared opportunity, language and framework for collaborative action, ensuring that stakeholders and leaders were equipped to engage meaningfully with First Nations services and communities.

The project emphasised the development of leadership and management capability to guide cross-sector partnerships and foster a culture of collaboration. Building the capacity across services to lead and drive change was viewed as a critical element in sustaining change over time and was further supported by the Transforming Relationships Evidence Review conducted by Dr Meaghan Vosz, which highlighted the conditions and key practices and principles of leadership and collaboration that support successful systems change.

Embedding an evidence-based, change management approach contributed to reflective continuous improvement and sharing of evidence-based program design and delivery with the project stakeholders for implementation within their own services and organisations.

The Transforming Relationships project involved collaboration with multiple services across the region. This included co-ordination with our project delivery partner, MurriMatters and participation in the project with eight services which formed a Collective of services in the region across health, early years education, child and family support, and community services. The Collective of those eight Transforming Relationships project services are:

1. Goonellabah Goodstart Early Learning Centre
2. Jarjum Centre
3. Lismore Parish Preschool
4. Lismore Preschool
5. Mid Richmond Neighbourhood Centre - Brighter Futures
6. Northern NSW Local Health District - Child, Family, Community Health (Brighter Beginnings)
7. Social Futures
8. Rekindling the Spirit

Phase one of the project engaged the Collective in a series of six design workshops. The Collective agreed on a shared vision, strategy and priorities for collaborative action including:

- ***'Leading Together'***- Facilitating a Transforming Relationships leadership group to lead, support and sustain a shared vision and strategy.

- ***'Working Together'*** – Building a culturally safe, informed and responsive sector to better meet the needs of First Nations families.

- ***'Designing Together'*** – Including child and family perspectives within governance systems to understand what works better for children and families to improve outcomes.

- ***'Learning Together'*** – Creating a sector training and development strategy that connects, strengthens and sustains our workforce.

**Transforming Relationships – Project Development**

Transforming Relationships was grounded in a shared commitment to improving outcomes for children, families, and communities. It aimed to foster deeper collaboration, sector leadership, and culturally safe approaches to practice. A key partnership with MurriMatters helped shape a culturally informed, strengths-based, relational foundation for this work.

Phase 1 of the project focused on laying the groundwork for long-term systems change through three strategic objectives: supporting self-determination for First Nations peoples, strengthening sector leadership and capacity, and embedding evidence-based approaches.

The Process Review of Phase 1 reflected on early achievements in building knowledge and practice, while setting the stage for broader systemic transformation.

The Review included:

- Assessment of existing data and documentation
- 15 interviews, including 10 Collective members and 7 project team members
- Preliminary analysis of emerging themes and insights
- Sense checking team workshop
- Headline insights shared with the TR Collective and team members
- Analysis and reporting.

***Learnings:***

The Process Review identified the following key learnings:

- The Transforming Relationships Project emerged from a shared sector commitment to strengthen connections, build on community strengths, and enhance relational, cross sector, and community-based collaboration.
- Phase 1 fostered trust, connection, and shared purpose across childhood and family services. It has been effective in establishing the foundations and conditions for new ways of working together, and a shared vision and framework to guide collective action according to four priority areas.
- Phase 1 demonstrates a model that is collaborative, relational, evidence-informed and built capability.

Key supports included:

- Personal and intentional early engagement
- Clear, consistent communication and regular check ins
- Early leadership buy in and the Engoori training
- Modelling of relational, collaborative leadership and practice
- Tools and frameworks that deepened reflection and shared understanding.

Phase 1 demonstrated the following progress towards the Project's strategic outcomes, to build knowledge, deepen practice and transform systems:

- Phase 1 built participant knowledge, creating a strong foundation for future work.
- Phase 1 made progress towards deepening collaborative practice, with participants beginning to embed learnings within their organisations and explore new ways of working.
- There are early signs of strengthened cross sector collaboration.  However, sustained collective effort over time is required to transform sector systems.

***Implications and future directions***

The Transforming Relationships project sought to contribute to the evidence of what works to improve outcomes for children and families, through sector collaboration, leadership and systems change.

So, what does this way of working require from individuals, organisations and the sector?

- Helping services become comfortable with an uncertain, emergent process: This way of working is not linear, and outcomes are often discovered through the work, rather than predetermined in advance. Moving through complexity together requires a shared tolerance for uncertainty, and a belief that meaningful change comes through relational, iterative processes, rather than rigid project plans. Clear structures that support shared decision making, participant engagement, and focus on tangible shared community benefit, are key. Even small, shared actions can help maintain momentum and purpose.

- Gaining executive leadership support across different services: Executive endorsement is crucial to embedding and sustaining collaborative practice. Without overarching leadership commitment, these efforts may be short-lived. Transformational approaches therefore require:

    - Visible leadership support: Leaders modelling relational values in how they partner, make decisions, and allocate resources.

    - Strategic alignment: Embedding collaborative goals into organisational strategies and planning cycles.

    - Authorising environment for staff: Allowing and encouraging staff to invest time in partnership-building, systems thinking, and reflective practice, rather than only direct service outputs. This includes supporting staff to attend workshops and training.

    - When executive leaders across services champion the work, it legitimises the process, aligns priorities across organisations, and creates the permission structure needed for innovation.

- Overcoming traditional funding and organisational incentives that promote working in isolation: Collaborative, place-based approaches such as Transforming Relationships require a significant shift in mindset and systems. Traditional funding models often reinforce siloed operations by allocating resources to individual organisations based on discrete outputs or competitive applications. These structures can unintentionally discourage collaboration, shared planning, and joint accountability.

- To truly work in relational and cross-sector ways, services need flexibility in how they use resources and a mandate to prioritise collective outcomes. This includes:

    - Shifting from competition to collaboration: Encouraging joint funding models, shared reporting frameworks, and collaborative outcome measurement.

    - Embedding collective impact in funding agreements: Incentivising services to invest time in shared governance, reflection, and relationship-building.

    - Creating safe spaces to share power and risk: Supporting organisations to move away from ‘proving impact alone’ toward ‘improving impact together.’

    - This way of working means challenging deeply embedded structures and shifting the focus from short-term service delivery metrics to long-term systemic change.

**Conclusion**

Phase 1 of Transforming Relationships highlighted key opportunities for the future, including transitioning from knowledge and relationship building to action in Phase 2, the need for continued iteration and learning cycles, and the importance of facilitated supports and collective engagement to maintain and sustain momentum. Transforming Relationships demonstrates a model that builds towards transformational change, with learnings that may be applied more broadly by sector stakeholders, funders and decision makers.

# Appendix 2: Models of Participation

**Figure 1:** IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation[8]

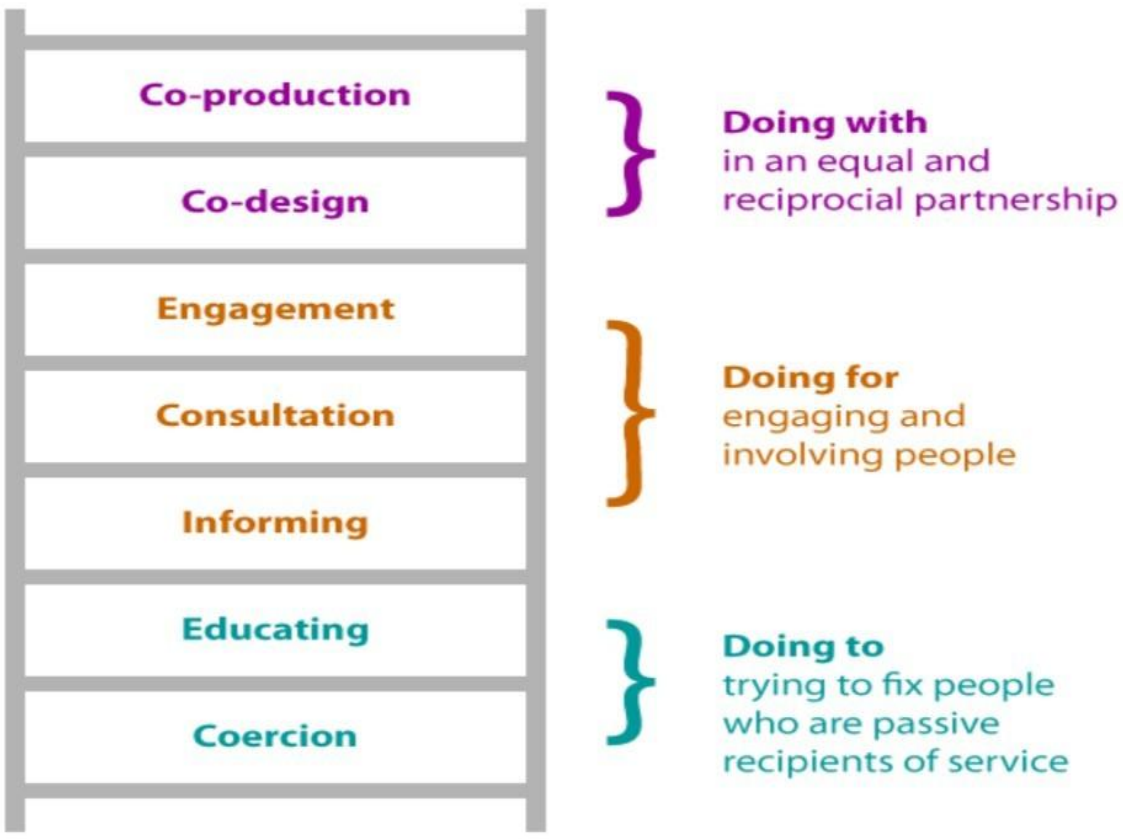
## IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2 developed The Spectrum of Public Participation to help groups define the public's role in any public engagement process. The Spectrum is quickly becoming an international standard.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

| PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL | INFORM | CONSULT | INVOLVE | COLLABORATE | EMPOWER |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions. | To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions. | To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. | To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution. | To place final decision making in the hands of the public. |
| **PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC** | We will keep you informed. | We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. | We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. | We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible. | We will implement what you decide. |

**Figure 2:** Think Local Act Personal, Ladder of Co-Production[9]




[8] International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), *IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation,* available at: https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars
[9] Think Local Act Personal, *Ladder of co-production,* available at: https://thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/resources/ladder-of-co-production/ and as used by way of example by the UK Government Department for Work & Pensions, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ssac-occasional-paper-25-how-dwp-involves-disabled-people-when-developing-or-evaluating-programmes-that-affect-them/how-dwp-involves-disabled-people-when-developing-or-evaluating-programmes-that-affect-them-occasional-paper-25

**Figure 3:** Indigo Daya, The Participation Ladder – A Consumer/Survivor Lens[10]

## Participation Ladder

| Type of participation | What happens at each level | Implications & views | Power |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Consumer owned** | Consumers:<br>• Define the problem or need<br>• Design & provide the solution, delivery & evaluation.<br>Govt/sector support this with funding.<br>Work is within consumer-run enterprises. | **People doing it themselves.**<br>***Enabling, empowering.***<br>Government trusts that people are best placed to lead and own the development and delivery of what they need - if resources are provided. | *People have power over the services they need and use*<br>*Consumers have expertise that govt doesn't – and this expertise matters most.* |
| **Consumer-led** | Consumers lead the process, with others, to:<br>• Define the problem or need<br>• Design & provide the solution, delivery & evaluation.<br>Govt/sector support this with a range of resources.<br>Work is within existing services & systems. | | |
| **Co-Production** | Govt/sector works in partnership with service users[1] to:<br>• **Co-plan** & define the problem or need and<br>• **Co-design** the solution, **co-deliver** the service & **co-evaluate** it<br>Consumers form a majority of committee and project group memberships. Govt/sector ensure they privilege, hear, value, debate & act upon consumer views. Decisions are not made unless the majority of consumers agree. Power imbalances are proactively redressed.<br>Consumers are part of delivering and evaluating the solution. | **Doing with people.**<br>***Collaborative partnering.***<br>Government shares power and potential equally with the people who will receive the service.<br>Recognition that each party has something valuable to bring to the process.<br>Decision making is shared, as is design & delivery to some degree – or even completely. | *Govt & sector shares the power with the people who use services.*<br>*The expertise of consumers is just as critical as other expertise.* |
| **Co-Design** | Govt/sector works in partnership with service users[1] to **plan, design, deliver or evaluate** the problem and solution.<br>For whichever part of the process that is co-developed, consumers form a majority of committee /project group memberships. Consumer views are privileged, heard, valued, discussed and acted upon. Power imbalances are proactively redressed.<br>Consumers may or may not part of delivering the end result. | | |
| **Engage** | Govt/sector involve consumers in thinking through some, many or all aspects of decisions. This is most commonly seen by having a minority of team members as consumers (good practice should be a *minimum* of 2).<br>Consumers are a minority, often with less power and resources than others, and just one of many stakeholders. | **Doing for people.**<br>***Participants without power.***<br>Government takes account of consumer perspectives & opinions in some way.<br>They create limited opportunities for people to 'have their say' or get involved – but government (or the sector) makes the final decisions. | *Govt and sector hold the power and value their own expertise most of all.* |
| **Consult** | Govt/sector ask consumers what they think, and this becomes one of many considerations.<br>This is most commonly done by holding dedicated consultation sessions or surveys with consumers. | | |
| **Inform** | Govt/sector tell consumers about their decisions.<br>They may provide an opportunity for feedback. What is done with feedback varies. | **Doing to people.**<br>***Passive recipients.***<br>Consumers are not part of policy, service design or delivery. Govt/sector makes the decisions based on their own expertise. | |
| **Educate** | Govt/sector teach consumers about what they've decided so people know why it is good for them. | | |
| **Coerce** | Govt/sector expect consumers to accept the changes made on their behalf. | | |
| **Exclude** | Consumers are unable to access services or systems or decision making. | **Excluding people.**<br>***No involvement in any way.*** | |

[10] Indigo Daya, The Participation Ladder – A Consumer/Survivor Lens (2020) available at: https://www.indigodaya.com/wpcf7_captcha/2020/10/Participation-ladder_consumer_survivor-lens-2.pdf