

**MISSION  
AUSTRALIA**

# Submission

A new approach to  
programs for families and  
children: Mission Australia's  
response to the  
Department of Social  
Services

December 2025

# Contents

- Executive summary .....3**
- Summary of recommendations .....3**
  - Vision and outcomes..... 3
  - Program structure..... 4
  - Prioritising investment..... 4
  - Measuring outcomes ..... 5
  - Working together..... 5
- Vision and outcomes .....6**
  - Recommendations ..... 6
- Program structure.....7**
  - Recommendations ..... 8
- Prioritising investment .....9**
  - Recommendations ..... 10
  - Improving family wellbeing..... 10
  - Connected, co-located, and integrated services ..... 12
  - Responding to community need..... 13
  - Recommendations ..... 14
  - Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families..... 14
- Measuring outcomes .....16**
  - Recommendations ..... 18
- Working together.....18**
  - Recommendations ..... 20

# Executive summary

Mission Australia is pleased to provide a submission to the Department of Social Service's (DSS's) consultation on *A new approach to programs for families and children*. This document provides an overview of our responses to DSS's questions on how to operationalise a new program for families and children. We envision programs for families and children that sit within environments that enable connection and wellbeing for all community members. This requires system-level transformation that embeds cultural safety, community leadership, and structural equity. To achieve this kind of meaningful reform, we need an approach that invests in prevention, implements effective service integration strategies, proactively and rapidly responds to community needs and embeds flexibility, capability-building, and culturally grounded governance to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Mechanisms such as improved outcomes measurement and the implementation of a relational contracting approach will enhance service delivery and are essential for achieving sustainable, person-centred outcomes in complex social contexts.

## Summary of recommendations

### Vision and outcomes

1. Strengthen the vision to encompass both strong families and strong community ecosystems to better align with evidence, reform intent, and lived realities. This approach creates a more integrated framework for child and family wellbeing. Mission Australia's recommended vision is: *Every child and young person grows up feeling safe, loved, and supported by strong families and caring communities. Families have the confidence and resources they need, backed by a connected community network that works together to create opportunities for all to thrive.*
2. Broaden the main outcomes to include the following:
  - a. *Children and young people thrive:* Children and young people grow up safe, healthy, and resilient, with strong cultural and social connections, positive relationships, and meaningful engagement in learning and decision-making
  - b. *Families are strong and supported:* Families are empowered to nurture positive relationships and wellbeing through access to safe, inclusive, culturally responsive, and evidence-informed supports, alongside housing stability and financial security
  - c. *Adults are confident and connected:* Adults—including parents and carers—develop resilience and confidence in their ability through strong relationships, cultural and social connections, and active participation in decision-making. These foundations enable positive parenting and support improved life outcomes for individuals and families
  - d. *Communities are inclusive and collaborative:* Communities are safe, informed, and cohesive, with accessible, integrated services and opportunities for all members to participate and support families and children to thrive

## Program structure

3. Create the structural and functional conditions for an effective and flexible single national program by taking the following actions:

- a. Define core national principles
- b. Build flexibility into funding models
- c. Enable local governance structures
- d. Develop a national framework for local adaptation
- e. Strengthen accountability through outcomes
- f. Invest in capacity building
- g. Pilot and iterate

## Prioritising investment

4. Prioritise shifting investment from isolated programs to connected systems that enable children and families to thrive. This requires:
  - a. Whole-of-life support
  - b. Relational integration
  - c. Community capability-building
  - d. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) leadership
  - e. Action on structural determinants
5. Combine quantitative data with qualitative insights from local networks, frontline services, and community consultations to identify hidden stressors
6. Require community engagement evidence in funding proposals and prioritise initiatives that embed lived experience in design
7. Invest in leadership development, governance training, and backbone roles to strengthen local decision-making capacity
8. Mandate cultural safety frameworks and fund culturally responsive service models co-designed with First Nations leaders
9. Include equity impact assessments in funding criteria to ensure services meet diverse cohort needs
10. Allocate flexible funding for transport, interpreters, and digital connectivity, especially in regional and remote areas
11. Align funding with community-endorsed plans and collective impact strategies where they exist

12. Embed future-proofing criteria (population trends, infrastructure gaps) and require evidence of inclusive engagement processes

## Measuring outcomes

13. To enhance transparency and continuous improvement:
  - a. Enable real-time updates
  - b. Enable strategic release of insights
  - c. Combine data with stories
  - d. Benchmark across providers

## Working together

14. Endorse a Relational Contracting Framework as national policy
15. Establish a National Program Steering Group for oversight
16. Allocate funding for readiness assessment and capability building
17. Commit to transparent decision-making and continuous improvement

# Vision and outcomes

The Department of Social Services' (DSS's) new vision and proposed aims for programs for families and children are:

*All children and young people are supported by strong families who have the skills and confidence to nurture them.*

- *Outcome 1: Parents and caregivers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children.*
- *Outcome 2: Children are supported to grow into healthy, resilient adults.*

This vision is positive and aspirational, prioritising family-centred practice, which is critical for empowering families and helping children thrive. However, it frames family strength primarily as an individual attribute, without acknowledging the broader ecosystem that shapes wellbeing. To fully reflect what children, families, and communities need, the vision should incorporate enabling environments—connected communities, coordinated services, accessible supports, local leadership, and structural conditions that promote wellbeing.

While these outcomes are positive and adaptable across diverse contexts, they present significant gaps when assessed against the [Department's Families and Children Activity Outcomes Framework with Suggested Indicators](#) and broader reform ambitions. Mission Australia's recommended outcomes provide a more holistic, systemic, and culturally responsive framing that aligns with reform objectives and addresses structural determinants of wellbeing.

## Recommendations

1. Strengthen the vision to encompass both strong families and strong community ecosystems to better align with evidence, reform intent, and lived realities. This approach creates a more integrated framework for child and family wellbeing. Mission Australia's recommended vision is:

*Every child and young person grows up feeling safe, loved, and supported by strong families and caring communities. Families have the confidence and resources they need, backed by a connected community network that works together to create opportunities for all to thrive.*

2. Broaden the main outcomes to include the following:

- a. Children and young people thrive:* Children and young people grow up safe, healthy, and resilient, with strong cultural and social connections, positive relationships, and meaningful engagement in learning and decision-making.
- b. Families are strong and supported:* Families are empowered to nurture positive relationships and wellbeing through access to safe, inclusive, culturally responsive, and evidence-informed supports, alongside housing stability and financial security.

*c. Adults are confident and connected:* Adults—including parents and carers—develop resilience and confidence in their ability through strong relationships, cultural and social connections, and active participation in decision-making. These foundations enable positive parenting and support improved life outcomes for individuals and families.

*d. Communities are inclusive and collaborative:* Communities are safe, informed, and cohesive, with accessible, integrated services and opportunities for all members to participate and support families and children to thrive.

## Program structure

Mission Australia supports progressive universalism - universal access to services with prioritisation for those with greatest need alongside early intervention and step-up pathways that allow families facing complex challenges to move in and out of programs as needed. A single national program can increase flexibility, reduce duplication, streamline reporting, and align resources with community priorities. However, flexibility cannot be assumed—it must be deliberately designed. Governments must create conditions for service system integration. At the structural level, there should be intergovernmental agreements and national strategies across community services, and mental health, health, disability, education, and related sectors should embed common child and family wellbeing outcomes and aligned reporting frameworks that cascade across agencies and programs. At the functional level, agencies should move toward joint and co-commissioning to drive integration and shared accountability. Practical actions that DSS could take to ensure flexibility include:

### 1. Define core national principles

- Establish national program objectives (e.g., outcomes for families and children, equity, accountability).
- Clearly articulate what must be consistent nationally (e.g., reporting standards, eligibility criteria) versus what can vary locally.

### 2. Build flexibility into funding models

- Use block funding with outcome-based components rather than rigid line-item budgets.
- Allow local co-design of service delivery models within agreed parameters.
- Consider tiered funding formulas that account for regional needs (e.g., remoteness, cultural diversity).

### 3. Enable local governance structures

- Require local governance bodies (e.g., community advisory groups) to guide implementation.

- Formalise relational contracting—contracts that emphasise collaboration, trust, and shared problem-solving rather than strict compliance.

#### 4. Develop a national framework for local adaptation

- Provide toolkits and guidelines for local adaptation (e.g., templates for governance, community engagement).
- Include flexibility clauses in contracts that allow adjustments based on local evidence.

#### 5. Strengthen accountability through outcomes

- Use both activity-based and outcome-based reporting.
- Implement shared measurement systems nationally, while allowing local indicators to supplement.

#### 6. Invest in capacity building

- Fund training for local providers on governance, relational contracting, and adaptive service design.
- Support data capability at the local level for continuous improvement.

#### 7. Pilot and iterate

- Start with regional pilots to test governance and flexibility mechanisms.
- Use feedback loops to refine the balance between national consistency and local autonomy before scaling.

### Recommendations

3. Create the structural and functional conditions for an effective and flexible single national program by taking the following actions:

- a. Define core national principles
- b. Build flexibility into funding models
- c. Enable local governance structures
- d. Develop a national framework for local adaptation
- e. Strengthen accountability through outcomes
- f. Invest in capacity building
- g. Pilot and iterate

# Prioritising investment

DSS's four priority areas are:

1. *Invest early to improve family wellbeing, break cycles of disadvantage, and reduce the need for later interventions – like child protection.*
2. *Prioritise connected, co-located, and integrated services that work together to meet family needs.*
3. *Ensure services are informed by, and respond to, community needs.*
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.*

These remain critical for improving outcomes for children and families. However, to maximise impact and sustainability, these priorities must move beyond programmatic interventions toward system-level transformation that embeds cultural safety, community leadership, and structural equity. Current service systems are fragmented and reactive, often addressing crises rather than preventing them. We propose the following overarching strategic priorities:

## 1. Whole-of-life investment

Position early investment within a continuum of support across the lifespan—from early childhood through adolescence and adulthood because sustained, flexible interventions prevent intergenerational disadvantage and improve long-term outcomes.

## 2. Relational integration of services

Move beyond co-location to shared governance, joint workforce development, and backbone capability for coordination because families need seamless, holistic support—not siloed programs.

## 3. Community-led design with capability building

Elevate community voice to genuine decision-making authority, supported by resourcing, time, and governance capacity-building because without capability-building, community-led approaches risk tokenism.

## 4. Embed ACCOs in governance and delivery

Position ACCOs as leaders and co-design partners, not just service providers because ACCOs ensure cultural safety and self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

## 5. Address structural determinants of wellbeing

Integrate sustainable housing, poverty reduction, and cost-of-living strategies into family and child wellbeing policy because service integration alone cannot overcome systemic barriers.

These strategic priorities should sit alongside the following implementation principles:

- **Evidence-based alignment:** Integrate with Closing the Gap, Safe and Supported, National Guidelines for Early Childhood Intervention, National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children, and Thriving Kids.
- **Flexible funding models:** Support long-term governance capacity and partnership infrastructure.
- **Measurable outcomes:** Track indicators such as reduced child protection entries, improved developmental milestones, and increased ACCO governance roles.

## Recommendations

4. Prioritise shifting investment from isolated programs to connected systems that enable children and families to thrive. This requires:

- a. Whole-of-life support
- b. Relational integration
- c. Community capability-building
- d. ACCO leadership
- e. Action on structural determinants

## Improving family wellbeing

The proposed focus areas—supporting families at risk of child protection involvement, young parents, and children aged 0–5—are important and broadly align with the needs and priorities we see across our service footprint. These cohorts experience higher vulnerability, service fragmentation, and intergenerational disadvantage, and benefit significantly from prevention and early intervention approaches. However, these focus areas alone are not sufficient. To achieve meaningful reform, we need a broader approach that supports all children and families and invests in true prevention—not just early intervention—to break cycles of disadvantage before they begin. DSS should broaden its scope to reflect the complexity of family needs and ensure reforms deliver meaningful, sustained improvements. Key recommendations include:

- Broaden target groups to include families, or individual parents or carers, taking into account:
  - Poverty and housing instability
  - Mental health challenges and substance use
  - Family violence
  - Disability
  - Kinship networks and sibling carers

- Culturally diverse and inclusive family structures, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family systems, multigenerational households and extended family and community-based caregiving
- Multiple intersecting stressors

These issues often overlap and require trauma-informed, wraparound approaches, rather than narrowly defined categories.

- Flexibility for holistic support: Families often present with one issue but disclose multiple needs once trust is established. Funding models and flexible funding streams should allow time and flexibility for practitioners to work relationally, address underlying issues and coordinate referrals without being constrained by prescriptive eligibility criteria
- Reduce prescriptiveness in key areas: Anecdotal evidence suggests families not known to child protection and not young parents often fall through gaps despite significant need. The new program offers an opportunity to be less restrictive and more inclusive of families historically ineligible for support.
- Address cultural and linguistic diversity: Communities with high cultural and linguistic diversity—including newly arrived families—require tailored supports. However, eligibility should not create inequity for other families with similar needs who do not meet narrow criteria. Guidelines must adopt a needs-based approach rather than status-based eligibility for greater fairness.
- Close gaps in developmental support: Late diagnosis of developmental delays is often linked to rigid eligibility and missed age-stage checks. Universal principles from frameworks such as the National Early Childhood Intervention Framework should inform program design to ensure timely support for all children.
- Invest in place-based services and integrated child & family hubs: Integrated, place-based services—such as the First Steps Count Child and Community Centre in Taree—offer a proven model for supporting families with complex needs. These hubs provide:
  - Co-location with relational practice: Families access multiple services without retelling their story
  - Multidisciplinary teams: Working across early childhood, health, family support, and community engagement
  - Safe, culturally grounded environments: Reducing stigma and increasing trust
  - Natural pathways: Into early learning, health screening, peer connection, and community-led activities

Investment in place-based models and the relational workforce capability to operate them would create a critical platform for early intervention and system integration, particularly in communities where fragmentation has historically undermined outcomes.

Mission Australia also suggests:

- Ensuring state-funded family counselling and support services remain complementary to federal programs to avoid duplication and prevent withdrawal of state funding when DSS enters the space
- Including peer workers and lived experience roles to strengthen engagement
- Linking with Connected Beginnings, Schools as Hubs, Community of Schools and Services (COSS) models, and capital investment programs
- Expanding youth mental health services (e.g., Family Mental Health Support (FMHSS) and Headspace) to include younger age groups (8+), as communities identify this as a gap
- Piloting Community Connector and Navigator roles to improve access and coordination

## Connected, co-located, and integrated services

True integration does not happen simply because services share a building. It emerges from cohesive relationships, aligned structures, trust, and shared goals. Key underlying principles include:

- Investing in the connection, not just the program or a building: Integration depends on resourcing the activities that build connection—relationship development, shared planning, and joint governance.
- Funder engagement matters: Approaches that prioritise trust, flexibility, and shared learning over compliance-driven processes strengthen collaboration and innovation.
- Integration is about relationships, shared purpose, and enabling infrastructure—not co-location.

Proven strategies for effective integration include:

1. **Shared local governance and joint decision-making:** Community-led, cross-agency governance groups create structured mechanisms for setting shared priorities, aligning resources, problem-solving emerging issues and holding joint accountability for family outcomes—not just program outputs.
2. **Dedicated backbone or coordination roles:** Funded roles such as partnership brokers, collective impact facilitators, and community connectors or navigators provide the connective tissue that holds local systems together by ensuring consistent communication, coordinating pathways and reducing duplication across services.
3. **Integrated referral pathways and warm handovers:** Agreed protocols for warm handovers, joint intake processes, and shared follow-ups prevent families from navigating fragmented systems alone. Service navigators embedded in place-based services are highly effective in guiding families through complex pathways.
4. **Multidisciplinary practice teams:** Models such as Team Around the Child and case conferencing bring together practitioners from health, education, early childhood, and family support to plan collaboratively and deliver seamless care—even when services are not co-located.

5. **Relational practice cultures:** Integration is driven by trust. When practitioners share responsibility and respond flexibly, services operate as a coherent ecosystem rather than siloed programs.
6. **Data sharing and collective learning systems:** Shared dashboards, joint learning sessions, and reflective practice cycles create a common understanding of local needs and strengthen collective responsibility for outcomes.
7. **Community-led networks and place-based collaborations:** Active community participation in system design ensures services align with local priorities and lived experience, and foster integration that is culturally grounded and contextually relevant.
8. **Technology-enabled collaboration:** In regional and remote areas, digital access and capability are required to support leveraging technology for virtual case conferencing and governance meetings. This connects local place-based supports with specialist expertise, reduces isolation and improves coordination.

## Responding to community need

Understanding need requires more than demographic data. To ensure funding reflects the true needs of communities, DSS must look beyond postcode-based measures and consider a broader set of indicators including:

- **Hidden disadvantage and social stressors:** Need is not always visible through postcode or property data. Affluent areas can still face financial insecurity and housing stress, domestic and family violence, mental health challenges, parenting pressures and social isolation.
- **Community knowledge and lived experience:** Local communities know what works and where gaps exist. Funding should value mechanisms for community voice (e.g., advisory groups, Elders' councils, youth panels) and evidence of co-design and community-defined priorities.
- **Community leadership and governance:** Support communities to lead design and oversight. Assess the presence of local leaders, ACCOs, and trusted connectors, and capacity for shared governance and service ecosystem stewardship.
- **Cultural safety and identity:** Responses must reflect cultural identity, including First Nations knowledge and leadership, and local languages, protocols, and practices.
- **Service gaps for specific cohorts:** Beyond geography, consider families with CALD backgrounds, and those experiencing disability or neurodiverse needs and trauma, substance use, or mental health challenges.
- **Infrastructure and access barriers:** It is important to account for transport costs, regional access issues, interpreter services, digital inclusion and technology-enabled solutions where local services are scarce.
- **Community-defined priorities:** Local planning efforts (e.g., collective impact initiatives) reveal what families see as most urgent. Funding should respond to these—not just national classifications.

- **Additional considerations:** These include demographic trends and growth areas, service deserts with minimal infrastructure, community-led investment strategies aligned to shared outcomes and genuine engagement, as how questions are asked matters.

## Recommendations

5. Combine quantitative data with qualitative insights from local networks, frontline services, and community consultations to identify hidden stressors.
6. Require community engagement evidence in funding proposals and prioritise initiatives that embed lived experience in design.
7. Invest in leadership development, governance training, and backbone roles to strengthen local decision-making capacity.
8. Mandate cultural safety frameworks and fund culturally responsive service models co-designed with First Nations leaders.
9. Include equity impact assessments in funding criteria to ensure services meet diverse cohort needs.
10. Allocate flexible funding for transport, interpreters, and digital connectivity, especially in regional and remote areas.
11. Align funding with community-endorsed plans and collective impact strategies where they exist.
12. Embed future-proofing criteria (population trends, infrastructure gaps) and require evidence of inclusive engagement processes.

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

To increase the number of ACCOs delivering services to children and families, the grant process must embed flexibility, capability-building, and culturally grounded governance. The key components of this are:

### Dedicated and flexible funding streams

- **Targeted funding pools:** Create specific allocations for ACCOs, prioritising regions with significant Aboriginal populations.
- **Flexible transition timelines:** Allow sufficient time for workforce development and service establishment to strengthen local capacity.
- **Long-term funding certainty:** Offer extended funding cycles to enable ACCOs to plan, grow, and sustain culturally grounded supports.

## Relational and locally grounded commissioning

- Shift from transactional submissions to dialogue-based commissioning that builds trust and relationships.
- Align funding decisions with community-defined priorities, informed by ACCOs, Elders, and local voices—not government assumptions.
- Provide technical assistance and mentoring for grant writing, compliance, and reporting.
- Require processes that demonstrate cultural safety and shared governance.
- Embed Aboriginal leadership in assessment panels and governance structures.
- Ensure decisions reflect cultural knowledge, local context, and Aboriginal-defined priorities for children and families.

## Partnership and transition options

- Enable joint funding models where ACCOs partner with mainstream organisations during transition.
- Develop ACCO-led transition strategies tailored to regional contexts, ensuring readiness before full delivery responsibility.
- Invest in peer support roles to build ACCO capability and confidence—measured as a key outcome.
- Support emerging ACCOs through informal networks, nexus centres, and enabling grants.
- Create integrated service models allowing ACCOs to participate meaningfully without full delivery responsibility.
- Provide independent application assistance and remove unnecessary barriers.
- Respect client choice, acknowledging that families may prefer ACCOs or mainstream NGOs depending on circumstances.

## Culturally appropriate data collection

- Use story-based and participatory methods, such as yarning circles for collective reflection, community-led surveys in plain language and culturally relevant formats and reflective interviews respecting cultural protocols.
- Integrate local indicators co-designed with Elders and community leaders.
- Ensure tools are adaptable to diverse cultural contexts.
- Prioritise voice and choice—families and communities define success and how it is measured.

To achieve better outcomes, program design must go beyond increasing ACCO service delivery and embed principles that reflect local aspirations and deliver meaningful impact. These include:

## Flexibility for locally designed, community-driven models

Communities differ in histories, strengths, and needs. Funding should enable ACCOs and communities to design locally relevant approaches, free from rigid program categories or prescriptive activity lists.

## Workforce development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff

Investment should strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce across both ACCOs and mainstream providers through training and professional development, mentoring opportunities and wellbeing support for Aboriginal staff.

## Strong requirements for cultural safety across all providers

All organisations, including non-ACCOs, must demonstrate culturally safe practice, partnerships with ACCOs, Aboriginal employment strategies and ongoing cultural learning.

## Support for partnerships, not just individual ACCO service delivery

To strengthen the ecosystem around families and prevent duplication, DSS should incentivise genuine collaboration between ACCOs and mainstream providers through funding, governance, and accountability mechanisms:

- **Embed partnership requirements in grant guidelines:** Make collaboration and co-design a criterion for funding eligibility.
- **Performance-based incentives:** Include partnership indicators in reporting frameworks and prioritise organisations that deliver joint initiatives and shared outcomes.
- **Capacity-building support:** Provide training and technical assistance for collaborative practice, cultural safety, and governance capability for both ACCOs and mainstream providers.
- **Integration support:** Fund initiatives that enable ACCOs and other providers to create a seamless system of care, ensuring existing ACCO services complement and strengthen the program rather than duplicate efforts.

# Measuring outcomes

To strengthen our understanding of outcomes and enhance service delivery, Mission Australia recommends focusing on the following priorities.

## Access to common data sources

Minimising data collection for both service providers and service users is critical. This can be achieved by leveraging linked government datasets and common data sources across the service system. Common data sources refer to leveraging existing datasets within the service system rather than repeatedly collecting the same information from families and providers. Linked government datasets can include:

- **Internal matching within DEX:** For example, using Statistical Linkage Keys (SLKs) or similar identifiers to identify clients accessing multiple DEX-funded services. This helps build a richer picture of service pathways without additional data collection.
- **External linkage (where appropriate):** Linking with other government datasets (e.g., health, housing) to understand cross-sector impacts and long-term outcomes. This requires careful consideration of consent, privacy, and governance requirements.

The benefits include:

- Reduced data burden and duplication for providers and families.
- Richer insights into long-term outcomes and cross-sector impacts (e.g., health, housing).
- Improved understanding of service journeys without repetitive requests to vulnerable families.
- Minimising duplication by using common data sources to reduce provider burden and track people along their pathways.
- Identifying journeys: SLKs or similar mechanisms can be used to track clients across DEX services, or other data sources, enabling insights into service pathways and improving integrated, client-centred planning.

This approach strengthens impact measurement and supports a more integrated, client-centred system.

### Real-time reporting and benchmarking

To enhance transparency and continuous improvement:

- **Enable real-time updates:** Through a secure online platform – Grants Portal.
- **Enable strategic release of insights:** Tailored for policymakers, providers, and communities.
- **Combine data with stories:** Balance quantitative metrics with qualitative context.
- **Benchmark across providers:** This includes highlighting best practices and areas for improvement, using interactive dashboards for transparency and standardising measures for consistency and confidence.

### Measuring the quality of relationships

Trusting relationships between practitioners, children, and families are key drivers of positive outcomes. To measure this without adding data burden, existing tools such as the satisfaction SCORE and domains could be enhanced to include measures of trust, cultural safety, responsiveness and support.

### Community development data and evaluation

To effectively measure progress in community development, a tailored and phased Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) strategy is essential. This strategy should capture short- and medium-term outcomes, which are critical precursors to long-term population-level results that often take years to materialise.

We also need innovative ways to assess how well Australian communities are building and sustaining the foundations for effective place-based work. Evaluation should not only demonstrate outcomes and impact but also serve as a tool for ongoing learning and continuous improvement.

The key actions arising from these priorities are:

- Co-design methods to measure and evaluate outcomes achieved by Community Facilitators and the broader community.
- Record Community Strategic Plans in the Grants Portal in a way that is distinct from current DEX Client Profile (CP) individual client data collection and reporting.
- Commit to long-term investment for evaluation across the lifecycle of place-based work, including capability indicators and mapping social capital across communities.
- Gather strong, population-level evidence about long-term changes and model cost avoidance as part of the Measuring What Matters Framework.

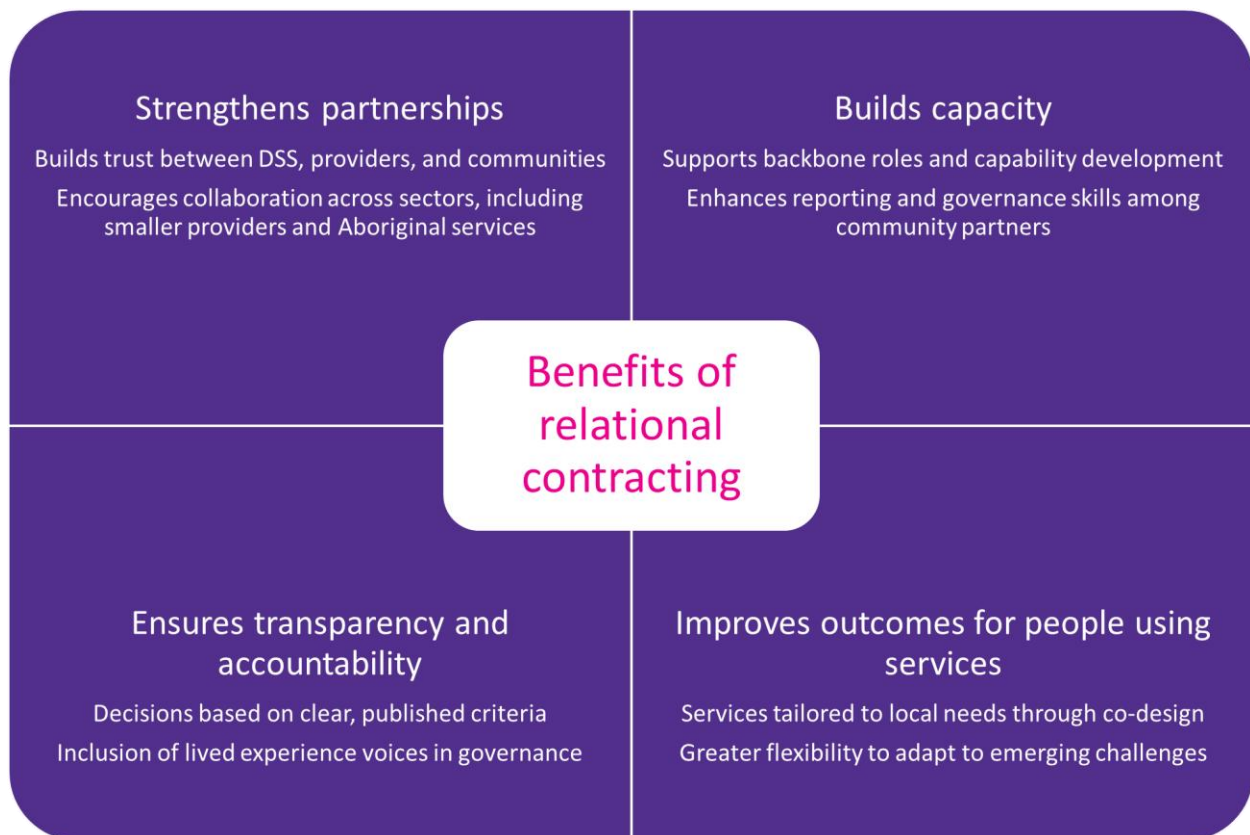
## Recommendations

13. To enhance transparency and continuous improvement:

- a. Enable real-time updates
- b. Enable strategic release of insights
- c. Combine data with stories
- d. Benchmark across providers

## Working together

Traditional transactional contracts often fail to address complex social challenges such as family support, homelessness, and community development. Relational contracting offers a better way forward through the components identified in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Benefits of relational contracting.**

A relational contract is a legal agreement built on shared goals and open communication. It typically has two parts. Part A includes agreed values, guiding principles, and governance arrangements and Part B contains required outcomes, target groups, and delivery timelines. Core principles include:

- Best-for-outcomes decision-making
- Open-book transparency
- No-blame culture
- Embedded lived experience
- Self-determination
- Flexible, adaptive service design

A relational contracting approach moves beyond rigid, compliance-driven models to foster flexibility, trust, and shared accountability. In practice, this means:

- Adaptive responses to changing community needs
- Innovation and continuous improvement in service delivery
- Strong partnerships that build local capability and resilience

- Shared purpose and outcomes guiding decision-making
- Agreed behavioural expectations to underpin trust and transparency
- Collaborative governance structures for joint oversight and problem-solving
- Transparency and information sharing, enabling evidence-based decisions
- Shared risk and flexibility, with mechanisms to adjust as circumstances evolve
- Outcomes-focused performance, rather than output compliance
- System stewardship, recognising the relationship as part of a broader ecosystem

Mission Australia strongly welcomes DSS' commitment to adopt relational contracting—a model that provides greater flexibility for both government and service providers to improve outcomes for people with complex needs. Delivery methods must adapt over time, and success depends on fairness, trust, and genuine partnership. Central to this approach is agreeing how risks and benefits will be shared, fostering equity and collaboration. Enablers of success include:

- Local decision-making and commissioning (including co-commissioning and joint commissioning)
- Strong pre-launch relationships and co-design of services and ways of working
- Joint training for government, providers, and communities in effective partnering practices
- Ongoing learning, evaluation, and improvement for all parties
- Public accountability and oversight, engaging the Department of Finance and ANAO early to ensure transparency and reduce risk

## Recommendations

14. Endorse a Relational Contracting Framework as national policy.
15. Establish a National Program Steering Group for oversight.
16. Allocate funding for readiness assessment and capability building.
17. Commit to transparent decision-making and continuous improvement.

Mission Australia strongly supports the adoption of a relational contracting approach within social service delivery. This model aligns with our mission and values and is essential for achieving sustainable, person-centred outcomes in complex social contexts (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Why relational contracting matters to Mission Australia.**

**Case study: Mission Australia’s experience with relational contracting**

In South Australia, Mission Australia is a member of the Toward Home Alliance ([towardhome.org.au](http://towardhome.org.au)). The Alliance operates under eight key principles that exemplify relational contracting.

**1. Shared purpose and vision**

- All partners, including government, agreed on a common purpose beyond individual organisational goals.
- A distinct vision for the Toward Home Alliance was developed and adopted by every provider.

**2. Joint decision-making**

- Decisions are made collaboratively through consensus, with government representatives actively involved.

- Governance structures include an Alliance Leadership Team (strategic decisions) and an Alliance Management Team (operational decisions).

### 3. Transparency and accountability

- Full transparency in budgets, KPIs, and resource allocation.
- Surpluses are discussed collectively and reinvested based on agreed priorities.

### 4. Flexibility and adaptability

- Ability to reorganise resources and funding mid-contract without lengthy government approval, provided changes align with contract intent.
- KPIs were negotiated after the contract commenced, allowing practical adjustments.

### 5. Equality among partners

- The lead agency does not dominate decision-making; chair roles rotate among organisations.
- Strategic meeting representation is based on purpose, not hierarchy.

### 6. Collaborative problem-solving

- Partners and government work together to address emerging issues (e.g., crisis weather events, service gaps).
- Open dialogue enables solutions without reverting to adversarial contracting norms.

### 7. Commitment to continuous improvement

- Ongoing evaluation and willingness to bring in new partners to strengthen the alliance.
- Annual staff conferences and shared branding reinforce alliance identity and learning.

### 8. Relationship-based governance

- Emphasis on trust, frank conversations, and constructive management of tensions.
- Clear distinction between alliance advocacy and individual organisational lobbying.