

Ms Tracy Creech, Branch Manager,
Family and Adult Supports
Department of Social Services
71 Athllon Drive
Greenway ACT 2900

10th February 2025

**Invitation to co-convene community and sector input into the strategic
evolution of the Communities for Children program**

Dear Ms Creech,

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to the Review and the Discussion Paper on the Department of Social Services' Children, Youth and Families programs.

This submission draws on a productive discussion on 21 January between yourself, Mr Hardcastle, Ms Wettenhall and representatives from the broad group which are signatories. We appreciated the opportunity to discuss these points with you and would be pleased to resume the conversation when convenient. As mentioned then, we also plan to discuss our vision of the possibilities for the future of the Communities for Children program with the Minister for Social Services.

About this submission

This submission outlines how we believe that the Department of Social Services (DSS) can build on the current success of the Communities for Children program to boost its effectiveness in achieving outcomes for children, their families and their communities. It is predicated on a view that children prosper best, and cycles of disadvantage can be broken, when they are surrounded by a strong, stable, inclusive and self-determining community.

This letter is submitted on behalf of a diverse coalition united by a shared commitment to driving long-term, sustainable change in systems that impact people and their communities. Our members represent thousands of individuals and agencies, including community partnerships like Logan Together, organisational alliances such as The Possibility Partnership and the Strengthening Communities Alliance, service providers, philanthropists, and more. Drawing on extensive experience living and working in communities supported by the Department's funding—often as service providers under the Families and Children Activity—we offer this submission informed by our deep, collective expertise.

With this submission, we invite DSS to collaborate with us, approaching the next iteration of Communities for Children in partnership with community. This invitation is elaborated in section 2 below. Section 1 offers the coalition's view on the possibility of change.

In this submission, we respond to the Discussion Paper primarily as it relates to **Communities for Children**. However, the implications of our submission are much broader than this specific initiative – extending both to other programs within the Families and Children Activity, and to the Government's policy objectives for place-based initiatives and

for joined-up ways of working with governments, community members, First Nations people and communities, people with lived experience of disadvantage and the community services sector.

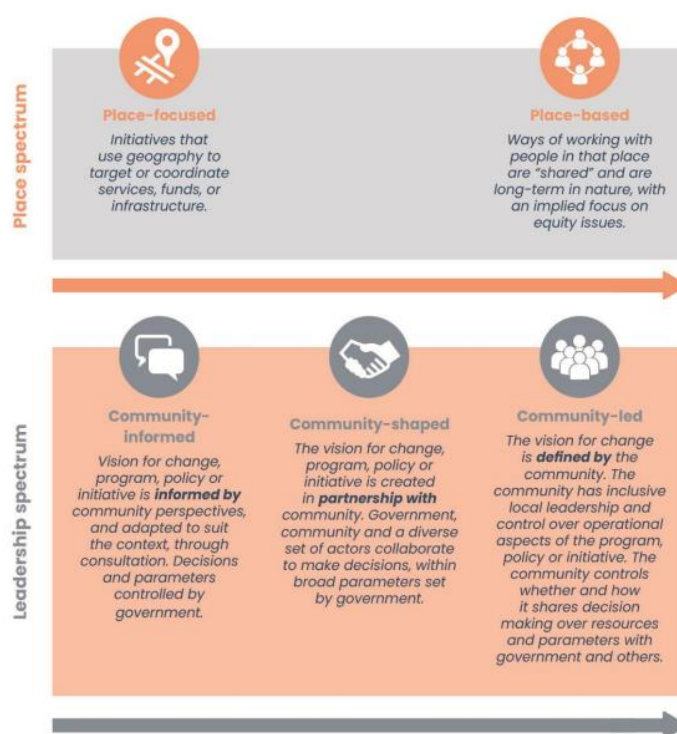
SECTION 1 – THE POSSIBILITY FOR THE NEXT ITERATION OF COMMUNITIES FOR CHILDREN

We recommend strengthened government policy and investment focus in the following four areas of Communities for Children.

1. Evolve the Communities for Children program to support truly place-based and community-led initiatives.

The current Communities for Children (CfC) program guidelines see CfC sites as being place-focused and community-informed or community-shaped but led by a funded provider (as Facilitating Partner) – usually a large community services organisation.

In our experience, community leadership is the key to achieving sustainability and to delivering better outcomes for children, their families and their broader community. Our vision is for all CfC sites to work toward becoming truly place-based and community-led. The difference between the various states is shown in the below diagram.¹



Source: Adapted from Collaboration for Impact, 2022

It is encouraging to see, in the discussion paper, DSS now recognising that the CfC program has evolved and matured in many of its sites, with emerging community leadership in some sites, and community engagement levels significantly advanced in others.

We see this review as an opportunity for formal government endorsement of the evolution underway and encouragement of its growth and spread. DSS can drive this shift

¹ <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/position-statements/strengthening-communities>

through building on CfC communities' and sector organisations' goodwill and willingness to contribute.

We recommend that the CfC guidelines explicitly recognise place-focused and community-informed or community-shaped practices, and encourage communities that are ready and willing to progress toward becoming meaningfully place-based and community-led.

The CfC program guidelines should specifically promote the centrality of place and state that, while each CfC will evolve differently to reflect its local context, the aspirational end goal of all sites is community participation and leadership. This will look different in different sites:

- Where local conditions are already favourable, it should adopt governance structures and practices which empower community leadership and self-determination, including through communities setting the priorities and adapting initiatives to suit their places.
- Where readiness is not well advanced, CfC sites should adopt place-focused approaches to develop community confidence to engage.

In both cases, governance mechanisms and practices must be inclusive of the active participation of First Nations people and of people with lived experience of disadvantage. Our recommendation aligns with *Recommended Action 1: Embed community-based decision-making at every stage of funding development and allocation* in the Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families Final Report².

The power-sharing involved in community leadership necessitates a new approach to the requirements of government as a funder. As part of that, DSS will need to specify its minimum requirements for aspects including governance and reporting arrangements.

DSS' agreement on changed arrangements for the Logan CfC site is a positive precedent for this and demonstrates that government-as-funder agreements can exist within a community leadership context.

To support this shift, we recommend that the CfC program guidelines give communities the power and flexibility to respond to their place context.

Further, to give greater scope for innovation, these models should also fund activities which are not yet evidence-based. We are pleased that the Department has signalled its understanding of the need to balance practice which already has an evidence base against emergent and innovative practice. Recognising potential risks around greater flexibility, and to ensure it is used to deliver improvements, local committees could choose (for example) to fund services which are either:

- evidence-based;
- evidence-informed with in-built monitoring and evaluation activities to contribute to innovation and back to the evidence base; or
- related to innovation and learning practices (see #4).

² <https://www.snaicc.org.au/resources/stronger-accos-stronger-families-report/>

We recommend that future iterations of CfC commit to:

- a) Funding work in communities for ten years, because stable and predictable funding is essential to the development of collaboration within communities and the delivery of sustained results.
- b) Flexible funding models that allow innovation and evolution over time, rather than a rigid approach that allocates funding to programs as identified at the start of the funding period. Developing an equitable and streamlined approval or shared decision-making process that maximises community ownership, reduces bureaucracy and supports the Community-Controlled sector, including Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations.

The flexibility recommended to be built into the CfC program guidelines must be seen through the lens of the power sharing arrangements inherent in community leadership. The community must be able to fund what it knows will work best in that place.

2. Explicitly validate and promote how Communities for Children sites can drive service system integration alongside other funded government (and other) initiatives.

At the local implementation level, CfC governance structures (such as Community Committees) could act as platforms for service system integration across different funded programs in the child and family space. Many CfC sites operate in this way already and others have the potential to adopt this function.

Numerous Federal Government entities, State and Territory Government agencies, local councils, philanthropy and others are currently funding a multitude of disparate children and family programs and initiatives, which differ across locations. These are not formally coordinated, placing the onus on local communities and service providers to do this informally and without adequate funding.

In particular, where CfC sites co-exist with other child-focused place-based initiatives, such as Connected Beginnings, Empowered Communities or some SPSP sites, the local CfC could support service system integration and resource alignment across programs and initiatives in those places. This currently works in numerous CfC places, whilst other CfC sites can be supported in their maturity journey to expand their confidence in undertaking this function.

This role for CfC in integrating other existing mechanisms and programs naturally extends to State and Territory Government funded programs and services. Again, many CfCs currently work well with State/Territory Government personnel at least at the local level, and many also at regional and State levels.

Ultimately, we see CfC as an ideal mechanism for enabling and resourcing coordination, joined-up service delivery and integration to reduce duplication, streamline resources, leverage investment and optimize impact.

We recommend that future iterations of CfC commit to:

- a) Explicitly naming and encouraging CfC sites' function of locally connecting children and families programs and initiatives, to ensure better outcomes and value for money in communities across Australia.

- b) Highlighting the value of integration between Federal and State/Territory Government funded programs and services. This could look like DSS or other Federal Government bodies liaising with State/Territory Government leaders (i.e. top down) to encourage formal agreements under which agencies would work with CfC community committees. Or this could be driven more organically at the community-level (i.e. bottom-up).

3. Enable Communities for Children as an innovation engine that supports and informs community-led change efforts across Australia.

There is a growing recognition of the potential value of place-based and community-led approaches in enabling better outcomes for people and families – particularly in cases where mainstream systems are struggling to respond to their complex and intersecting needs. We must also recognise that whilst various place-based efforts have been delivering on the ground for many years now, the evidence base and body of knowledge around the practices and approaches that deliver results is still forming. We need to shift the power imbalances that exist in traditional evaluation approaches and incorporate and value multiple sources of knowing. These multiple sources of knowing include information, insights and wisdom from First Nations people that extend beyond data and encompass truths, journeys and experiences in community, and within systems that are transforming. We believe that Communities for Children offers an opportunity to invest in developing the body of knowledge required to support and proliferate more successful place-based initiatives and programs in different contexts across Australia.

Such an approach would require that the right conditions for innovation are set, through the way that CfC is implemented. Over-investing in a known set of Evidence-Based Programs may both be inappropriate for particular places, as well as stifling of innovation where new approaches may yield better results. At the same time, we risk losing lessons learnt from innovation, unless we find and embed ways to measure, learn and share learnings from our efforts. Implemented in the right way, we envision CfC becoming an anchor of learning networks across services and networks in local communities, to enhance efficiency and knowledge sharing.

We recommend that future iterations of CfC commit to:

- a) Embedding flexibility in both funding models and approaches, that enables thoughtful innovation and place-appropriate approaches.
- b) Encouraging ongoing connection points between CfC sites that facilitate information sharing.
- c) Building in learning processes, tools and continual feedback loops that allow the scaling and proliferation of learnings across multiple parts of the system.

4. Harness the strategic potential of Communities for Children in enabling the Government's strategic policy directions around place and early years at a national level.

This review provides a significant opportunity to recast the role that CfC sites play in informing and leading change in the systems that enable place-based and community-led responses to local challenges. In recent years, we have seen increasing numbers of strategies and reviews that indicate an emerging vision for the way that different

commissioning, funding, governance and leadership approaches, alongside an evolving community sector can enable more people and families to flourish. See, for example:

- Priority Reforms in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap
- Early Years Strategy
- the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children (IDAC)
- the Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families Final Report
- Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment (PLACE)
- Targeting Entrenched Disadvantage (TED)
- Whole of Government Framework to Support Community Change
- NfP Sector Development Blueprint
- Strong and Resilient Communities Activity

Delivering successfully on such initiatives, strategies and partnerships will require different structures, approaches and ways of working to evolve at both local and global systemic levels. We believe that CfC is well-placed, if appropriately funded, to be one of the platforms that can help to evolve, integrate and connect this enabling infrastructure and context.

Across Australia, there will be many different initiatives that will be well-placed to contribute to this emerging body of work, each with its own drivers and areas of focus – for example Stronger Places Stronger People, Empowered Communities, Justice Reinvest, Connected Beginnings, etc. Whilst each instance will be unique, most structures will share common underlying bases of place centrality, community leadership, power sharing, relational support and self-determination. Each will learn through experience in ways that could make a valuable contribution to sustainable and systemic change, if harnessed correctly.

CfC sites' work in improving coordination and outcomes within communities (see recommendation #2) should be more than filling local gaps and integrating local child and family service systems. They are uniquely placed to call out and address systemic issues and challenges which have broader drivers and solutions.

This requires acknowledging that systemic, community-level changes require investment and time to embed in place, and necessitates a commensurate shift from within government and services. It requires a "meeting in middle" of policy and governance structures and processes with grounded practice and broader rule-setting contexts, to shape and connect how policy is developed and implemented.

We recommend that future iterations of CfC commit to:

- a) Creating a new mechanism to aggregate learnings from individual CfC sites to drive meta-level systems change.
- b) Exploring how DSS or PLACE could convene (or commission) a cross-sectoral CfC learning exchange to:
 - support confidence and capability building for systems thinking in CfC community committees and backbone teams;

- share and aggregate learning on systems issues between the different CfC sites; and
- determine policy and investment changes necessary to solve those issues.

This learning exchange could also periodically join with other funded place-based community-led initiatives (as listed above).

SECTION 2 - INVITATION TO CO-CONVENE COMMUNITY AND SECTOR INPUT IN THE DESIGN OF THE CFC PROGRAM

Our vision is that Communities for Children can become truly community-led – not just in terms of what activities should be undertaken in a site, but also in how it is shaped and delivered in place.

What we propose is a more radical approach than is tested in the consultation paper, driven by the need to keep up with a quickly evolving landscape, and a current policy context that we feel both supports this work and may benefit strongly from it. We believe the time is right to take this opportunity to transform Communities for Children, to accept the challenge to respond to so much of what government is seeking to achieve.

We also recognise that DSS must meet a reform timeframe to ensure that new funding agreements are in place from July 2026. We propose that government engage in a phased and managed process.

5. To meet the Department's publicly articulated timeframes, we propose DSS continue on the current track of incremental reform. Our coalition is ready and willing to work alongside you to identify which of our recommendations in Section 1 are achievable and desirable within this period.
 - At the same time, we propose that a small number of CfC sites are identified to undertake intensive co-design work with community, funders, government, the sector and others to explore and shape how CfC can evolve to deliver on all of the recommendations.

We acknowledge that codesign processes may seem slow and onerous from a government point of view. However, we also believe that the way in which government evolves Communities for Children is equally as important as the specific changes it makes. We believe that a codesign process is supportive of the underpinning ethos of the work, and will ensure deeper and wider consensus on community outcomes, create opportunities to optimise resourcing and will take advantage of synergies across programs. Ultimately, we believe this approach will deliver better outcomes, with less cost overall.

Further, what we learn from conducting this co-design will not only drive better outcomes and more efficiency in those specific places, but will also offer models, tools and best practices to inform how other sites might also move in similar directions. We can already embed considerations in the 2026 funding agreements that will pave the way for the future we're working towards.

Again, we recognise that this work is not in isolation – it will be important to consider, for example, how this work sits alongside the innovation zones suggested by the Investment

Dialogue for Australia's Children to test and learn whilst creating impact. Whether connected, or run in parallel, such a process would help us to understand the replicable elements of successful approaches, as well as those which are not transferrable. This may enable some minimum standards to be articulated, for example, governance, reporting and activity requirements. We know that it is possible for the program to have different expression of these in different locations as the department has already shown flexibility in this space.

What we are proposing could be a game-changer that builds off existing funding and drives additional investment.

We offer a unique opportunity to support government to achieve this, because we bring together a significant number of organisations of all types and at all scales who are already engaging with each other in this way and are eager to do so with government.

We are ready to work with the government to design this new way forward, and would be pleased to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss this. Please do not hesitate to contact Michelle Lucas (michelle.lucas@griffith.edu.au) for more information or to arrange a meeting.

Yours sincerely,

Michelle Lucas
Executive Director, Logan
Together

Adam Jay
Director, TPP

Marion Bennett
On behalf of SCAA



See following page for full list of contributing organisations.

An invitation to co-convene community and sector input into the strategic evolution of the Communities for Children program

This submission has been contributed to and is supported by:



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