



Brotherhood of St. Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

A new approach to programs for families and children

Brotherhood of St. Laurence

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The Brotherhood of St. Laurence and support for children and families

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is a social justice organisation working towards an Australia free of poverty. Our purpose is to advance a fair Australia through our leadership on policy reform, our partnerships with communities and the quality of our services. Our approach is informed directly by people experiencing disadvantage and uses evidence drawn from our research, together with insights from our programs and services, to develop practical solutions that work.

BSL has been working alongside families and children in their communities for the past nine decades. We believe every child has the right to the best start in life. We work to empower children and their families to live the life they value, now and into the future. Enabling every child to thrive in early childhood is central to advancing an Australia free of poverty. Each year, BSL directly supports over 35,000 children (and their families) through a range of programs. Over 99 per cent of families in our programs report having built knowledge and skills to support their children to thrive through participation in the program.¹

For the past 25 years, we have held the HIPPY (Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters) licence for Australia. HIPPY is a program that is now delivered in 100 communities

¹ BSL Impact Framework data repository, 2025

nationwide and reaches over 5,000 families each year. Attending HIPYPY has improved both parent-level outcomes (e.g. confidence and engagement with their child's learning) and child-level outcomes (e.g. closing the gap created by poverty on school readiness).²

Within the broader landscape of early years reform, BSL is demonstrating an approach to supporting children and families through our Early Years Integrated Approach, currently being delivered in two communities, with plans to extend to others. This approach intentionally brings together critical components of the early childhood development system – Early Childhood Education and Care, Home Learning, Maternal Child Health, Early Supports for Children with Developmental Concerns, and Parent Coaching to create an integrated ecosystem of supports in local communities. In all of our work, BSL is invested in advancing systems change that will create an Australia in which all children and families can thrive. We have been actively involved in shaping thinking on commissioning reform, including recommendations to trial relational contracting.

In the following sections, we respond to the discussion questions posed by the department. We would welcome further engagement on any of the topics raised.

1 Vision and Outcomes

Does the new vision reflect what we all want for children and families?

BSL broadly supports the vision, however, given the critical importance of the community's role in supporting thriving children and families, 'community' needs to be reflected in the vision.

This would align with the National Early Years Strategy, which explicitly articulates the vision of children and families being 'supported by strong communities' and the outcome, 'Communities are strong and inclusive places for children and their parents or caregivers to live, grow, play and connect.'³ It would also reflect the importance of community throughout the department's previous work, including through the 'whole-of community approach' taken in the Communities for Children Facilitating Partners program.

Are the two main outcomes what we should be working towards for children and families? Why/why not?

BSL broadly supports the outcomes, but would suggest the following changes:

- Include the importance of a strong and engaged community as a key driver of child and family outcomes. This could be done either through a third outcome or reflected in a broadened framing of Outcome 1.
- Strengthen the recognition of parental wellbeing in Outcome 1. This should extend beyond 'empowerment' to raise healthy children and help recognise the importance of parental

² See list of relevant HIPYPY evaluations in response to questions on program structure

³ <https://www.dss.gov.au/system/files/resources/early-years-strategy-2024-2034.pdf>

wellbeing – including physical and mental health, financial wellbeing and employment opportunities – as a necessary precondition for raising healthy children. The evidence is clear that positive social connections, and social and economic inclusion, are fundamental to whole-of-family wellbeing and positive trajectories and opportunities for children.⁴ For example, many child and family programs generate and support pathways to employment, which increase parents' confidence, self-efficacy and financial wellbeing. This is a key mechanism through which these programs achieve their child-level outcomes and should be captured in the program outcomes.

2 Program structure

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

We welcome the intention of streamlining, simplification, integration and flexibility through the design of this single national program. BSL delivers a range of programs including the Early Years Integrated Approach and, within this, the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), which meet the outcomes of this single national program and which would benefit from this new approach.

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

BSL's services would fit across these proposed streams. Our Early Years Integrated Approach (EYIA) would respond to Stream 2, and potentially Stream 3 when working with families with more complex needs. Within this, the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) could be considered a Stream 2 program as would BSL's Enhanced Early Supports program.

BSL welcomes the proportionate universalism demonstrated by the three-stream approach. However, we encourage the department to realise the full potential of proportionate universalism by doing more than simply funding three streams of work. Through decades of work with children and families, BSL has built a deep understanding of the need for program design and delivery that centres their needs and makes system navigation easier. We recommend:

- connecting Families and Children Activity services to early childhood education and care and child and family health services, as universal front doors to a range of supports
- facilitating streamlined pathways for children and families to the supports they require (which may straddle multiple streams), including more intensive supports where required
- ensuring that services are accessible to families who experience disadvantage and typically face greater barriers to access

⁴ See, for example:

https://mcri.figshare.com/articles/report/Core_Care_Conditions_for_Children_and_Families_Implications_for_policy_and_practice/26065597

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- ensuring that more intensive services are available everywhere they are needed, and not just through place-based programs in communities facing the highest levels of disadvantage. Given that up to 40 per cent of children experiencing disadvantage live outside low-income areas,⁵ investing in a small number of place-based responses – while important – will not meet this need.

About the Early Years Integrated Approach (EYIA): BSL is demonstrating an integrated early years approach, designed in collaboration with local communities, to better connect families experiencing disadvantage, who have children from birth to school age, to the support they need for a strong start in life.

Every child needs the right support to thrive. However, Australia's early years system is complex, fragmented and hard to navigate. The families who need support the most are often the ones who face the greatest barriers to access. Barriers can include long waitlists, unclear referral pathways, culturally unsafe services, non-inclusive environments and service gaps. These are compounded by the challenges of poverty: financial challenges, insecure housing, family stress and health issues. The EYIA provides the scaffolding to enable services to work together with the child and family to access what they need for a good start in life. Integrated approaches amplify the success of other investments in early years services by helping those investments reach and support the families who need them the most.

The central feature of BSL's EYIA model is its integration of early years services and supports within the local communities in which it operates – this includes early childhood education and care, maternal and child health, family supports, early supports for children with disability or developmental delay, and early childhood development programs such as HIPPI. BSL supports this integration through delivering the 'glue'. The 'glue' refers to the intentional integration roles, processes and systems that connect early years services, engage with communities and outreach to families. Enabled by BSL in line with the National Child and Family Hubs Network definition, the 'glue' transforms co-location into genuine collaboration.

Two key roles in BSL's EYIA deliver the 'glue': family coaches and community connectors. Family coaches provide individualised coaching to parents, act as a navigator for families and link them with supports through warm referrals. Community connectors foster collaboration between community networks, families, local leaders and service providers to enhance local engagement and participation. They also build capability across the workforce, strengthen capacity of local services and spaces for inclusion, and share lessons. BSL is currently delivered demonstration sites in two communities in selected outer suburbs of Melbourne, with plans to extend to other communities. These communities have been identified through data analysis across a range of measures linked with disadvantage.

The EYIA delivers on the intention of Stream 2 in that it supports early intervention and prevention by helping to promote access to – and inclusion in – early years programs for families experiencing

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/jul/13/up-to-40-per-cent-of-australia-disadvantaged-children-live-outside-low-income-areas-study-finds>

disadvantage. There is strong evidence that integrated approaches can boost participation in a range of early childhood services for these families, improve child development outcomes and strengthen parental engagement. They can also deliver significant returns on investment of up to \$3.50 for every \$1 invested.⁶

The integration and ‘glue’ delivered through the EYIA can function as the enabling infrastructure that maximises the impact of a range of child and family services in community and ensures they reach the families who need them the most.

About HIPPY: The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) is a two-year, home-based early learning and parenting program. HIPPY is voluntary and free for families, and includes activity packs, storybooks and other learning resources. It is designed to be integrated into daily life, with families spending around 10–15 minutes a day doing play-based educational activities together.

In its support for both parents and children, HIPPY contributes to both of the outcomes proposed for a single national program and contributes to Stream 2 as an evidence-based early intervention. There is now a significant, established national and international evidence base of HIPPY’s positive effect on children’s home learning environments, improving indicators of early literacy, and strengthening the parent–child relationship and parents’ community connectedness.⁷ The discussion paper notes that reforms to the Family and Children Activities will ‘focus on practical activities that give parents and caregivers the tools, knowledge and confidence to raise healthy, resilient children’ – this accords with both the intent, approach and outcomes of the HIPPY program. The HIPPY program is a critical component of the Early Years Integrated Approach.

About the Enhanced Early Supports program: Over the past two years, BSL has been demonstrating an Enhanced Early Supports program that delivers targeted, family-centred early intervention for

⁶ Deloitte 2024, [Community Hubs Australia: Social return on investment evaluation of the National Community Hubs Program, 2023](https://www.communityhubs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Full-report-2023-SROI-National-Community-Hubs-Program.pdf). <https://www.communityhubs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Full-report-2023-SROI-National-Community-Hubs-Program.pdf>

⁷ See, for example: ACIL Allen Consulting 2018, *Evaluation of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters*, report prepared for the Department of Social Services, Canberra.

Barnett, T, Roost, FD & McEachran, J 2012, [Evaluating the effectiveness of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters \(HIPPY\)](https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/fm91c_0.pdf), *Family Matters*, no 90, pp 27–37.

https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/fm91c_0.pdf

Connolly, J & Mallett, S 2020, *Changing children’s trajectories: results of the HIPPY longitudinal study*, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

Gilley, T 2003, *Early days much promise: an evaluation of the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) in Australia*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

Goldstein, K 2017, *Five decades of HIPPY research: a preliminary global meta-analysis and review of significant outcomes*, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Liddell, M, Barnett, T, Roost, FD & McEachran, J 2011, *Investing in our future: an evaluation of the national rollout of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) final report*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

Parenting Research Centre 2021, *HIPPY Age 3 Developmental Evaluation*. Melbourne, Australia.

children aged 0–6 with developmental concerns who are not accessing the NDIS. Using a Lead Practitioner model, the program provides up to 20 hours of coaching and capacity building in home and community settings, helping parents identify goals, embed practical strategies in daily routines, and connect with mainstream and foundational supports. Implemented across Melbourne’s west, the pilot reached over 300 families – almost half from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – and demonstrated significant improvements in child development, parental confidence and family wellbeing.

By reducing reliance on clinical settings and long NDIS wait times, Enhanced Early Supports offered timely, inclusive support and built an evidence base for the national Thriving Kids initiative as a cost-effective model for foundational supports. It is also an example of a Stream 2 Prevention and Early Intervention program that can ‘support children and young people’s development and wellbeing’. Early intervention through simple strategies, such as those built in the Enhanced Early Supports program, can alter children’s developmental trajectory and prevent challenges down the track. Only 22 per cent of families who accessed the program in its pilot phase went on to access the NDIS – a significant reduction in the expected rate – and most exited the program before using the full 20 hours on offer, because their goals had been met. This program is also a key component of the Early Years Integrated Approach.

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

The streams reflect some of what children and families need, however, they do not reflect the full breadth. The streams focus on supporting service delivery, but do not include any of the accompanying supports or enabling functions which are essential for services to be effective. The components that we have identified as particularly critical for children and families are:

- **Community strengthening** is a critical element of support for children and families that is missing from the current description of the streams. This includes support for communities to play a role in children’s development (e.g. community capacity building, infrastructure such as community spaces) as well as the resources to enable community governance and coordination (e.g. often referred to as the ‘backbone’ in place-based initiatives, and the ‘glue’ of local service integration). These supports should be explicitly listed so they are not overlooked. For example, in their report on a new funding model for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) integrated early years services, SNAICC outlines that funding should explicitly and systematically provision for backbone support.⁸ To deliver on this, community strengthening could form its own fourth stream, be explicitly listed under Stream 1, or be explicitly listed across all four streams (i.e. recognising the importance of community strengthening in national universal programs, early intervention and intensive supports).
- Relatedly, **integration, coordination and systems and service navigation** are not explicitly articulated in the streams. How will families navigate to the supports they need, for example

⁸ <https://www.snaicc.org.au/resources/funding-model-options-for-acco-integrated-early-years-services-final-report>

while moving between streams from ‘early intervention’ to ‘intensive’ supports? These integration functions require dedicated resourcing as without them, participants often do not connect with the right services at the right time, and the outcomes of significant program investments are not fully realised. Explicitly acknowledging these functions under a stream will ensure they are not overlooked.

- **Capacity building** (e.g. for small community-led organisations and ACCOs) will likely need to be funded through this program, to realise the priority of greater ACCO delivery and responsiveness to community needs. Therefore, we recommend it is reflected under a stream.

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

Other changes needed to the program to support our organisation to meet the needs of community into the future are improvements in funding adequacy and indexation. Under the current HIPPY contract, for example, funding is not sufficient to cover the entire cost of the program. Funding deficits are being borne by some HIPPY providers and many providers are expressing concern that the funding allocation does not keep up with the rising costs of service delivery. Lack of indexation has resulted in ever-growing deficits (both at site and national office level). It has led to sites struggling with attraction and retention, and reduced ability for the national office to provide supports such as curriculum and promotional resources, contracting technical expertise (e.g. website updates), professional development activities and national gatherings.

We recommend that, in line with a more relational approach, the department considers appropriate funding indexation and a commitment to the Pay What It Takes⁹ principles to cover the true cost of quality service delivery – as outlined in the Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint.¹⁰ This should include funding to cover research, evaluation and monitoring – something that has historically been excluded from service delivery contracts from the department. Inclusion of funds for these activities will enable continued development of a robust evidence base, innovation and ongoing learning and improvement in program delivery and system design.

3 Prioritising investment

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

BSL supports these priorities.

⁹ <https://paywhatittakes.com.au/>

¹⁰ <https://www.dss.gov.au/panels-and-other-groups/resource/not-profit-sector-development-blueprint>

Are there any other priorities or issues you think the department should be focussing on?

As above, we recommend the department also prioritises supporting community-level governance and coordination, partnership infrastructure and the ‘glue’ of integration as critical components. Without these, the investment may not reach the people who need it most, and programs may continue to be delivered in siloes without the connection and continuity of support, and local tailoring, that evidence shows is crucial to them achieving the intended outcomes.

4 Improving family wellbeing

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?

The proposed focus area 2 of ‘prevention and early intervention support for children aged 0–5 years’ matches the needs and priorities of the people we support in our services. This broad focus area is important (in addition to the more specific flags, like ‘at risk of child protection involvement’) so that children receive support early, before more concerning risk flags emerge. It also acknowledges that risks and vulnerabilities occur at key life-course transitions, and that risks can be dynamic and co-occurring.

Are there other groups in your community, or different approaches, that you think the department should consider to better support family wellbeing?

Investing in support for the home learning environment and strengthening parents’ confidence as first and ongoing teachers are critical components of prevention and early intervention to support family wellbeing and will be an important focus for the new national program. This is because improving the quality of the home learning environment has been shown to be one of the most effective ways of closing the gap in school readiness created by poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage.¹¹ There is a significant body of international evidence that shows the quality of the home learning environment is a key predictor of a child’s future success,¹² and can be improved by teaching parents specific activities and ways of communicating to support their child’s early

¹¹ Melhuish, EC, Phan, MB, Sylva, K, Sammons, P, Siraj-Blatchford, I & Taggart, B 2008. Effects of the home learning environment and preschool center experience upon literacy and numeracy development in early primary school, *Journal of Social Issues*, vol 64, no 1, pp 95–114. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.00550.x>

¹² Taggart, B, Sylva, K, Melhuish, E, Sammons, P & Siraj, I 2015, *Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+)*, Department of Education, London. Retrieved from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf

language development.¹³ The evidence also shows that a good quality home learning environment can moderate the impacts of socioeconomic background on cognitive skills and socio-emotional difficulties¹⁴ and protect against the effects of disadvantage even into the teenage years.¹⁵ As such, support for home learning is an essential tool to deploy in efforts to break entrenched cycles of disadvantage, as this single national program intends to do.

Programs like HIPPY, which are focused on supporting the home learning environment, are supported by a substantial evidence base in terms of their effectiveness in strengthening the parent–child relationship, parental confidence and connection to community.¹⁶ Communities say HIPPY works due to its flexibility, strengths-based approach (i.e. focusing on building parent’s confidence in their role as their children’s first teachers, rather than ‘fixing’ their deficits), and the way it helps to build peer networks between parents in the local community.

There is a well-documented increase in financial stress for families during early child raising,¹⁷ and programs should also recognise the importance of social and economic inclusion during this stage of life. For example, in addition to its child development outcomes, HIPPY also has strong workforce participation outcomes for parents through the tutor employment pathway.¹⁸ Since 2020, HIPPY has employed 1,138 tutors. Of these tutors, 26 per cent had never been in paid work before. They remain employed for the two-year program, and 43 per cent secure ongoing employment after the program. By comparison, Australia’s national employment services system, Workforce Australia, achieves fewer than 15 per cent sustained 26-week employment outcomes.¹⁹ Research demonstrates HIPPY’s role as an effective transitional labour market that bridges the gap between full-time caregiving and future employment/study, developing tutors’ human capital, social capital and psychological capital.²⁰

¹³ Hillman, J & Williams, T 2015, *Early years education and childcare: lessons from evidence and future priorities*, Nuffield Foundation, London.

¹⁴ Hartas, D 2011, Families’ social backgrounds matter: socio-economic factors, home learning and young children’s language, literacy and social outcomes, *British Educational Research Journal*, vol 37, no 6, pp 893–914. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.506945>

¹⁵ Sylva, K, Melhuish, E, Sammons, P, Siraj-Blatchford, I, Taggart, B, Toth, WK, Welcomme, W 2012, *Final report from the key stage 3 phase: influences on students’ development from age 11–14*, Department of Education, London.

¹⁶ See, for example: ACIL Allen Consulting 2018; Barnett, T, Roost, FD & McEachran, J 2012; Connolly, J & Mallett, S 2020; Gilley, T 2003; Goldstein, K 2017; Liddell, M, Barnett, T, Roost, FD & McEachran, J 2011. Full citations listed above.

¹⁷ See, for example: <https://www.mcri.edu.au/news/insights-and-opinions/low-income-family-financial-support>

¹⁸ HIPPY Australia National Office 2025; Beyond the Data.

¹⁹ <https://www.dewr.gov.au/about-department/resources/employment-and-workplace-relations-2024-25-portfolio-budget-statements>

²⁰ Connolly, J & Chaitowitz, R 2020, *Transforming employment aspirations: results of the HIPPY Tutors Study*. Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

In addition to direct service provision, the new national program should also fund enabling mechanisms for place-based coordination, integration and local governance. This could be achieved by providing funding specifically focused on integration and coordination, or providing service providers sufficient funding to perform these roles in addition to direct service provision. Without explicitly supporting mechanisms for integration, the program risks perpetuating a fragmented, siloed and hard-to-navigate system.

5 Connected, co-located, and integrated services

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

Co-location of services does not guarantee meaningful collaboration: coordination and connection requires intentionality and sufficient resourcing, such as:

- **Dedicated connector roles and 'glue' funding:** Funding needs to cover relational components of service delivery, with staff resourced to take the time to listen to community need and collaborate with other services meaningfully, including, where necessary, building the capacity of local service providers to effectively integrate.
- **Service models that intentionally cover support pathways and continuity of care:** Providers should be expected to support participants to access further services where required, including through 'warm referrals' or by developing support pathways.
- **Flexibility:** Flexibility in service delivery is an important part of enabling connection as it allows service providers to adapt their services to complement other aspects of the local support system. Relational contracting and the right outcome measurement (e.g. metrics around collaboration and integration) can support this.
- **Leadership and staffing:** Leaders and frontline staff are the people who make connection happen – and recruiting for strong relational skillsets is important. HIPPY Tennant Creek is an excellent example of this. The coordinator's approach of 'journeying with families' has led to exceptional growth in participation. For example, the coordinator ensures the HIPPY program is adapted to local needs and priorities such as by facilitating access to transport and food; identifying and resolving barriers like supporting families to obtain identification documents so they can access employment opportunities; and creating a safe environment in which families can ask for what they need – like cooking for families during sorry business when shops are closed, or supporting medical appointments.
- **Non-competitive service environments:** Families benefit most when services support one another rather than compete, duplicate or fragment efforts. Creating environments where organisations collaborate, share resources and learn from one another builds stronger community outcomes and greater impact from government investment. Mechanisms such as communities of practice, relational contracting, joint ventures, partnerships, consortia and local community governance groups can all promote collaboration over competition.

- **Nationally connected service models and communities of practice:** Supporting the sharing of lessons, practice and networks at a national or regional level strengthens integration at a systems level (not just local area level integration) and improves practice. This is achieved in HIPPY through the role of the HIPPY Australia National Office. Some benefits of this structure include: sharing practice, lessons, frameworks, tools and training materials; facilitating connections between local HIPPY providers; and enabling innovation and collective advocacy. For example, the HIPPY Australia National Office was able to support HIPPY providers who support Yazidi communities in Toowoomba, Ashmont and Nambucca to connect and share lessons on strengthening support pathways for their cohort. Defence families relocating between states are routinely 'held' within the HIPPY network, ensuring continuity of engagement.

What would you highlight in a grant application to demonstrate a service is connected to the community it serves? What should applicants be assessed on?

Selecting providers with connection to the local community can be aided by:

- involving community members/local families on selection panels and involving them in co-creation of the assessment mechanism
- assessing applicants on their participation in local community governance groups, community engagement approaches, expertise and how long they have worked within a local community
- asking applicants to provide testimonials or letters of support from community members/local families.

These approaches are used by HIPPY in the expression of interest (EOI) process to support the ACCO transition. The EOI process has been designed to ensure that the community voice report is the primary evidence to support an interested ACCO, along with letters of support from other local stakeholders and cultural authorities/leaders and evidence that the interested provider has a physical presence and is accepted in the local area. This is the first milestone, paving the way for providers to demonstrate their strong policies and procedures, robust risk management frameworks, sound financial reports and commitment through a due diligence assessment. Each EOI panel consists of a panel chair, a member with HIPPY operational expertise and a First Nations panel member. The role of the First Nations panel member is to facilitate decisions that support First Nations ways of working.

6 Responding to community need

Beyond locational disadvantage, what other factors should the department consider to make sure funding reflects the needs of communities?

In developing our Early Years Integrated Approach, BSL has considered a range of data points which has assisted us to target communities in most need of such an approach. A similar dataset could be used to ensure funding reflects the needs of communities. Relevant factors include:

- **Social determinants/multidimensional poverty:** The department should consider a range of factors to prioritise investment. These should encompass the spectrum of multidimensional poverty (i.e. beyond income deprivation) and the broader social determinants of health and wellbeing. For example, the HIPPY site catchment review used the following indicators to determine the level of need:
 - Number of pre-school aged First Nations children.
 - High levels of Indigenous disadvantage (deciles 1 and 2).
 - Number of pre-school aged children.
 - High levels of Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) disadvantage (deciles 1 and 2).
 - High levels of Action on Disability within Ethnic Communities (AEDC) at risk (deciles 1 and 2).
 - High percentage of culturally and linguistically diverse population.
 - Areas with growing young populations.
- **Growth corridors:** Growth corridors on the urban fringe are likely to have particularly high need for this program, given these areas typically experience a lack of services infrastructure and high rates of social isolation.
- **Service mapping to strategically prioritise investment and coordinate with existing programs:** Beyond community characteristics, investment should also be prioritised where there are existing service gaps and should minimise potential duplication. Investment should be informed by service mapping that considers the full spectrum of services in a community, including those funded by different departments and state and territory governments, to ensure investments add value and address critical needs. Consideration should be given to how this program interacts with other related initiatives such as Connected Beginnings and Stronger Places Stronger People.
- **Looking beyond place-based concentration of disadvantage, and the importance of proportionate universalism:** Early childhood disadvantage is not just concentrated geographically in Australia – up to 40 per cent of Australia’s children experiencing disadvantage live outside low-income areas.²¹ Therefore, the ‘proportionate universalism’ intended by the

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/jul/13/up-to-40-per-cent-of-australia-disadvantaged-children-live-outside-low-income-areas-study-finds>

program is important to prioritise, so that children everywhere who need support – not just those in selected geographic areas – can access it. This should include more than just light-touch informational services (i.e. Stream 1) but also extend to the availability of more supportive programs (such as Stream 2 or 3) wherever they are needed, not just in areas with the most geographically concentrated disadvantage.

- **Language:** Finally, we would encourage the department to consider the impacts of language and deficit framing. Communities experiencing ‘locational disadvantage’ also possess considerable strengths, which should be drawn upon to support children and families. Using an Advantaged Thinking²² or Capability Approach²³ is important to make sure solutions are not inadvertently perpetuating a narrative of disadvantage.

What’s the best way for organisations to show in grant applications, that their service is genuinely meeting the needs of the community?

See response to question above: ‘What would you highlight in a grant application to demonstrate a service is connected to the community it serves.’

Relatedly, the department should also structure the grant application to promote collaboration rather than competition. This could include encouraging joint tendering or consortium-based applications, using relational contracting, and asking organisations to outline how they partner and collaborate with other organisations in their local area.

Other dimensions on which to assess providers could include:

- Experience on co-designed/co-produced programs.
- Workforce strategies that underpin delivery.
- Partnership histories.
- Approach to sector capacity building (e.g. sharing resources and knowledge).
- Applied research capabilities.

The department could also consider requiring organisations to adhere to partnership principles, such as the ‘Principles for a Partnership-centred approach for NGOs working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations and Communities’.²⁴ This includes considerations such as the following: ‘Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander NGOs are willing and able to provide a service or development activity, mainstream NGOs shall not directly compete for tender, but will seek, where appropriate, to develop a partnership...’.

²² See: <https://assets.bsl.org.au/assets/AT-Overview-V3-1.02.24-2.pdf>

²³ See: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/>

²⁴ <https://www.acoss.org.au/principles-for-a-partnership-centred-approach/>

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

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

BSL is currently supporting the transfer of mainstream HIPPY sites in First Nations communities to be managed and delivered by ACCOs. We have learnt a considerable amount through this process. The grant process could be designed in the following ways to support ACCOs:

- **Use a commissioning process that does not disadvantage small, local providers or ACCOs:** The criteria and approach used in the tendering process should be simple, not onerous and be accessible to small providers who may not have large tender writing teams. There are some valuable lessons from the HIPPY expression of interest (EOI) process to support the ACCO transition that could be applied here. For example, the primary criterion used in the HIPPY EOI process is community voice. Once this criterion has been satisfied, compliance requirements are assessed. Where an ACCO that is preferred by the community may need to build its capacity to meet compliance requirements, there is an option to form a 'caretaker partnership' in which the ACCO works with another provider to build their capacity over time, with transition of the program to the ACCO being the long-term goal. Caretaker partnerships may also look like a local and regional ACCO working together, when the local ACCO is unable to take on HIPPY immediately. This supports a staged transition that is genuine and sustainable so communities and families do not feel the impact.
- **Resource capacity and capability building:** Our experience of the HIPPY ACCO transition is that some ACCOs need to build capacity to be able to successfully deliver HIPPY. We define capacity as the organisational functions required to implement HIPPY and other future programs. These include policies and procedures, people services and human resources, financial management systems, IT systems and facilities and office space. Building capacity is essential to increasing the number of ACCOs delivering services and requires sufficient resourcing and time. Funding for this should be explicitly and intentionally provided to the ACCO, in addition to service delivery budgets.
- **Honour self-determination by funding First Nations organisations directly:** The department should fund ACCOs directly, as continuing to fund mainstream organisations for services focused on First Nations families and children undermines self-determination and cultural leadership. We have learnt through the HIPPY ACCO transition project that by controlling their funding and the HIPPY licence, BSL has held considerable power over provider organisations which has impacted community decision-making and cultural ways of working. When ACCOs hold the contract and the funds there are opportunities for self-determination, and a deeper and more genuine governance change can occur.
- **Support transition from mainstream to ACCO providers, including with a national transition framework and timeline/roadmap:** Through the HIPPY ACCO transition project, there have been instances where a national transition framework and roadmap would have benefited the work. A

framework, developed and supported by First Nations leaders and agreed to by government, would ensure there is integrity to each transition process. BSL is contributing to a Transition Framework being developed by SNAICC with input from other providers who are experiencing transitions. For any organisations unable to develop their own approaches, a framework would provide the information and resources they need to structure and organise their work. In addition, a timeframe or national road map would allow the community sector to see the global plan for the transition of programs and funding to First Nations organisations and communities. This would give clarity on what would be required from them in the transition process.

- **Facilitate a flexible funding model:** A core need for ACCOs is a flexible funding model to enable First Nations communities to adapt programs to meet their context and priorities. This has been a consistent recommendation from SNAICC for many years,²⁵ and should be supported in this program – including through the flexibility afforded by a relational contracting approach. Communities should be supported to set their own KPIs around how this funding can be used to meet their unique community needs and further engage families in programs and services in their own ways. A community is better placed to know the barriers to access than fly-in workforce and should be supported to set their own measures of success.

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

See response to previous question.

8 Measuring outcomes

What types of data would help your organisation better understand its impact and continuously improve its services?

BSL would find the following data useful for service delivery:

- **Benchmarking:** To help compare outcomes and identify service gaps, it would be helpful to have access to de-identified data from Data Exchange (DEX) showing the average outcomes of similar programs and programs operating in the same geographic area.
- **Access to linked data:** easier access to linked data by NGOs would enable longitudinal analysis and comparisons to control groups and would facilitate the development of an evidence base for interventions. Currently, the barriers to accessing linked data, such as time to access data, contractual limitations with use of data and resourcing required to complete the application process, makes it difficult for NGOs to reap the benefits of linked data.
- **Access to data in usable and interpretable formats:** Currently, a substantial volume of information is put into DEX and BSL receives very little back from the system. The DEX

²⁵ <https://www.snaicc.org.au/resources/funding-model-options-for-acco-integrated-early-years-services-final-report>

submission requires organisations to transform data to meet the submission guidelines, however, the transformation of the practice data means that any reports from DEX need to be re-interpreted by programs. This re-interpretation is a costly barrier to obtaining value from the DEX data.

What kinds of data or information would be most valuable for you to share, to show how your service is positively impacting children and families?

BSL requires the following data to show positive impact:

- **Community involvement in determining the relevant outcomes for reporting:** Communities should have a say in deciding what will demonstrate the impact of the program.
- **Child and family voice:** Stories should be shared about how change is occurring for participants beyond what can be captured using quantitative data. Specifically, being able to hear the voices of children and families directly – such as through videos or voice recordings (that protect identity) – would be powerful.
- **Data that supports objective measurement of impact, including parent-level impacts like employment and financial literacy:** Currently, much of the data collected does not go towards illuminating the real impacts of a program. Similarly, there is little reporting of data around financial literacy, which is a key component of support women’s empowerment and a way to assist women who are experiencing domestic violence.

If your organisation currently reports in the Data Exchange (DEX), what SCORE Circumstances domain is most relevant to the service you deliver?

For HIPPY, we use the following SCORE domains:

- Age-appropriate development.
- Education and training.
- Family functioning.

Other SCORE domains we use across our financial wellbeing and employment programs include:

- Financial resilience.
- Goals (behaviours) and Goals (empowerment, choice and control to make own decision).
- Employment.

Some elements of the SCORE questions and DEX reporting need to be changed, including:

- SCORE questions and response options are overly **deficit focused**. For example, baseline data collection requires reporting against a long list of challenges or things that children have difficulty with, while there is minimal focus on strengths or aspirations. This can create a negative first impression of the program for families who join, because they are required to

report on their challenges, rather than being able to share the strengths and capabilities they have and would like to build on. The department's intention to empower families should be reflected in data collection approaches. These should draw on a Capability Approach and/or Advantaged Thinking conceptual framework (see description of these approaches in section 6).

- The response options for SCORE questions are wordy and include many different concepts within the one response option.
- Recording outcomes at **multiple time points** is often not meaningful but is still required in the system. Sometimes things can only be measured meaningfully at the program conclusion. We also find that there is low data quality in the pre-service SCORE measure. We find people often inflate their pre-SCORE because they lack a point of reference, feel shame or do not have the capability assess an accurate assessment.
- The **5-point scale** is often not meaningful, and attempts to standardise it have led to scales that do not feel appropriate for our context or are overly complex. We have created our own definitions of the points on the scale, but without relevant common approaches across organisations, this limits comparability of the data. If comparisons are going to be made, a better form of standardisation will be needed.
- Another issue we face across programs reporting into DEX is the volume of data we are required to collect. When combined with our own program data, the intake process can take over 60 minutes. Some of the data requested does not appear directly relevant to the service, and some questions seek a 'tick-the-box' response. The data would likely be improved by giving respondents greater flexibility and agency to determine which data is genuinely useful to highlight participant experience and demonstrate impact.

What kinds of templates or guidance would help you prepare strong case studies that show the impact of your service?

We have created our own templates (e.g. Beyond the Data) to provide case studies as part of the HIPPY program that show the impact of the program. These are simple five-page documents that have sections for both quantitative data and qualitative description, stories, case studies and images. Each Beyond the Data publication is focused on a specific outcome for the program.

We also use the Most Significant Change approach to developing case studies, which we find impactful and respectful of participants, bringing their stories to life in their own voice.

We would be happy to share these templates, as they have proven to be a powerful way of communicating the impact of our programs to a variety of audiences.

9 Working together

What does a relational contracting approach mean to you in practice?

We strongly welcome the department's commitment to pilot formal relational contracting- (FRC). FRC means a focus on improved outcomes for participants through greater flexibility for both purchaser and service provider. FRC has particular relevance where service users have complex needs and where methods of delivery need to adapt over time.

The FRC method is widely used in the private sector and is also suitable for the public sector, particularly human services. While it is new to this program, it is not a new approach, nor too challenging to establish.

A formal relational contract is a specific legal agreement with shared goals and an expectation of open communication and data sharing. It typically has two parts: Part A – to establish agreed values, guiding principles, and governance arrangements; and Part B – to outline required outcomes, target groups and time for delivery. (Note: formal relational contracting is more than simply working in a 'relational' way – it refers to a specific legal contract.)

As the use of FRC is proposed as a pilot, we encourage government to invest in building capability in FRC – both within government procurement teams and service delivery organisations – and engaging in ongoing learning, evaluation and improvement around the process. It is important that in developing and establishing formal relational contracts, communities/clients are involved in the development of the proposed outcomes.

Greater detail on the five elements required to set the pilot up for success:

1. **Build government capability:** Train government contract commissioning and management teams on FRC and how to work differently with service providers.
2. **Build service provider capability:** Train service providers on FRC and enable sharing of lessons across providers.
3. **Provide public accountability and oversight:** Involve the Department of Finance and the Australian National Audit Office early, during the set-up phase, to ensure 'no surprises', and that prior approvals have been obtained.
4. **Facilitate client and community participation:** Involve communities in the development of the proposed outcomes of the relational contract, and report results/outcomes to community.
5. **Engage learning partners:** Engage learning partners and experts ('deal architects') to help train, prepare and evaluate this work. This includes access to best practice in other countries and the use of appropriate evaluation to validate and improve the work.

What criteria would you like to see included in a relational contract?

See response to next question.

What's the best way for the department to decide which organisations should be offered a relational contract?

The pilot of FRC through this program area will shape its future adoption as a commissioning approach. As such, organisations should be selected in a way that helps build the most valuable lessons on how to effectively implement relational contracting. Selection of organisations could therefore include criteria such as:

- Experience and expertise in the service areas relevant to the national program.
- Interest and willingness to share challenges and lessons with government and other agencies participating in the trial.
- Diversity of provider type/location/size/maturity etc. to help build lessons about the conditions under which FRC is most applicable, and/or ways in which it must be adapted to different contexts.
- A balance between considering past experience and expertise and allowing potential new entrants/innovators.

In addition to considering provider selection, BSL also considers it important to consider selection of service and contract type. The pilot should strike a balance between offering contracts for services that are sufficiently complex to enable rigorous testing and relational contracting exploration. It should avoid selecting contracts of such high complexity that they would be difficult to deliver under any contracting approach – including relational contracting.

Is your organisation interested in a relational contracting approach? Why/why not?

Yes. BSL is interested in a FRC approach because we can see it leading to stronger outcomes for families; greater coordination across investment in families and communities; and having the flexibility to enable adaptation over time to meet changing community needs. We welcome the opportunity to work more closely with government in a long-standing, trust-based relationship.

10 Other

Is there anything else you think the department should understand or consider about this proposed approach?

BSL would like to emphasise that this program should be rolled out with explicit consideration of how it connects to other major reforms and programs, such as Thriving Kids, universal early childhood education and care reform, place-based investments and state-run initiatives. For example, many of

A new approach to programs for families and children

the services currently delivered under this new single national program could also fit within Thriving Kids – making sure these investments are coordinated will be important.