

Submission to the Department of Social Services Discussion Paper – A new approach to programs for families and children

December 2025

About Uniting WA

Uniting WA is pleased to make the following submission in response to the Department of Social Services' proposed reforms outlined in the Discussion Paper: *A new approach to children and family programs*.

Uniting WA (Uniting) is part of the UnitingCare Australia network, the country's largest community service provider network, which employs over 50,000 staff, supported by more than 30,000 volunteers.

Uniting's programs span the areas of family and children's services, homelessness and housing services, mental health and disability support, as well as financial wellbeing and reintegration services. We're also a registered Tier 2 Community Housing Provider.

In WA, Uniting has extensive experience and a strong track record of persisting to create tangible positive impacts for vulnerable Western Australians. We deliver essential community services with respect and compassion, and we work with the government to build a strong foundation for positive change, supporting policy implementation that addresses social issues.

Programs and services we run that specifically support families and children include –

- **Parenting Under Pressure (PuP)** funded directly by the Department of Social Services in **Merriwa** through the **Children and Parenting Support (CaPS)** program and subcontracted from The Smith Family in **Kwinana** through the **Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (CfC FP)** program.
- **Attach**, funded by the Western Australian Mental Health Commission, which also delivers the Parenting Under Pressure model, but specialises in support for parents who live with problematic drug and alcohol use.
- **Intensive Family Support Services (IFSS)**, funded by the Western Australian Department of Communities, which assists parents to further strengthen their parenting skills and improve family functioning to create a safe and nurturing environment for their children.
- **Group Foster Care, Community Foster Care, Crisis, Complex and Temporary Care Homes**, funded by the Western Australian Department of Communities, where Uniting currently supports over 100 children in the out of home care system.
- **Child and Family Therapeutic Services (CAFTS)**, funded by the Western Australian Department of Communities, supporting children and families who have experienced sexual abuse and children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviours.
- **The Together Program**, funded through private philanthropy, which supports women experiencing homelessness through their pregnancy and into the second year of their newborn's life.
- **Moorditj Yorga Together Walking Domestic Violence Support Group**, funded by the Western Australian Department of Communities, which includes counselling and group work.

Vision, Outcomes and Program Structure

Uniting WA is broadly supportive of the proposed reforms, provided the new approach is designed with sufficient flexibility to respond to local needs, and is underpinned by funding and structures that enable providers to deliver high-quality services.

We agree in principle that consolidating multiple programs into a unified framework has the potential to reduce administrative burden, streamline reporting, and allow organisations to focus more fully on delivering integrated and holistic services that genuinely benefit children and families. We particularly welcome the clear distinction between activity streams 2 and 3, separating prevention and early intervention from intensive family supports.

The Discussion Paper presents an ambitious vision, but additional operational detail is needed to clearly understand how the proposed reforms would function in practice. There is limited clarity regarding timelines, tender processes, transition arrangements, workforce development, or how continuity of care will be maintained. Without this guidance, there is a risk that the reforms may appear “good on paper” but prove difficult to implement effectively.

Families experience instability when service systems change. Funding arrangements may be invisible to families, yet delays, service gaps, and shifting eligibility requirements have a direct impact on their wellbeing. To support a smooth transition, providers will require sufficient advance notice of new requirements, and dedicated transition resources. It is essential that the national program allows for adaptation to community priorities and diverse provider contexts, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach.

The following section outlines Uniting’s key feedback on the proposed reforms.

Key Feedback

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?

Uniting welcomes the Discussion Paper’s focus on connected, co-located services and aspirations towards relational contracting.

a. What is working now

The Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (CfC FP) program in Kwinana, led by The Smith Family, demonstrates effective, community-led collaboration that is generating measurable improvements for children and families. Uniting is proud to play a role in the collaborative service network within this region, with our PuP program supporting families to achieve positive outcomes.

Other providers, including Ngala’s Incredible Years program, Kwinana Early Years Services (KEYS) and the Meerilinga Parenting Service, further strengthen the network of supports

available to families. This focused geographical approach enables a high level of responsiveness to emerging needs and fosters strong relationships across providers. As a result, services in the region benefit from deep local knowledge, confident referral pathways and an ability to connect families with complementary supports such as financial counselling.

Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data demonstrates clear progress in the Kwinana region from 2021 to 2024. Four of the five developmental domains improved over this period, with emotional maturity showing the greatest uplift and language and cognitive skills recording the highest proportion of children on track. Notably, these improvements run counter to the broader statewide trend, which declined in 2024.

Parenting Under Pressure (PuP) Kwinana Case Study - Sharna

Sharna has given consent for her story to be used for publicity, communications, or to report to funders or management.

“Before starting PuP, I was on a path where I didn’t know how to proceed. I didn’t feel like I was a good mother or that I deserved my kids. I felt negative about everything in the whole world, even my kids.”

“I found it hard to care for myself, I felt like I didn’t have the time, energy or even care. I didn’t want to shower or brush my hair. I would cut knots out of my hair instead of washing and brushing my hair.”

“I neglected myself a lot.”

“Through PuP, I realised there are people who care. I felt like I was being listened to, I was being encouraged and cared for, and that was really important. We started to talk about values and it reminded me that I am an okay person, that I do hold values that help and I care for people and myself.”

“In one of the sessions, we created a self-care chart, which I put on my mirror in my bathroom. This reminded me that I deserve to have a shower and feel clean.”

“I decided to start taking my medication. I realised that I was worth the time and energy to take my medication. Once I started taking it regularly, I started to see the changes in my mood and the tasks I had to do didn’t seem so foreboding, every day felt a little bit easier.”

“I think it has been helpful to have someone who is proud of my progress. Having someone check in with me and ask how I am, that has been important.”

b. Other considerations

While co-location has value, outreach and flexibility are often more impactful than physical co-location alone.

- Outreach allows workers to engage with families in their own environments, building rapport and identifying needs that may not be visible in office-based settings.

- Group work, although not currently funded, addresses clear community needs.
- Flexibility to engage with community groups, schools, playgroups and informal networks is critical, yet is not always captured or supported in existing contract requirements.

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

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

Uniting strongly supports increased investment in ACCOs and recognises their essential role in service delivery. We highlight two considerations that will be critical as the model develops.

- a. Choice and self-determination for First Nations families must be preserved

Not all Aboriginal families wish to access ACCO-only services. Many intentionally access non-ACCO providers due to personal preference, relationships, past experiences, or trusted local supports. A blanket requirement would undermine self-determination, which includes the right to choose who provides support. Uniting affirms the right of First Peoples to choose the service that best meets their needs, including the option to work with a non-Indigenous practitioner if that is their preference.

- b. Authentic partnerships requires time and resourcing

To ensure ACCO partnerships are both effective and culturally safe, adequate lead time is essential to establish relationships, governance structures, co-design processes and agreed practice approaches. Partnerships need to be authentic and well-resourced, as compressed timelines risk tokenistic engagement and undermine long-term collaboration. Tight procurement windows do not provide sufficient time to establish these foundations.

Measuring outcomes

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?

Uniting considers current reporting requirements manageable; however, the proposed reforms signal a shift toward more intensive, outcomes-focused reporting. To ensure this supports rather than hinders service quality, several considerations are critical.

- a. The DEX system requires substantial modernisation.

Many of the current questions are outdated and poorly aligned with contemporary practice language. For example, several Circumstance SCORE questions rely on the term “negative impact,” a phrase that is subjective, interpreted differently by each person and inconsistent with strengths-based, collaborative practice. Effective engagement requires working with families to identify what matters to them, not fitting their experiences into ambiguous or deficit-framed categories.

b. Reporting must be properly funded and resourced

Case studies and lived experience reporting provide essential insight into program impact and are strongly supported by Uniting WA. To ensure this reporting is collected safely, ethically and in a way that strengthens, rather than reduces, frontline capacity, dedicated funding and resourcing will be necessary.

c. Data systems must capture the complexity of working with vulnerable people.

Reporting frameworks should reflect the relational, intensive and often nonlinear nature of family support, rather than oversimplifying experiences into narrow metrics. Systems that honour this complexity will generate more accurate insights and better support continuous improvement.

Conclusion

Uniting WA appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the Discussion Paper and acknowledges the Department's commitment to meaningful consultation. We look forward to continued engagement as the program is developed, and to working in partnership with government to achieve the best possible outcomes for children and families.

The proposed reforms present important opportunities. Uniting WA's programs supporting children and families consistently experience high demand and have significant waitlists. There is scope to expand existing services to reach more families who would benefit. There is also an opportunity to invest in innovative approaches that enhance prevention, early intervention, and intensive support for children and families across communities. We look forward to further detail on the next steps in the reform process.

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