



Another way is possible

Over recent months, we have been talking with young people, parents and families, carers, practitioners, Aboriginal-led organisations, community groups, service providers, policymakers and advocates about what a genuinely different child protection system could look like.

Again and again, we hear the same thing: the current system is not working as it should for children and families. But we are also hearing something else.

Making the alternative visible

Across the sector, people are already offering solutions. Young advocates sharply highlight the importance of connection and belonging to children and young people. New approaches, initiatives and ways of working are showing what is possible. There is energy, evidence and vision for change.

This sits alongside our recent conversations with UK systems innovator Charlie Leadbeater who suggests that system shifts involve making new maps as you go. Not waiting for a perfect plan, but reading the landscape as it unfolds, learning from each other's experience along the way.

It's in this spirit that we've recently published a new visual overview of a Child Connection System. It's not a finished blueprint - it's more like a working map - something to orient around, question and improve.

At its heart, the Child Connection System asks a simple question: what would it take to organise the whole system around connection?

It brings together what we've been learning so far from lived experience, research and sector conversations. Our aim is to back and connect this collective body of work, and make visible the direction of change being called for by a growing movement.

A map we can design together

We're hearing that the visual helps the case for an alternative feel more concrete. Over the coming months, we will continue to work together to develop the Child Connection System in more practical detail, building on work already underway.

This includes deeper dives into the key parts of the system: legislation, help hubs, funding, measurement, voluntary pathways, and relational care.

If there is a part that you want to help shape, test or strengthen, we would love to hear from you. This work takes many people, across many parts of the system and community, working together with a commitment to children's connection, belonging and healing.

The Child Connection System is a way of holding that shared direction in view and an invitation into deeper design conversations.

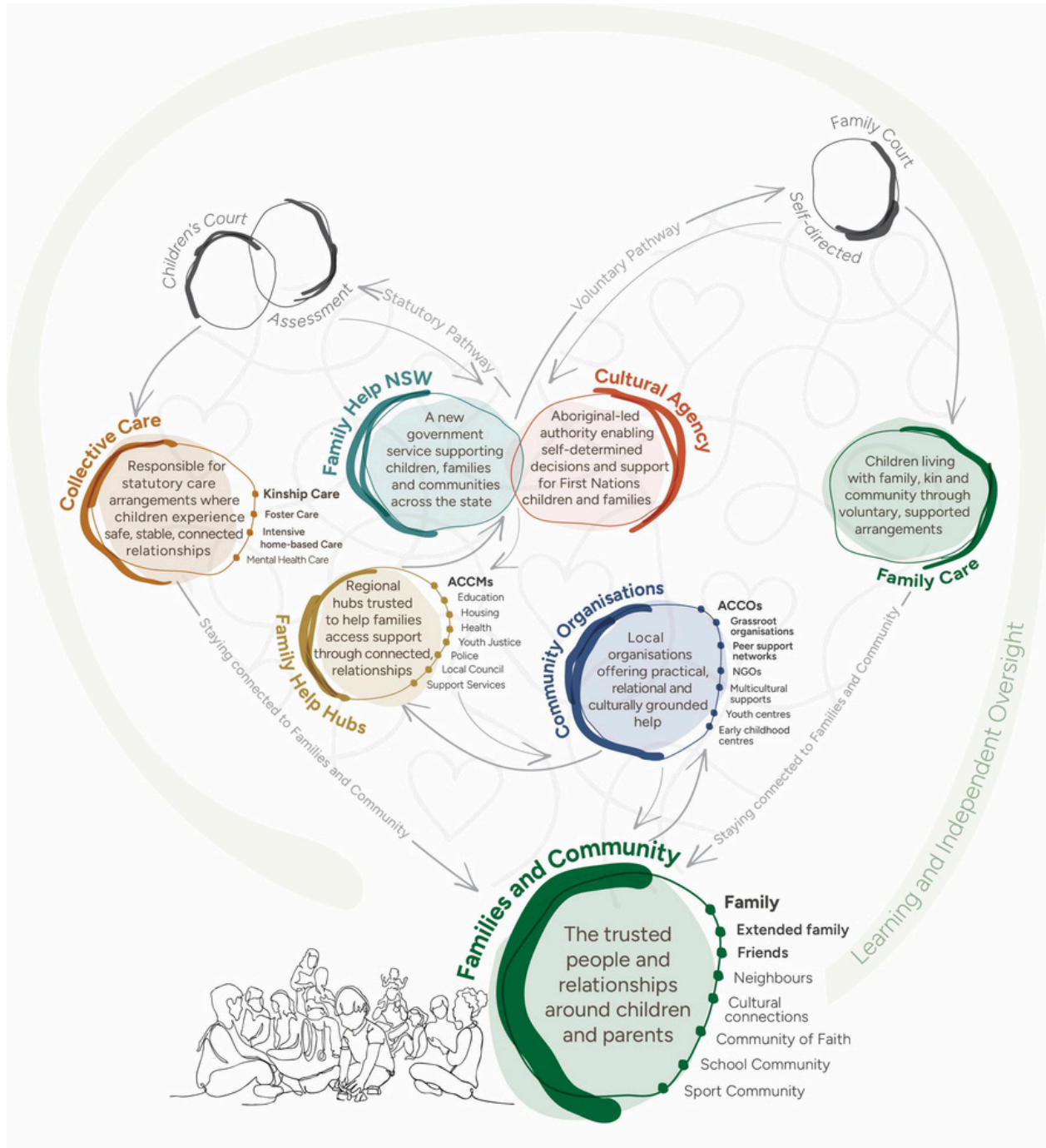


Sophi Bruce
Sophi Bruce
CEO

What a Child Connection System could look like

Our new visual overview brings together many of the shifts already being called for across child protection and out-of-home care reform: earlier help for families, stronger community-led responses, Aboriginal authority and decision-making, better support for kin and carers, a smaller statutory system, and funding that rewards connection.

These changes don't sit neatly inside the current system. If the organising purpose remains surveillance, investigation and removal, the system will keep pulling people back toward the same patterns. A Child Connection System starts somewhere different. It asks what children and families need to stay safe and connected, and builds the architecture around that purpose.



This work is being shaped by many voices. Young people are helping imagine and advocate for a different future, including through work on a new Social Compact that asks us to return to a more human starting point. Parents, families and carers are calling for trust and dignity. Practitioners continue to hold on to the importance of relationships, even when the system pulls them away from connection.

Community organisations, Aboriginal leaders, researchers and policymakers are also pushing for change that goes beyond small adjustments to the status quo.

You can access the visual, and accompanying Explainer and webinar, on our website. If you'd like to get involved in developing the Child Connection System in more practical detail, email us at change@centreforrelationalcare.org.au

Young people help shape commitment to relational care

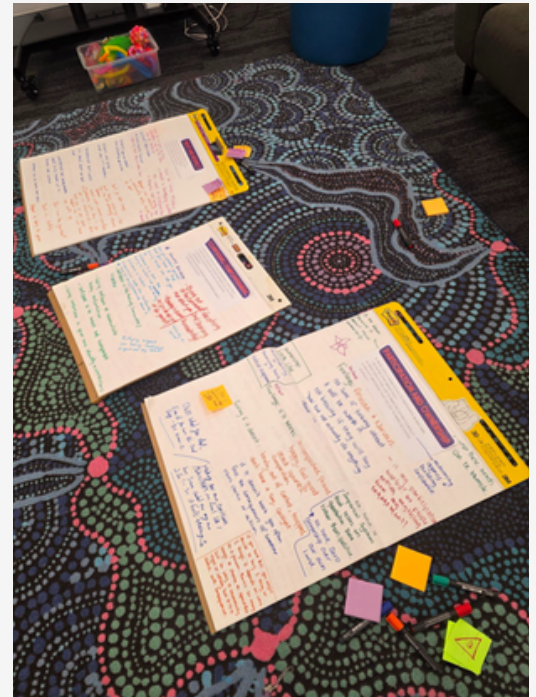
In April and May, the Centre for Relational Care and CREATE Foundation came together to facilitate a Youth Advisory Group with young people who have lived experience of the care system.

Across several sessions, we talked about what good care *feels* like, what makes a relationship feel real, and what adults in the system need to understand if we are serious about building something different.

These conversations are helping to shape the foundations for a Social Compact for the Child Connection System. The idea of a Social Compact was recommended in our collaborative project with the Australian Public Policy Institute, *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish (2024)*, which calls for a shared commitment between government, the sector and community to guide a new system oriented toward love, wellbeing, human connection and family flourishing.

To be meaningful, a Social Compact must be shaped by the people who know what the current system feels like from the inside. The conversations with young people centred on four ideas:

- A commitment to genuine care should go beyond the minimum. Safety and basic dignity are the floor, not the promise.
- Relational care as a value should be lived every day, in every interaction. It cannot be written in a mission statement once and then forgotten.
- Relationships should go both ways. Young people spoke about the importance of workers taking the time to genuinely know them, and being willing to be known in return.
- Relational care should be defined by how it feels to a young person, not simply by what an adult believes they did.



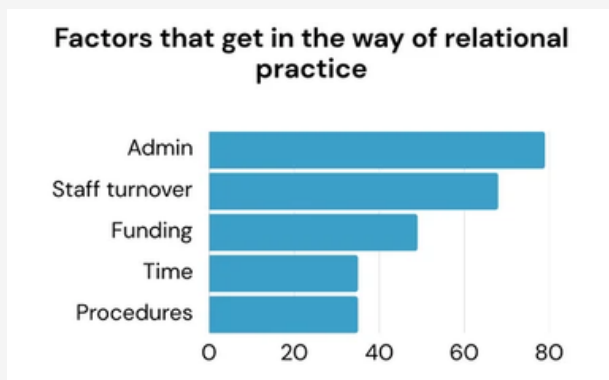
A huge thanks to every young person who brought their honesty, experience and ideas to this work, and to CREATE Foundation for their partnership.

We look forward to sharing more as the Social Compact develops.

Strengthening the conditions for relational practice

CRC and the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies are continuing their collaborative work to strengthen the conditions for relational practice across the NSW out-of-home care sector. This includes undertaking a sector survey on relational practice, drawing on the views of more than 200 out-of-home care practitioners and managers, and in-depth discussion groups.

The findings highlighted a significant gap between relational *capability* and relational *conditions*. While practitioners said they value and understand relational work, they are frequently hindered by system incentives that reward compliance, speed, and documentation over time, presence, and connection.



These findings serve as a pathway for reflection, and a catalyst for sector-wide dialogue. While these service provider perspectives offer valuable insight, they are only part of the picture. A fuller understanding requires centring the relational and emotional experiences of children, parents and carers, and being guided by their definitions of what safe, meaningful and genuine relationships look like to them.

The findings are also informing an ACWA/CRC-convened Taskforce focused on strengthening relational practice. The Taskforce brings together OOHc practitioners, as well as representatives from government, regulators, carers, parents who had their children removed, and young people with lived experience, to develop new approaches to supporting and enabling relational work.

Current areas of focus for the Taskforce include reducing administrative burden, engaging children, parents and carers in care planning, using AI to minimise paperwork, redesigning templates to be more child and young person-centred, supporting newer practitioners to build confidence in relational practice, and developing a relational health check.

Survey findings are in the Knowledge Hub on our website at centreforrelationalcare.org.au/knowledge-hub

CRC at the National Child and Family Safety Leadership Summit

CRC CEO Sophi Bruce joined the National Child and Family Safety Leadership Summit in Perth in May, speaking on the panel *One System for Safety: Collaboration, Data and Shared Accountability*.

The discussion explored how we move from separate systems working hard in isolation to a more connected system that is genuinely accountable for safety. A key theme was that safety is not created by one service, one policy or one point of intervention. It is built through the relationships, systems and shared commitments that make children, families and victim-survivors visible, heard and supported.



Youth workers as relational responders

In April, CRC joined BackTrack's Tracker Network for two days, alongside grassroots youth work organisations from NSW, WA, SA and Queensland. We led a session on the Child Connection System, exploring the integral role of community organisations as relational responders: the people and places best positioned to notice, connect, support and stay alongside children and families.

The session also explored relational health as an ecosystem. A child's relationship with a worker, mentor or trusted adult does not sit in isolation. It is shaped by the wider web of relationships around them, including family, peers, community, culture and the relationships that sustain the adults doing the work.

For the Tracker Network, this is familiar ground. Their work shows how relational care is not just a practice model, but something built through local trust, shared commitment and communities that keep showing up for young people.

Ideas for shifting a system

CRC recently hosted a workshop with UK systems innovator and author Charlie Leadbeater, using CRC as a live "experiment space" to explore how movements grow and alternative futures become visible.

The importance of telling a bigger story was discussed. Systems can stay stuck when people cannot see a viable alternative. To build momentum, people need more than critique; they need to know others are working towards something better. The workshop named the significant financial, social and human costs of maintaining the status quo, and CRC's role in creating the conditions for a shared story, practical imagination and collective action.

Young leaders calling for change across Australia and New Zealand



CRC youth advocate and advisor Emily Hikaiti spoke at the VOYCE Whakarongo Mai Kōkiri: *The Future Speaks Conference* in Wellington, Aotearoa. Emily presented on CRC's work to push for change in Australia, including our vision for a Child Connection System, emphasising that relationships and connection help keep children safer.

While there, Emily connected with peers and advocates who have been working across the child and youth sector for many years. Many have given so much to this work and are still waiting for meaningful change. There was strong agreement at the conference that we cannot wait another decade for the voices of young people with lived experience to be acted on. Practical solutions exist - we now need the commitment to move forward.

Rethinking residential care on the *Relational Social Work* podcast



CRC Chair Jarrod Wheatley recently joined The Relational Social Work Podcast to discuss alternatives to residential institutional care for children and young people in Australia. Drawing on the work of Professional Individualised Care and international models, Jarrod explored what it means to place enduring, authentic relationships at the centre of care, for children and young people and also social workers.

A link to the podcast is available at centreforrelationalcare.org.au/knowledge-hub



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