

Centre for
Relational Care

WORKSHOP SUMMARY PACK

Overview of workshop insights

29 October 2025





ACTIVITY 1

Perspectives on the current system

The experience and ground truths of the current system of OOHC

We worked in perspective-based groups to explore how the current system shapes actions and behaviours through its underlying incentives. This provides an honest snapshot about how the system actually operates and surfaces uncomfortable ground truths that help deepen understanding of the dynamics that hold the status quo in place.

ACTIVITY 1: PERSPECTIVES ON THE CURRENT SYSTEM

children and young people

Themes	Comments
System over children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ The system is built around compliance, tracking, and process, not the child.○ Children feel unseen, unheard, and forced to conform to rules that don't fit their lives.○ "Success" is defined by placements and outcomes on paper, not by children's wellbeing or connection.
Fragmented & dehumanising	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Workers and agencies don't communicate, leaving children caught between silos.○ The system views children as objects "presented as a gift on a silver platter" to be managed or placed, rather than as full people.
Risk-averse & distrusting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Fear of risk dominates - leaders & policy (systems) thinking do not support workers to make the right decision and organisations don't back them○ Organisational and policy settings do not back relational or courageous decision-making.
Need for genuine relationship & respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Children want adults and carers to build trust, not compliance.○ They sense that carers and workers are often guided by their own narratives / system expectations rather than objectively from the child's interests.○ Young people want to be part of decisions, not subjects of them.

"Children are forced to conform, given no choice and are not heard"

"Children should be seen as children"

"We aren't focused on the person that is sitting in front of us but on what the system needs to be compliant"

ACTIVITY 1: PERSPECTIVES ON THE CURRENT SYSTEM

parents and families

Themes	Comments
Compliance over care	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ The system rewards compliance, conformity, and silence not healing or engagement.○ Families are punished for behaviours tied to trauma or disadvantage (e.g. housing instability, mental health).○ Policy defers responsibility through process instead of relational work.
Dehumanising & stigma	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Families feel objectified, coerced, and judged rather than supported.○ Parents' stories are rewritten to fit deficit-based narratives of "bad families."○ The system hides behind a "saving children" story that masks its own failures.
Values that perpetuate harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Protection is defined by the system, not by family or cultural wellbeing.○ There's little honesty or reflection - the system is not family-centred or trauma-aware.○ Lived experience is sidelined, treated as risk instead of wisdom. Deep shame and distrust are continually reinforced

"Nothing is "family" centred"

"Parents are viewed as a problem"

"Lived experience is seen as a risk"

ACTIVITY 1: PERSPECTIVES ON THE CURRENT SYSTEM providers

Themes	Comments
Incentivised compliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Providers are rewarded for meeting contracts, not for improving children's lived experience.○ Risk avoidance and reputational management override ethical or relational practice.○ Innovation, flexibility, and cultural responsiveness are discouraged.
Punitive system logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Going "outside the lines" to serve Culture and relationally support children or families is punished.○ The system is transactional, it's about maintaining contracts and budgets rather than care.○ "Legal liability" and "safety for the system" dominate decision-making.
Underlying harmful narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ The system reproduces colonial and individualistic values: control, hierarchy, competition.○ Narratives of "saving children" or "bad parents" sustain blame and justify system control.○ Providers feel trapped in a culture that protects the system rather than transforms it.

"The state acting as the parent is not doing a good enough job, but it's not socially acceptable to call that out"

"Coloniser value sets underpin the hierarchy: competition, rugged individualism, subject-object world"

"There's a hidden social narrative in Australia....(the system) is an echo chamber enabled by media"

ACTIVITY 1: PERSPECTIVES ON THE CURRENT SYSTEM

community organisations

Themes	Comments
Systemic power imbalance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ DCJ and government agencies are hierarchical and directive, not collaborative.○ Community organisations experience blame and punishment when outcomes fall short, even when under-resourced.○ Competitive funding models pit organisations against one another.○ Localised change vs state change is different.
Punitive & problem focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Policy language and funding structures focus on deficits and risk rather than empowerment.○ Intergenerational trauma is reproduced through system interactions.○ Families and community services are positioned as problems to manage, not partners to engage.
Pockets of relational progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Some recognition of the value of programs like TEI shows potential for more relational investment.○ There's hope for shared learning and capacity-building if system control and defensiveness can ease.

"Punitive language"

"Problem focused and not empowering families"

"We need to have capacity for self determination"

ACTIVITY 1: PERSPECTIVES ON THE CURRENT SYSTEM

government and policy

Themes	Comments
Protection of the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Policy and leadership are driven by fear of public or political criticism.○ Decisions are made to “prove” safety and compliance rather than to create safety.○ Success is performative, it’s about demonstrating control, not learning or improving.○ Short term funding is rewarded/fits political cycles – this stops real reform
Defensive logics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Risk mitigation is bureaucratic and focused on what can be measured, not what matters.○ Legislation and accountability mechanisms prioritise evidence of safety over the experience of safety.○ Bureaucratic comfort and certainty take precedence over relational or adaptive responses.
Disconnection & lack of reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ The system struggles to learn from experience or to think differently.○ Policy structures reinforce distance from lived reality where decisions are abstract, not human-centred.○ There’s a persistent illusion of control through rules, rather than understanding through relationships.

“What then!!!!”: The system is performative”

“The language of safety used as a cover for stopping new ways”

“Fear of the front page story is an avoidance strategy”

SOME GROUND TRUTHS ON THE CURRENT SYSTEM

- ❖ The state is not acting like a parent would. The system protects itself, not the child.
- ❖ Children are secondary to organisational / government self-interests.
- ❖ The system is rigid and unable to adapt to the individual needs of children, leading to repeated harm and instability
- ❖ Children, families, and carers are rarely genuinely heard; lived experience is ignored and voices marginalised.
- ❖ Families are problematised instead of partnered with.
- ❖ OOHC is punitive, risk-averse, and rigid, applying blame, shame, and fear to families.
- ❖ Removal and competition for children as 'commodities' are built into the system's incentives.
- ❖ Promises are made to secure funding or status create competition not outcomes for children.
- ❖ Underlying structures of control and power continue to harm, particularly for First Nations children and families.
- ❖ Professional expertise, individualism and priorities of agencies dominate over relational accountability.
- ❖ Decisions prioritise rules, compliance, and organisational survival over children's needs.
- ❖ The system punishes those who genuinely show care or seek meaningful connection.
- ❖ Learning is slow, self-serving, and focused on protecting the institution.
- ❖ The truth from lived experience is loud, messy, and unwelcome.



ACTIVITY 2

REIMAGINED SYSTEM VISION

What a child and family system built on connection could look like.

In exploring this future state, we named **underlying values** needed to support it and identified **new incentives** to prioritise relationships and wellbeing. We looked at how these incentives could be reinforced through **relational accountability and meaningful measures** and explored early ideas for the **structural changes** and **governance and planning approaches** that would enable this reimaged system.

ACTIVITY 2: REIMAGINED SYSTEM VISION

Supporting new incentives: underlying values

- ❖ Universal principles of ethics and honesty rather than just compliance
- ❖ People are essentially good: starting point is trust
- ❖ The voice of the individual: children and families having genuine say
- ❖ The child belongs with their family: fundamental shift in perspective
- ❖ Families and carers belong together: not separated or adversarial
- ❖ Children as sovereign agents with voice and self-determination
- ❖ Relationships and connection over process
- ❖ Reduced bureaucratic control with removal of government welfare overlay
- ❖ First Nations ways of being in community and cultural governance centred
- ❖ Community as the centre: village raising the child

ACTIVITY 2: REIMAGINED SYSTEM VISION

Supporting new incentives: accountability and measurement

- ❖ Measure relationships not just metrics/performance
- ❖ Invest in relationships as primary focus
- ❖ Lifespan continuity: long-term thinking, not short-term interventions
- ❖ Community-controlled funding: put resources in community hands
- ❖ Genuine consultation building trust: moving away from tokenistic engagement
- ❖ Measurement as a relational practice: what matters to people who are most important
- ❖ No fear of removal and judgement

ACTIVITY 2: REIMAGINED SYSTEM VISION

Enabling structural change

- ❖ People with lived experience valued and in decision-making roles
- ❖ Remove stigma: eliminate punitive language and approaches
- ❖ Support help-seeking: make relational health a priority
- ❖ Flipping support: going in to families rather than extraction
- ❖ Family and carer live in the home together
- ❖ Kinship care prioritised: family connection maintained
- ❖ Stop compartmentalising: more integrated approach
- ❖ Kids-directed services: child-led and child-centred experience
- ❖ Birth support/universal care: from birth support/universal supports
- ❖ Small teams/hospitals: smaller, more personal scale
- ❖ Provide housing as foundational support
- ❖ Multi-year funding (how): funding to support families/restoration

ACTIVITY 2: REIMAGINED SYSTEM VISION

Governance and planning

- ❖ Community-driven governance with power shift away from government
- ❖ Community-led mechanisms that trigger response not just statutory investigation
- ❖ Partnership planning between families, care providers, and system
- ❖ Legislation mandates partnership planning at local level
- ❖ Relational based strategies throughout and shared planning approaches

- ❖ Legal and financial incentives to keep families safe (removal as the last resort)
- ❖ Preventative removal mechanisms based on relationships
- ❖ Community first, statutory last: new incentives for community/place
- ❖ Government held accountable if removal happens
- ❖ Family reunification and back to community as the goal: default is to strengthen family connection

HOW PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE WOULD CHANGE

For children

- Circle of support around child and family - not isolation
- Empowerment: children have voice and agency
- More caring, grounded experience
- Holistic understanding of self, belonging, identity
- Community wrap around families to raise children
- Not shuttled around: stability and continuity
- Children and families will not be judged / stigmatised / pathologised
- Stay connected to supports/culture: maintain important connections
- Children fit naturally/feel committed/seen
- Understand freedom and boundaries within supportive structure

For community / carers / organisations:

- Carers engage meaningfully with parents and families
- Political support for community wraparound
- Community support prioritised
- Relational care: 1:1, deeply personal
- Resources flow to local levels: community control over resources
- Shared responsibility
- Prioritise and support families based on need and short-term pilots (communities)
- Funded to support

For families and parents

- They are trusted with accountability: not assumed incapable
- Responsibility of capacity building given to them
- Support provided rather than punishment
- One worker over long periods: consistent relationships
- Safe to be genuine: not performative
- Stay connected to supports/culture: maintain important connections
- Don't become carers against families: work together
- Carers to be good mentors for families
- Shared responsibility among community