

Submission to the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2027–2030

From the Centre for Relational Care

Supported by CRC Youth Advocates with lived experience of out-of-home care

Our main message

The next NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People should make *connection* one of its clearest priorities.

Children and young people need enduring, consistent relationships with adults who care about them. That is how they feel safe, build trust, learn who they are, and grow. This matters for every child, but it is especially urgent for the almost 14,000 children and young people in out-of-home care in NSW. Too many are growing up without the long-term, safe and secure relationships every child needs.

For children and young people in out-of-home care, connection is not an add-on or nice extra. It is safety. It is identity. It is mental health. It is culture. It is school. It is community. It is having someone who knows you, notices when something is up, and is in your corner.

That means children should be supported to stay safely with family wherever possible. If they do need to enter care, the people and places that matter to them should not disappear. They should be helped to stay connected to family, kin, siblings, culture, school, friends, community and trusted adults. And when young people ‘leave care’ - a horrible term - they should not be expected to become independent overnight. They are still young people, and they still need trusted people around them.

A quick snapshot of out-of-home care in NSW

There are around 14,000 children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) in NSW. Roughly:

- 7,600 live with relatives or kin
- 5,200 are in foster care
- 900 are in residential care institutions
- around 45% are Aboriginal.

What’s wrong with the current system

For many children and young people in OOHC, the system that is meant to protect them also disrupts the people and places that help them feel safe.

Too many are being raised in residential care institutions by rotating shift workers, without consistent adults in their lives. Even in foster care, children are often moved from placement to placement, losing the very relationships that should help them heal and feel safe.

The system makes it hard to build and sustain the relationships that matter most, with family, carers and workers alike:

- Compliance, forms and risk assessments crowd out connection.
- Excessive rules and regulations undermine relationships.

This is a system that, by design, creates barriers to the one thing that children need most: real, lasting connection. This isn't just a policy issue. It's a heartbreak. Because **relational deprivation is harm**.

The NSW Auditor General described the child protection system as "ineffective, inefficient and unsustainable."¹ The NSW Ombudsman found that "the child protection system is not adequately protecting and supporting children and families and this situation is not improving" and that the Department of Communities and Justice "cannot demonstrate that it is meeting any of its three core child protection responsibilities."²

The evidence on leaving care is clear enough to tell us the direction. Young people leaving care are more likely to experience homelessness, mental health issues, unemployment, justice involvement and poor education outcomes. We also know that many young people want and need more help with practical life areas, but also with staying connected to family, friends and culture.

The answer is not a better 'leaving care' case plan. The answer is a stronger web of support around every young person.

Another way: a Child Connection System

The visual below reflects the ideas and experiences of young people, parents, families, carers and workers, as well as research, neuroscience and sector conversations. It shows what a practical alternative to the current child protection system could look like, with connection as its north star.

It is focused on children and families who come into contact with child protection, but the idea is bigger than child protection. All children and young people need support systems that are built around connection, because relationships are at the heart of safety, wellbeing, learning, healing and belonging

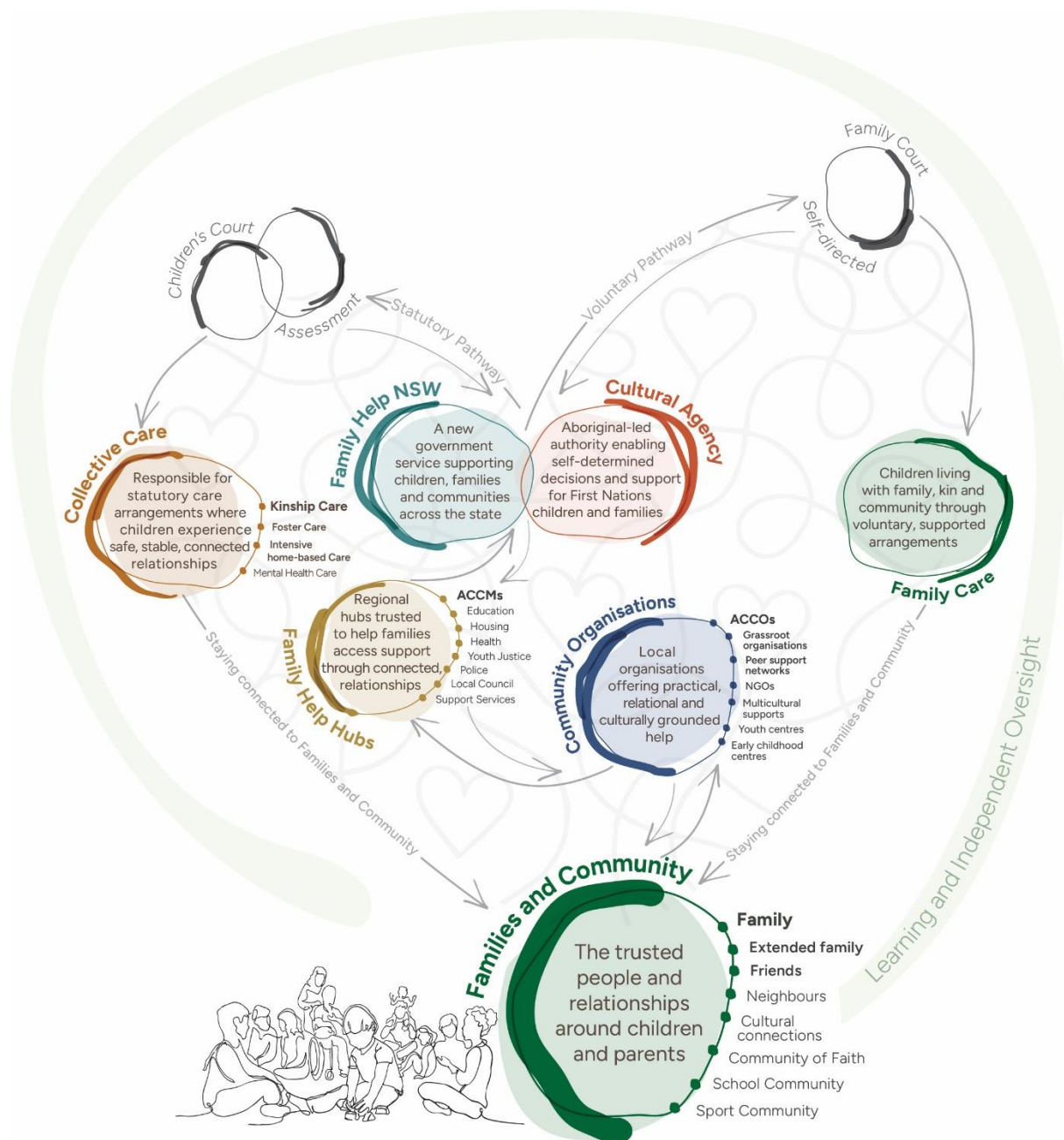
This 'Child Connection System' creates a healthier ecosystem of support around children and families, so children can grow up safe, secure, loved, and able to thrive within enduring relationships of care and belonging.

The visual brings together many of the shifts already being called for across child and family policy: earlier help, community-led responses, Aboriginal self-determination, prevention-focused funding, learning-oriented oversight, and a workforce with the time, authority and support to work relationally.

It is not a finished blueprint. It's a practical reference point for change. We're working alongside others to progress the functional design of areas within the Child Connection System and demonstrate how it can work in practice. The NSW Government, and particularly the Department of Communities and Justice, can support this work by progressing the 11 Opportunity areas set out in the Australian Public Policy Institute's *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish* report, which the NSW Minister for Families and Communities described as a 'guiding light' for system reform.

¹ Audit Office of New South Wales. (2024). *Oversight of the child protection system* (Performance Audit, 6 June 2024). NSW Auditor-General.

² NSW Ombudsman. (2024). *Protecting children at risk: An assessment of whether the Department of Communities and Justice is meeting its core responsibilities* (Special report under section 31 of the *Ombudsman Act 1974*). NSW Ombudsman.



A Child Connection System would mean:

- help can come earlier, before families are pushed into crisis
- parents and families can get practical support without fear that asking for help will automatically lead to investigation or removal
- Aboriginal children, families and communities have real authority and decision-making, not just consultation
- community organisations are funded to provide relational, practical and culturally safe help
- kin, carers and families are supported properly
- children in care have active support to stay connected to siblings, family, culture, school, community and trusted adults

- residential care becomes much smaller and is not used as the default answer when the system runs out of family-based options
- young people leaving care have housing, relationships and practical support before, during and after they turn 18
- the system measures what matters, including whether children feel safe, known, loved and connected.

This is not about pretending every child can safely stay at home. Some children will need statutory care. But even then, the purpose should still be connection.

Care should not cut children off from everything and everyone that matters to them.

What we want the Strategic Plan to include

We recommend the Strategic Plan include a clear commitment to help create a Child Connection System in NSW.

This should include progressing the 11 Opportunity areas set out in the Australian Public Policy Institute's *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish* report, including:

A new social compact with children and young people, with the purpose of the system being help, not surveillance. The work being led by care-experienced young people through a collaborative project with CREATE Foundation and CRC Youth Advocates is an important starting point.

New legislation that enables earlier, voluntary and practical help for families, including differential responses and care without court orders where that is safe and appropriate.

New funding and commissioning approaches that back long-term, relational, place-based programs and services rather than short-term programs, competitive contracting and crisis responses.

Success should be evaluated by measuring what matters: the quality of relationships, children and young people's lived experience, and whether they feel safe, known, loved and connected.

There's a real opportunity for government departments to work together across health, education, housing, youth services, disability, justice and child protection around this shared purpose, so children and young people are supported to thrive through connection, and not passed between disconnected systems.

Final message

We have a final comment in response to the 'Voice and influence' section of the Consultation Paper.

Young people have explained over and over again what's not working – to their caseworkers, to researchers, to department staff, to politicians, and to various commissions and inquiries.

They have said they want to be listened to. They want to be told the truth. They want more say in decisions. They want help before crisis. They want safe housing. They want better leaving care support. They want connection to family, culture, community and the people who matter to them.

The problem is not a shortage of reports. One part of government writes a report about how bad things are and makes recommendations. Another part of government writes a response. It goes backwards and forwards, with government writing reports and recommendations to itself. Years pass while young people keep living the same problems.

The next Strategic Plan should not just collect young people's voices. It should show what changed because of them.

Children and young people need more than services. They need people. They need places where they belong. They need culture, family, community, school, friends and trusted adults.

Most importantly, they need to know the answer to the question: **Who has my back?**

The next Strategic Plan should help NSW build a Child Connection System where every child and young person can answer that question.

Signed



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About the Centre for Relational Care

We are an independent, not-for-profit advocacy body seeking to transform Australia's care systems toward relational models of practice, with an initial focus on out-of-home care. Our work is built on evidence that a system that puts child connection and relationship first, works best for families and keeps children safer. We call this a "Child Connection System". We are growing a community of people with extensive and diverse experience in child protection and care systems to guide our work.

www.centreforrelationalcare.org.au