



Thriving Kids WA – Sector Briefing

12 August 2026

Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for readability.

Lauren McFarlane

Good morning. Welcome to the Thriving Kids Sector Briefing for WA from the Department of Communities today. I'm Lauren McFarlane, Executive Director of Disability Engagement and Stewardship in the Disability division at Communities. My co-presenter today is Richard Slattery, Director of Disability Reform.

Before we start, I will just go through a few housekeeping notes. We will be recording today's session. Attendees aren't visible to one another and won't appear in the recording. It will be published on the Thriving Kids website afterwards for anyone who can't join us live.

Live captions are available. You can turn them on yourself using the CC icon in your Teams toolbar. Your cameras, microphones and chat are turned off, so no one's details will appear in the recording on the website. We will be running this today as a presentation rather than as a discussion, and there's no live question and answer session. Please send any questions, or any feedback you haven't had a chance to give us, to the Foundational Supports inbox, and we will provide that email address later on.

I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which we're all meeting today. For those of us in Perth, that's Whadjuk Noongar boodja. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and I acknowledge the continuing connection of Aboriginal people to land, waters and community.

So today, firstly, I'll start with a short recap of Thriving Kids and the model for WA, for anyone who's joining us for the first time or who might be watching the recording later. Richard will take you through what we heard from you through our sector engagement and community consultation. He'll cover who we spoke with and the themes that came through consistently across this work.

I'll come back after that to talk about how we are refining the model in response to what you told us. And then we'll finish off with what happens next with Thriving Kids in WA.

Before we go any further though, I really want to say thank you. The contributions we received through this consultation process were very generous. They were thoughtful, and they were often very frank. We know how deeply you care about the children and families

you work with, and we're really grateful for the expertise and the honesty you brought to this. What you'll see today has been shaped by that.

Thriving Kids in Western Australia

So firstly, to kick off with our recap of the Thriving Kids model for WA children and families.

The Department of Communities delivered a detailed sector briefing in May this year, which outlined what Thriving Kids is and our approach to delivering it in WA. It's published on the Thriving Kids website, and I do encourage you to access this if you haven't already done so. But let me recap what Thriving Kids is very briefly.

Thriving Kids came out of the findings of the independent review into the NDIS. That review set out a vision of a connected, balanced and fair system. You'd still have mainstream services and community supports available to all Australians. You'd still have the NDIS, providing individualised funding packages for children and families with significant need. This doesn't necessarily support families, carers, kin and community. The review identified a missing middle, and it advocated for what it called Foundational Supports to fill that gap.

Thriving Kids is the first tranche of Foundational Supports to go live, and WA has signed a bilateral agreement with the Commonwealth to deliver it in our state.

The slide shows this as three layers: the NDIS at the top, mainstream services and community supports at the bottom, and Foundational Supports in the middle, which is where Thriving Kids sits.

Thriving Kids is reframing how we talk about support, to align with best practice in early childhood intervention. It's rebalancing towards community-based supports and away from a diagnosis-driven medical model. That point is why Thriving Kids isn't diagnosis dependent.

Who is Thriving Kids for? It's for children aged 0 to 8 with developmental delay and/or autism with low to moderate support needs, along with their families, carers and kin. It will provide information, supports and services aimed at building on the strengths of children and families so that they can participate more fully in their everyday lives.

The Commonwealth, State and Territory governments will block fund up to \$4 billion of supports and services over five years. For WA specifically, the State Government will commission \$360.5 million of Thriving Kids services over five years.

It will be delivered in natural, everyday settings where children live, learn and play. In practice, for WA, that largely means community-based settings such as playgroups, community hubs, and early childhood education and care.

Delivery will be progressive, commencing from 1 October 2026 in what we are referring to as Phase One, with full rollout, or Phase Two, by January 2028.

Thriving Kids will enable families to access help early and close to home, without waiting for a diagnosis first. That's what makes the difference for a young child, and that's what we're working to build in WA.

This will be delivered across five investment streams. I will go through these fairly quickly today. They were discussed in a lot more detail in the previous briefing, so if you would like to understand more, please do go back to that presentation.

The first of the streams is information, advice and navigation. This is so families have somewhere local and trusted to go to work out what they need, to access early support and connect with the right services at the right time.

The second stream is family-based capacity building supports, which will be delivered in existing natural settings such as the home, playgroups and community settings, to help further build parents', carers' and families' knowledge, skills and confidence in supporting a child's development, strengthening peer connections and improving early access to support.

The third stream is therapeutic group and individual supports that are targeted, evidence-based and time-limited, providing children and families with focused assistance where additional support is needed.

The fourth stream is programs for children with autism and their families and carers, also delivered in natural settings and embedded within everyday routines and activities, to build capacity, capability and participation in daily life.

The fifth stream is culturally appropriate supports delivered by Aboriginal-led organisations across the whole Thriving Kids continuum, ensuring that Aboriginal children and families can access services that are culturally safe, community led and responsive to their local needs and strengths.

I will hand over to Richard now, and he will go through what we have heard through the consultations and what we're planning to do with that. Thanks, Richard.

Richard Slattery

Thanks a lot, Lauren. And can I just thank everyone who was able to participate in the consultations we've done to date, be they in person or online. I've been privileged to be a part of many of them. They've certainly been valuable and we're certainly being informed by them in how we take this forward.

The feedback we heard through the consultation process was pretty clear against our objectives, and they were fairly straightforward. When we went out and spoke to people, we wanted to first confirm and further inform our service design, and test the assumptions underpinning it with the people who'd be delivering it. The second element was to understand how ready the sector was to deliver a new Thriving Kids approach in Western Australia, from both a capability and capacity perspective. The third element was to identify the implementation considerations we needed to take into account, including the enablers needed to make Thriving Kids happen.

Who we spoke with

Through the consultations, we spoke to over 300 providers across WA. We've visited the Kimberley, we've had town halls in the Midwest, Perth and the South West, and we've run online sessions. Alongside those town halls, we also held targeted interviews to better understand regional and remote nuance, to understand the considerations for culturally and linguistically diverse families and children, and to understand the considerations for Aboriginal children and their families. We also met with organisations to understand how a Thriving Kids approach will intersect with other community service systems and communities.

In addition to that sector engagement, we have also heard from children, families and experts as part of a broader approach. We've run workshops working with the Youth Disability Advocacy Network for children and young people, and workshops in partnership with Kiind for families, carers and kin. We've also spoken with clinicians, allied health professionals, and early childhood education and care practitioners, to test the clinical and developmental thinking behind the model.

We've worked with our partners across the education, health and mental health service systems, with peak bodies across the sectors, and with disability representative and advocacy organisations. This includes the WA Ministerial Advisory Council on Disability.

We're continuing engagement regularly with our trusted partners across the sector, with the WA Government, and across the Commonwealth Government. For us, engagement isn't finished yet. We still have some further consultations to come. So the next few slides talk about what we have heard to date as the consistent themes.

What we heard

We identified six themes. My intent is to present these back to you to show what we've heard. I'm not going to tell you that they're solved, because they're a work in progress, but Lauren will talk after me about how we're working to respond to them.

Theme 1: Putting children and families at the centre

Thriving Kids, as Lauren outlined at the start, is intentionally designed to be family-centred. That's a direct response to the findings of the independent review into the NDIS.

Foundational Supports, when it was talked about in the NDIS review, focused on building family connection and capacity. When we think about who Thriving Kids is for, it is for a cohort of children, but it is also for their families, carers and kin.

What you told us is that this principle has to be real in delivery, and four things on how to do that came up.

The first is trust. Deliver supports through settings, relationships and providers that families already know. Families who are managing a lot do not have the energy to build new relationships with new organisations in unfamiliar buildings. If the support comes through a playgroup they already attend, or a service they already use, or a person they already trust, they're more likely to engage with it. If it doesn't, many people won't engage.

The second is responsiveness. Tailor delivery to meet the actual needs and the context of the family that's in front of us. What works for a family in Kununurra is not what will work

for a family in Rockingham. What works for a family where both parents work shifts is not what will work for a family where you have a parent at home.

The third is accessibility. Reducing the barriers so families can access support easily and with minimal additional burden. That means less paperwork, fewer assessments, fewer appointments to establish eligibility before anything actually happens, and fewer occasions when a family has to tell their story from the beginning to a new person.

And the fourth is equity. Support families to access and benefit from support regardless of their circumstances, which means recognising that some families will need more help just to get them to the starting line.

I want to underline the point we heard around burden. There are many families in this cohort who are already at capacity, and every additional form, appointment or phone call is a reason families may stop engaging. The ones who are most likely to drop out are the ones who are most likely to benefit from and need the support.

Theme 2: Creating clear and connected pathways

The 'no wrong door' approach is a key principle for Thriving Kids. This means having multiple entry points. Families can self-refer, they can be referred via an information, advice and navigation approach, and they can be referred by other Thriving Kids service providers.

You told us three things need to be true for a no wrong door approach to actually work.

Firstly, the pathways need to be simple and clear enough that a family can navigate them or be connected onward to an alternative service if Thriving Kids isn't the right fit.

Secondly, access needs to be genuinely low barrier. Families should be able to access Thriving Kids without complex administrative, assessment and diagnostic requirements. This connects directly back to the first theme.

And third, frontline settings need to be informed. The trusted places families go, like health services and early childhood education and care, need to know what Thriving Kids is and how to help a family get to it. You were clear with us that it can't be an afterthought.

We've also had questions about the eligibility criteria for targeted therapeutic supports. That is still being worked through. What I can say is that it will be graduated and informed by an assessment of needs, rather than a diagnosis.

Theme 3: Strengthening local delivery and equity of access

The third theme is equity of access across metropolitan, regional and remote WA. In some regions there are very few providers at all, and there can be a heavy reliance on one or a few individual sole practitioners, which means the service exists as long as those few people are there. There's limited diversity of disciplines, so a family might be able to access speech pathology but not occupational therapy, or the reverse.

We've heard that what sustains engagement is someone local, because it links to the trust and continuity that will make a family keep turning up.

You also told us about the practical barriers that compound this. Travel distance and the cost of it, limitations on public transport, and digital connectivity that doesn't support telehealth reliably. And for small communities, there is the additional factor of visibility, where accessing a service in a small place is not a private act and can generate stigma that can stop people or families from walking through the door.

It's worth noting that our regional consultations aren't finished. We have further sessions coming up this month in the Pilbara, the Goldfields, the Wheatbelt and the Great Southern. This presentation is about what we've heard so far, and the themes will keep developing as we hear from more communities. If you're in one of those regions, please watch this space and our website. And please, across the board, understand that we haven't finished listening.

Theme 4: Responding to the needs of CaLD children and families

The fourth theme comes from culturally and linguistically diverse children and families, and making sure Thriving Kids works for them. Four things came through in relation to this.

The first is information, advice and navigation that is genuinely linguistically diverse. This is not just English language material with an interpreter attached at the point of appointment, but information families can actually read and act on in their own language and in the context of their culture.

The second is service delivery that is culturally responsive and trauma informed. For a number of families in this cohort who may have come through humanitarian pathways, their experiences of government services and of disclosing information about children shapes their willingness to engage. Providers told us they need to understand this to be effective, and that the model needs to allow the time it takes to do so.

The third is delivery through trusted community settings. This is the same principle as in theme one: go where families already go, and work with organisations they already trust.

And the fourth is culturally and linguistically diverse capability development and sector support. Building that cultural capability is not something an individual small provider can solve on their own. If we expect the sector to deliver culturally responsive services, the system needs to support the sector as a whole to build that capability.

Theme 5: Supporting Aboriginal governance and cultural safety

The fifth theme concerns Aboriginal children, families and communities, and the role that Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) play. What we heard is that ACCOs and Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations (ACCHOs) play a critical role in delivering supports that are culturally safe and genuinely trusted.

The first key thing that came through is genuine collaboration: ACCOs, ACCHOs and Aboriginal communities leading and shaping the delivery of supports for Aboriginal children and families. The word 'leading' is doing the work in that sentence. What was put to us clearly is the difference between being consulted at the end of a process, and being involved in shaping it from the start.

The second is embedding Aboriginal leadership and governance. Aboriginal leadership and cultural authority embedded in the governance of Thriving Kids, so decisions affecting

Aboriginal children and families can be shared rather than made for them. We're working through what that might look like in practice.

The third is sector capability: supporting ACCOs and ACCHOs to grow their capability and capacity so they can sustainably lead, deliver and expand services for Aboriginal children and families. We clearly heard that short funding cycles and contracting arrangements designed around larger organisations can work against ACCOs, and that's a practical barrier for us to look at solving.

And the fourth is shared responsibility for cultural safety. Cultural safety cannot only sit with ACCOs and ACCHOs. It needs to be built across the whole system, so that an Aboriginal family gets culturally safe, responsive support from whoever they choose to seek help from.

Theme 6: Building an integrated system

The sixth theme is about Thriving Kids working as part of a system, rather than as a standalone program. Thriving Kids is one part of a much larger system of support for children and families. There are many existing services already being delivered through health, mental health, education, and the NDIS. Thriving Kids will complement those services, and needs to not duplicate them and not replace them.

We recognise that the Thriving Kids approach shapes and signals change, and that it comes at a time when change is also occurring in many other parts of that broader service system. We recognise that this can be a stressful and challenging period for many of the providers servicing that system, and for the families and children accessing it.

What we were told on this theme is how much it matters that the system works together, and that when it doesn't, that burden lands upon the family. When two services can't share information, it's the parent who has to repeat the story. When a referral pathway doesn't exist, it's the parent who has to make the phone calls.

The Department of Communities has been working closely with other departments in Western Australia, as well as with the NDIS, to support embedding appropriate interlinkages.

Market preparedness

Before I hand back to Lauren, I'd just comment on market preparedness. We ran a survey earlier in the year to better understand what already exists across the state, and we also learnt about this through our consultations with providers and users of services.

Providers indicated they've been working in recent years within a market that – post the introduction of the NDIS – has seen a shift towards individualised funding. We recognise that the approach we've presented for Thriving Kids is a further shift for this market.

There are three headlines from the survey and consultations that I'd highlight.

The first is that existing services provide a strong foundation. There are many providers already delivering supports that closely align with the Thriving Kids service offerings. We're not starting from nothing.

The second is that there's a real willingness to deliver, with strong interest across the sector in developing and supporting Thriving Kids in Western Australia.

And the third is that capacity does vary across the regions. The number of providers and the range of services available differs significantly, particularly in the more remote areas.

Lauren, I'll hand back to you now.

Lauren McFarlane

Thanks, Richard. I will just say thank you to those of you who did participate in the market preparedness survey. It was a really valuable exercise and has given us a lot of insight into how the market is operating, and where there are opportunities for us to implement and link in with existing services.

How we are refining the model

In terms of what we heard and what we're doing now to refine the model, a consistent theme through the engagement has really been the value of stakeholder feedback in strengthening the Thriving Kids model in WA.

This slide highlights some of the key areas where we've refined the approach based on what we've heard. Some of these improvements are being incorporated into Phase One, which is those services that will come online from October this year, while others will inform the design and development of Phase Two. We also recognise that some feedback relates to broader systemic reform that requires ongoing collaboration across governments and the sector, and that not everything will be visible from day one in October 2026.

The slide sets out some of what's being refined, and this is by no means an exhaustive list.

The first is around clearer investment stream descriptions. Stakeholders told us they wanted greater clarity about what sits within each Thriving Kids stream and what each stream is intended to achieve. In response, we're refining our descriptions and communication materials so children, families, services and partners can more easily understand the supports available and how the different streams work together.

The second one is around easier access and movement between those streams. We heard very clear and strong feedback about the importance of a seamless experience for children and families. As children's needs change over time, we know that support should be able to adapt and move with them. We're looking at ways to make it easier for families to move between streams and access the right level of support at the right time, without unnecessary barriers or duplication. That's the no wrong door principle applied across the Thriving Kids streams, as well as at the front door.

Locally responsive delivery was also something stakeholders highlighted. Communities across WA are diverse, and a one-size-fits-all approach won't always achieve the best outcomes. We're exploring opportunities for services to be responsive to local needs, workforce capability and community priorities, while maintaining consistency in achieving the intended outcomes for children and families. That's a direct response to what Richard covered earlier on regional service delivery.

The final one on this slide is Aboriginal governance and leadership. A particularly strong message was the need for genuine partnership with Aboriginal organisations and communities. We're strengthening our focus on Aboriginal governance and leadership by working closely with ACCOs and ACCHOs to ensure services reflect the strengths, priorities and aspirations of Aboriginal children, families and communities. This isn't just about consultation. It's about meaningful partnership and shared decision making that we want to embed into the Thriving Kids model on an ongoing basis.

Overall, the feedback has been invaluable in helping us strengthen the model. There is more than this, and the fuller picture will come through as we adopt an ongoing learning and continuous improvement approach, as services gradually come online and we adjust where required to further refine the model to meet the needs of the community.

What happens next

In terms of what's happening next, we are in the pre-rollout phase now. That's the work we've been doing with you: gathering information, engaging service providers and subject matter experts to confirm and further inform the design, and understanding how prepared the sector is.

Phase One commences from 1 October this year. That's when some services will commence initial rollout, with ongoing engagement alongside that so we can keep refining both Phase One and Phase Two delivery as we learn. In the coming weeks and months, we expect to enter the market with a range of procurement approaches to stand up some services for this first phase.

Phase Two begins from 1 January 2028. That's the full ramp up of services, and it's also when we will adapt the commissioning and procurement approach based on what we've learned through Phase One.

We're also continuing consultations, as Richard said earlier, and today is not the end of the conversation. The regional consultations are continuing throughout this month across the Pilbara, the Goldfields, the Wheatbelt and the Great Southern, and we'll be reaching out to stakeholders in those regions to engage with you.

We're continuing to work with peak bodies and advocacy organisations, including the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia and the Council of Aboriginal Services WA.

Between now and January 2028, what we learn and what you continue to tell us will shape how Thriving Kids evolves. It is designed to be iterative, and we will keep monitoring, keep learning and keep adjusting.

Which brings me to this next slide.

As Thriving Kids develops, we're taking a genuinely collaborative approach. Children and families sit at the centre of everything we do, and we're working across multiple levels of the system to ensure their voices, needs and experiences shape the Thriving Kids approach in WA.

The starting point for all of our work is children and families, carers and kin. We're committed to hearing directly from those with lived experience, to understand what's

working, what's not, and what needs to change. Their perspectives help us design a system that is more responsive, accessible and effective.

Around children and families sits the service system. We will keep engaging with service providers, peak bodies, ACCOs and ACCHOs through consultation and commissioning. These organisations bring critical expertise about what works on the ground and how we can strengthen service delivery and outcomes for children and their families.

We're working collaboratively across government, because children's wellbeing doesn't sit within a single portfolio. As Richard mentioned earlier, this includes strong partnerships across [Departments of] Health, Education and the Mental Health Commission, as well as ongoing engagement with the Commonwealth Government to ensure alignment and shared accountability.

And the outermost circle is the broader community. That is the people and places already around each child: their friends, community workers, educators, Elders and community leaders. This community plays a vital role in every child's life.

The key message from this slide is that Thriving Kids is not something government can deliver alone. It requires a whole-of-community and whole-of-system effort, with children and families at the centre of decision making, and all stakeholders contributing to a shared vision for children's wellbeing in WA.

Where to find information about upcoming opportunities

The Thriving Kids page on the Communities website is the front door for all Thriving Kids updates and opportunities. TendersWA is where procurement opportunities will be published, and grant opportunities will be published on SmartyGrants. Opportunities will be released progressively over the coming weeks and months, so my advice is to keep checking.

I know some of you will be very keen for more detail on commissioning approaches. In the coming weeks and months, we expect to enter the market with a range of procurement approaches that may take the form of grants and direct commissioning, where appropriate, to stand up services for this first phase. We'll use that to inform, test and learn ahead of Phase Two design and implementation. Details will be published in the places on this slide as it's confirmed.

I know some of you have asked previously if there'll be a mailing list or a newsletter for updates related to Thriving Kids in WA. You can now subscribe on the Thriving Kids website to receive updates as they come through.

Conclusion

That brings us to the end of our presentation today. Thank you again for your contributions to this process. If you have any questions, or feedback you didn't get the chance to give us, please do email us. That address is on the slide in front of you.

The recording, the transcript and these slides will be published on the Thriving Kids webpage, and you'll receive a link to the website via email following today's presentation.

We really look forward to continuing to engage and work in partnership with the sector as we implement Thriving Kids in WA. Once again, thank you all for your contributions. They are very valuable, and we do look forward to engaging with you again soon. Thank you.

Transcript ends.