



**Early Childhood Australia**  
A voice for young children

# Early Childhood Australia's Pre-Budget Submission for the Federal Budget 2026

January 2026

EVERY  
YOUNG  
CHILD IS  
THRIVING  
AND  
LEARNING



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**OUR  
VISION:  
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## About us

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit, membership-based organisation that was first incorporated in 1938. We work at both the national and local levels, with active State and Territory Committees in each Australian jurisdiction and a National Board of Directors. Our membership includes early childhood professionals, services, schools and organisations that share a commitment to the rights and wellbeing of young children.

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning. To achieve this, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school. Our work builds the capacity of our society and the early childhood sector to realise the potential of every child during the critical early years from birth to the age of eight.

ECA acknowledges the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our society, the past and current injustices and realities for them across Australia, and the enduring strength of their cultures and identities. We commit to being at the forefront of achieving a reconciled nation that values, respects and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being.

Find out more at: [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au)

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## Acknowledgement of Country

Early Childhood Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to the Elders both past and present.



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## Budget Context

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Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is cognisant of challenges facing the early childhood sector as we enter 2026. There have been significant policy, funding and regulatory changes in response to reports of child harm and quality breaches in some early childhood services. There have also been foundations set down for a universal system of high-quality early childhood education and care through previous budget commitments including the 3-day guarantee, a much-needed pay rise for educators through the Worker Retention Grant and new investment in infrastructure through the Building Early Education Fund.

ECA believes that safety and quality are cornerstones of a high-quality system that can deliver positive outcomes for all Australian children, in every Australian community. When children can access high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), everyone benefits—children benefit, families benefit, communities and employers benefit, and there is a positive impact on social and economic metrics.

Ensuring children’s access to high quality services continues to be a priority in our advocacy, keeping children and their families front of mind. Ethical and principled early childhood professionals have described feeling a sense of betrayal and profound distress for children and their families affected by child harm and maltreatment. Early childhood colleagues from across the sector have demonstrated their reaffirmed commitment to children’s safety, quality, and the rights and best interests of children.

This Federal Budget provides an opportunity to complement the progress of new and existing measures. ECA has identified areas of challenge and possibility to animate the national reform agenda. As national peak body for early childhood (birth to eight), ECA is well-positioned to actively lead or co-lead relevant initiatives and/or projects, if granted the authority and funding to do so. For each of our proposals we can provide more detailed briefing materials and costings.

ECA understands the importance of fiscal responsibility and restraint. In the context of the Australian Government’s significant spend on early childhood education and care—over \$16 billion per annum through the Child Care Subsidy (CSS) alone—the investments we propose are modest. We have identified proposals that will ensure the value of ECEC spending is fully realised, that bad actors and poor practice are removed from the sector and that we don’t perpetuate inequity for children and families living in small communities or needing proportionate support. While it is difficult to quantify, we believe that these proposals will deliver a long-term return on investment through enhanced provider integrity and community confidence. They are also consistent with recommendations from major inquiries including the Productivity Commission (2024)<sup>1</sup> and the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission (2023)<sup>2</sup>.

Investing in reshaping the ‘market’, improving inclusion, strengthening the workforce and engaging the sector will ensure that the CCS investment is effective in strengthening the quality and safety of early childhood services. We know that when families have confidence in the quality of early childhood education and care they are more likely to utilise services to engage in economic activities including paid work and running small businesses. We also know that high-quality early childhood education and care delivers long-term improvements

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission, [A path to universal early childhood education and care inquiry report](#) (Australian Government, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Australian Consumer and Competition Commission, [Childcare inquiry final report](#) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023).



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in education outcomes and is effective in targeting early intervention to children that need it, saving millions in late intervention.



## Budget Proposals

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### Proposal 1: Early Childhood Services Commission

**Summary: Establish a new Early Childhood Services Commission with scope, remit and powers to build a universal system of early childhood services to support families, champion the early years and deliver high-quality early childhood education and care across all Australian communities, building on the capability established within ACECQA with an expanded mandate to incorporate system stewardship and sector reform.**

**Budget ask: Estimate \$450 million over three years 2027–30 (with savings from the current ACECQA appropriation)**

As identified by the Productivity Commission, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and many sector experts, market-driven approaches to early childhood education and care have not delivered on access and availability. Instead, we have chronic undersupply in many communities, particularly small regional, rural and remote communities, impacting on both children’s developmental outcomes and the capacity of families to work or run businesses. At the same time, we have oversupply in many areas, putting pressure on an already stretched workforce and driving up the out-of-pocket costs for many families.

Despite substantial growth in government investment over the past decade, the demand-driven CCS has not delivered consistent affordability for families, and while there is high variability in price, that is not consistently linked to higher quality. The uneven patterns of growth and limited restrictions on provider credentials have created significant challenges for regulators and unacceptable risks to the safety and wellbeing of children. Because the CCS covers such a high proportion of the cost of operating an ECEC service, we have seen rapid growth in both property development and operators seeking quick and excessive profit margins without the knowledge or commitment to children’s best interests that is essential to the delivery of high quality ECEC services.

To build a universal system, the Australian Government’s vision needs to be clearly articulated and translated into system stewardship. This requires a shift from a ‘free market’ approach based on investor returns to a ‘social market’ based on agreed values and outcomes for children and families. This does not mean that private operators cannot run services—they can continue to be an important part of the provider mix, but government can and should demand that all providers commit to the paramount consideration to child and family outcomes and to meeting quality, safety and transparency standards. There is the potential to review current providers, in collaboration with State and Territory Regulatory Authorities, and to impose new requirements such as those proposed by ECA in 2025 (see Attachment 1: Proposed Provider Commitments to Quality and Safety).

Eliminating bad actors and increasing entry requirements for new providers is necessary to reshape the sector and address the quality and safety breaches that have been unprecedented in recent years. In return, high-quality providers will benefit from greater public confidence and more stability through supply/demand management. From an investment perspective this represents a maturing of the sector—reduced risk for investors, more moderate returns on capital investment, longer-term system planning and stewardship. It has been previously estimated that over \$1 billion per annum of spending through the CCS is lost from the system through profit-taking. This can be reduced through public stewardship and expanding the not-for-profit sector, as the government is doing through initiatives such as the Building Early Education Fund.



The proposed Early Childhood Services Commission must have national authority with scope, remit and powers to effectively lead sector reform, but collaboration with State and Territory Governments will be crucial. There is also the potential to create a role for the highly contextualised knowledge held by local government authorities, particularly in identifying and responding to community needs. Rather than an additional layer of regulation, the role of the Commission will be reshape the sector—to build a universal system based on the foundations of quality as articulated within the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) with agility and responsiveness. Functions for the Commission could include:

- Oversee and have powers to drive and coordinate consistency across the jurisdictional regulatory authorities in alignment with the NQF.
- Exercise powers to compel regulatory authorities, providers and services to act, within the scope of the Commission’s remit and powers, to ensure and drive quality and safety.
- Assess available data and where needed, develop new or complementary comprehensive national data sets to enable a data-informed approach toward stewardship of the provider and service footprint, and provision.
- Use data to inform provider and service approvals and cancellations to balance supply and demand.
- Lead the development of provider commitments to clearly articulate expectations of providers and their obligations within the stewarded system of quality and safety, including their commitment to the paramountcy of children’s safety, rights and best interests.
- Lead a renegotiation of the provider mix whereby bad actors are expelled from the new stewarded system, and those who remain or enter accept that government investment of public monies comes with clear obligations about what is fair and reasonable in terms of profit and surplus, and an expected level of re-investment into services where children attend, such as those proposed by ECA in 2025 (see Attachment 1: Proposed Provider Commitments to Quality and Safety).
- Work with state/territory and local governments to monitor and respond to community needs and service system gaps through agreed approaches to needs analysis, community consultation and local system design.
- Drive research and innovation in relation to flexible service models, particularly in thin markets or cohorts with bespoke needs, moving beyond work-related care to integrated approaches that can wrap supports and services around families and children.

The establishment of a new Commission is a significant step, but one that we believe is necessary to address current challenges and enable reform that will deliver a universal service system.

## Proposal 2: Establish an ECEC Universal Access and Inclusion Program

**Summary: Replace the current Inclusion Support Program with a Universal Access and Inclusion Program tasked with delivering on universal access and inclusion, co-designed in consultation with Inclusion Agencies, service providers and families. This would include national coordination for inclusion support currently provided through the Inclusion Agencies and a new approach to financing ECEC services to increase staffing and upskill teams to deliver inclusive and culturally responsive services.**

**Budget ask: Estimate \$250 million over three years 2027–30 (in addition to current spending on the Inclusion Support Program, including both the Inclusion Development Fund and the Inclusion Agencies)**



ECA is acutely aware of the frustrations families experience when they are unable to access early childhood education and care or feel that the services provided do not meet the needs of their child(ren). We are also aware that the current approach to supporting ECEC services to be inclusive is under-resourced and that the Inclusion Development Fund is not covering the actual costs involved in increasing staffing capacity when necessary or equipping education teams with the skills, resources and support they need.

It is relevant to declare that ECA is the current Northern Territory Inclusion Agency, funded through the Inclusion Support Program, as well as being the NDIS Partner in the Community for the Darwin region. This provides us with the insight to see that reform is necessary, while recognising that a new approach must be informed by stakeholders including families, service providers and the current Inclusion Agencies working across the service sector and across jurisdictions.

ECA believes that the next two years could be used to transition the Inclusion Support Program from providing short-term or ad hoc support to services, to driving universal access and inclusion at a systems level working across service types and regions. Our proposed new Universal Access and Inclusion Program (UAIP) would see Inclusion Agency Consultants (IACs) providing high-level, broad-ranging, tiered supports with access to training and development and resources that are embedded into core practice capabilities that broaden the capacity of ECEC services. This would also encompass an improved approach to funding inclusion capacity within services such as higher staffing levels, educator upskilling, equipment needs and innovative practice.

This represents a paradigm ‘code’ shift, from integrating ‘others’ into existing systems to reshaping those systems using the core concepts of diversity, equity and universalism. It recognises ECEC as a foundational provision for choice, social justice and collective wellbeing. In doing so, ECEC becomes not only inclusive, but transformative for all children. ‘Inclusion’ often implies the need for some children to fit into an already established dominant, standardised system. This (unintentionally) positions *difference* as a problem and reinforces deficit-based approaches which are hard work, short-term and expensive. The opportunity here is to move beyond inclusion as an activity and embed it as a core foundation built on the following three principles:

- Diversity—Rather than treating diversity as an exception, ECEC beyond inclusion assumes diversity as the normative condition in early childhood settings and is set up for differential models of education and care.
- Equity—Provision (resources, funding, support) is proportionate to need, acknowledging that children start from different positions due to social, structural, historic and systemic inequalities. Some of this need can be determined long before children turn up so the service is ready and waiting.
- Universalism—Ensuring access and availability to ECEC as a social right and collective responsibility for all children. Cost, eligibility, access and funding—while this is in-train with the current Australian Government, it needs to be fast-tracked.

The new program could be established quickly, building on the existing governance, management and infrastructure in the Inclusion Agencies. These services can then map local community service provisions (similar to the Australian Government’s Ask Izzy app) and support the establishment of local peer support networks.

Inclusion Professionals within the Inclusion Support Program currently work to provide guidance and advice to ECEC education teams to support inclusive practice. This includes support to include children with developmental or disability related needs as well as culturally diverse families, LGBTQI+ families and gifted



children who require unique or specialist support. The Inclusion Professionals assist with the development of strategic inclusion plans, access to additional educator funding, upskilling educator teams and facilitating access to assessment, early intervention or family support. We see opportunities to expand their remit to assist ECEC services with community needs assessment, inclusion preparedness, as well as child assessment and screening, referral, and early childhood intervention delivery and coordination.

Beyond reform of the Inclusion Support Program there is a potential role for Inclusion Agencies and professionals in the ECEC sector to provide coordination and navigation supports across related Australian Government initiatives including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the Thriving Kids Initiative. ECA has considered the potential role of Inclusion Agencies in coordinating Foundational Supports that can be delivered or hosted by early childhood services (see Attachment 2: Thought Piece on the Role of Inclusion Agencies in the Thriving Kids Initiative). There are also opportunities to better coordinate supports provided to young children with a disability and their families funded by the NDIS, utilising the national best practice standards for the delivery of early childhood intervention.

ECA recognises that many ECEC providers, particularly those operating in disadvantaged communities, have the capacity to embed early childhood intervention provision within their services and should be resourced to do so. This allows relationships to build between education teams and allied health professionals, providing soft entry points to intervention and enriched early childhood education and care. Having capability or coordination added to the role of the Inclusion Agencies has the potential to extend the reach of other programs (such as the Thriving Kids Initiative) to all services. The additional resourcing can build on existing infrastructure and contractual arrangements, allowing for timely implementation (see Attachment 2: Thought Piece on Inclusion Agencies and the Thriving Kids Initiative).

The Universal Access and Inclusion Program can also play a role in connecting supports for children and families across the service sector. ECEC services are already established in local communities and connect with families every day. Educators spend many hours a week with many children and are in a unique position to use everyday learning, interactions and relationships to maximise child development and learning in partnership with families. ECEC environments are ripe for providing a platform to foster peer support among families attending and provide information, guidance and resources on child development and where to go if more support is required. This work is not currently resourced through the CSS—there is potential to use inclusion funding to drive more cross-sector collaboration and multidisciplinary responses to children and families, reducing the costs of late intervention which are estimated to be \$22.3 billion, equivalent to \$838 for every person in Australia every year, or \$2704 for every child and young person up to the age of 24<sup>3</sup>.

### Proposal 3: Invest in Sector Capability to Support Reform Initiatives

**Summary: Establish an Early Childhood Policy Dialogue tasked with contributing to strengthening safety, quality, access, inclusion and affordability across the early childhood service system. The early childhood sector would be better able to analyse policy and program proposals and alternatives, build consensus on potential solutions to current challenges and back-in reform initiatives if it was resourced to come together in a way that respects and values the diversity of families, communities, providers and educators.**

**Budget ask: \$2.1 million (over three years)**

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<sup>3</sup> M. O'Connell, *The Cost of Late Intervention in 2024* (The Front Project, 2024).



ECA proposes to establish an Early Childhood Policy Dialogue and convene six sector roundtables with policy and practice experts to engage in dialogue on system reforms, with topics to be agreed in advance with government representatives. The Policy Dialogue will include sector leaders from practice, research and policy backgrounds and will be tasked with facilitating sector engagement on current and future reform initiatives. Given ECA's position as the national peak for early childhood, our reputation as a measured and ethical voice, and the breadth and reach of our activities nationally, we could stand this up relatively quickly.

The early childhood sector is frequently called upon to provide advice and guidance. Resourcing the participation of early childhood experts, including our practitioner colleagues, acknowledges their deep knowledge, expertise and lived experience. ECA previously convened the National Children's Services Forum which brought together sector peaks for quarterly meetings with a similar remit.

The purpose of each roundtable would be to do a deep dive on an area of complexity, to explore potential solutions and build support for reform, ensuring that Australian Government decision-making is informed by sector expertise while managing conflicting interests or positions. Each roundtable will have a topic, background papers and an outline for facilitated dialogue. Participants will include experts from research, practice and stakeholder networks selected in a way that is appropriate to the topic and representative of diverse interests.

The involvement of government representatives would be in selecting topics and providing guidance on background information, as well as participating in the dialogue and follow-up briefings on reform opportunities. Following each roundtable a summary of areas of consensus and recommended next steps would be provided to the Australian Government and to participants. ECA would seek to work collaboratively with other peak networks as well as providers, stakeholder representatives and academics to ensure each roundtable is productive and collegiate. We are uniquely placed to do this because we have long-standing relationships based on respect and mutual recognition of expertise. We also have clarity of purpose in relation to putting the interests of children at the centre of early childhood policy and program design.

Through these roundtables, the Australian Government would have a direct conduit to a significant footprint of the sector, with highly technical and specialised knowledge. The preparedness to take a systems view could inform any renegotiation of the provider mix within the current market approach (potentially modelled on the principles of a social market where providers opt in and agree to meet clearly articulated commitments as put forward by the Australian Government).

## Proposal 4: Professional Learning on Safety and Quality

**Summary: Build on the success of the ECA Learning Hub to invest in a comprehensive suite of professional learning that will support the transition to a universal system of early childhood education and care, reflecting the diversity of provider and service types while reinforcing the foundation of good practice that safeguards children and delivers high-quality and inclusive early education and care.**

**Budget ask: \$14 million (over four years)**

The transition to a universal system of early childhood education and care represents a significant change in the expectation on providers and educators to be committed to quality, safety and inclusion. The early childhood profession needs support to manage this transition and there is consensus among experts that investing in the



capability and competence of educators is the best way to improve outcomes for children and strengthen safeguards in early childhood settings.

Recent quality and safety breaches across the sector have highlighted the significant risks associated with poor practice and how educators who have not been provided with ongoing professional learning can find themselves in difficult circumstances, overwhelmed by the work and unsure how to report concerns. Investment in a national and freely available professional learning suite for the early childhood sector would be an investment in children's safety and quality in early childhood settings. We know that currently, access to professional learning differs across provider and service types. Tenuous access to professional learning can further compound challenges within early childhood settings.

High-quality, freely available professional learning can help to address this. ECA has a Child Safety and Safeguarding Taskforce consisting of sector experts and partners (including the National Centre for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse, Act for Kids and Bravehearts)<sup>4</sup>. We are well-placed to develop a suite of resources to lift quality and safety across the sector and to deploy these resources effectively across service and provider types.

When the *National Quality Framework* was first introduced, ECA was contracted to deliver professional learning to support its adoption (2009–2015), working alongside and in collaboration with the Professional Support Coordinators (PSCs) funded in each jurisdiction to support professional practice. The resulting National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program (NQS PLP) was highly successful, with content developed by early childhood experts with a strong understanding of the delivery context and professional role of educators. The suite of materials included explainers, videos and accompanying resources that were highly contextualised for early childhood settings, and these quality resources were accessed long beyond the life of the funded project. When the NQS PLP came to an end ECA invested in building an online learning platform—the ECA Learning Hub—to continue providing high-quality professional learning resources to the early childhood sector. In 2026, the ECA Learning Hub has over 60,000 active users and provides packages of professional learning to the majority of large providers; it hosts both free content that has been subsidised by government (e.g. eSafety Office, inclusion support) and fee-based content that has been developed by us or our partners (local and international).

We propose a similar investment to the NQS PLP and PSCs (adjusted for inflation) to provide high-quality professional learning that reflects contemporary and evidence-informed adult learning approaches and content. ECA would not look to replicate existing materials, but complement the existing offerings, including our own extensive catalogue as well as that of other leading organisations in the sector.

Access to a freely available, Australian Government–endorsed, contemporary, research-informed, early childhood–specific professional learning suite would address gaps and inconsistencies in professional learning currently accessed by the sector, and improve access to quality materials. We have partnerships with other peaks including Family Day Care Australia and SNAICC to tailor professional learning to their stakeholders and would be happy to work collaboratively with peaks and training providers in a way that recognises their expertise.

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<sup>4</sup> Early Childhood Australia Learning Hub, [Children's safety and safeguarding in early childhood services](#) (2025)



Accompanying the professional learning program with equity grants for backfill and release for eligible early childhood services of greatest need (or least likely to be able to undertake professional learning due to low viability, workforce challenges etc.) would be beneficial.

ECA, as the largest provider of high-quality professional learning to the early childhood sector, is well-equipped to undertake such a project, with infrastructure such as our highly capable Learner Management System (LMS) and in-house content, instructional design and publication teams. We are uniquely placed to disseminate high-quality content across the sector using SCORM wrapping technology that has been specifically developed for the early childhood sector, allowing us to host, monitor and update content on multiple LMS platforms. A comprehensive suite of professional learning that meets the needs of different providers, service types and geographies, as well as reflecting different learning styles for greatest applicability, would be an excellent contribution towards strengthening child safety and quality across all parts of the early childhood education and care sector.

## Proposal 5: Articulate Professional Expectations for Student Educators

**Summary: Commission the development of clear guidance on appropriate professional expectations for students, training providers and employers to ensure that everyone understands what is reasonable and what is not reasonable in relation to student educators engaged in qualification training.**

**Budget ask: \$150,000 (over one year)**

The early childhood sector does not have clearly articulated scope of practice guidelines for student educators engaged in qualification pathways including Certificate III, Diploma and Degree attainment. ECA has been alarmed by reports of quality and safety breaches involving unqualified educators and students on placement. There have been too many examples of knowledge being assumed and student educators being made responsible for children or tasks when they are not yet competent. Our insight here comes from our members (including students, service managers, training organisations and universities) and from our role in workforce development such as managing the Early Years and School Aged Care Workforce Strategy in Tasmania.

In consultation with registered training organisations and universities, we have identified that there is potential benefit in developing a resource that sets out the expectations and obligations within early childhood settings for trainee educators at milestones through their studies. This would clearly define what is fair and reasonable for trainee and student educators, early childhood leaders in services, providers and training providers, and may help minimise the risk of developing educators being asked to operate beyond their knowledge and skills.

ECA has heard anecdotally from within the sector of the vulnerability of trainee and student educators, educators Working Towards and new graduates when they are expected to take on higher levels of responsibility than is safe and/or reasonable.

As a national network, ECA is well-placed to develop the guide with input from employers, training providers and educators. The development process would include data collection through survey and focus group consultations with students and semi-structured interviews with student placement coordinators and employers. We would develop a prototype and then consult again to test for accuracy and value. The purpose of the guide would be to codify what can be expected of student and trainee educators at different stages of their



qualification attainment. This would include what tasks they can be expected to do with or without supervision. We would ensure the guide is:

- easy to understand (simple language, easily translated)
- endorsed by reputable employers and registered training providers
- applicable across service settings and jurisdictions
- suitable for digital and printed versions to be widely shared with students and employers (at no or low cost).

## Proposal 6: Invest in a Community Needs Analysis and Mapping Toolkit

**Summary: Invest in the development of a community needs analysis and mapping tool that will support small communities to better identify the child and family services they need and support collaboration on solutions between stakeholders, providers, government funders and regulatory authorities.**

**Budget ask: \$250,000 (over two years)**

Gaining further insight into the needs of rural and remote communities through the development of a community needs analysis and community mapping tool would help the Australian Government as it seeks to expand ECEC supply and deliver on the 3-day guarantee.

Through ECA's recent stakeholder consultations exploring unserved and underserved children, families and communities, it has become clear that while government may employ a formula to determine thresholds of investment and resourcing, localised and informed qualitative data input from the communities themselves is also required. There is a need for top-down engagement, but also bottom-up. At present, how communities utilise the options available to them is largely ad hoc and very much dependent on the capability of the community to inquire, weigh the information, seek solutions and successfully initiate these.

For unserved and underserved communities ('thin markets'), the pursuit of the wrong solution can delay the right solution. Time, money and goodwill may be expended with little improvement to the lack of supply into that community. A community needs analysis and mapping tool has the capacity to provide clear guidance and manage community expectation of likely outcomes by aligning to the *National Quality Framework* and government approval processes at national, state/territory and local levels. A decision-making tree could help communities navigate alternative options to build consensus on the 'best fit' for their needs.

The toolkit would draw together the current complex arrangements in navigating potential service establishment in unserved and underserved markets. Where some obvious alignment can be found to service establishment in metropolitan areas, the lack of services in unserved and underserved markets itself speaks to the challenges in exploring and standing up enduring service delivery. In some communities, services may exist, but with tenuous viability leaving ongoing, consistent provision at risk—this can be missed through modelling which is not adequately informed through a place-based qualitative lens, as well as quantitative analysis.

The toolkit would also include guidance—potentially delivered through case studies, checklists, templates and decision trees—to help local actors understand the establishment process and identify viable pathways forward. Available grant, financing and commissioning models to support service establishment could be incorporated. The current arrangements are highly complex and burdensome for unserved and underserved communities and providers, making it difficult to eke out sufficient capital and operational funding to establish



services that meet community need and accommodate the many aspects of high-quality service delivery, including workforce initiatives such as incentives, subsidies, housing, professional learning, networks and mentorship.

## Proposal 7: Pilot and Evaluate Flexible Models of ECEC for Small Communities

**Summary: Pilot and evaluate flexible models of early childhood education and care specific to eligible small communities to identify long-term solutions for persistently unserved and underserved communities.**

**Budget ask: \$11 million, including \$10 million for service establishment and delivery in pilot sites, \$1.2 million for coordination and evaluation (over three years)**

Many small communities are missing out on early childhood education and care because the scale of delivery is too small to be viable under current funding arrangements, and/or there are complex barriers such as flood/fire zoning, limited land or facility options or no experienced ECEC provider to establish and operate a service. Communities often have solutions they would like to pursue but these are not always compatible with regulatory requirements and existing funding mechanisms. Successful models such as Connected Beginnings, Child and Family Centres and integrated models such as hubs demonstrate how we can leverage investment in early childhood education and care to provide more holistic support to families and more flexible approaches to meeting their needs.

In 2024–25 ECA was funded to undertake consultation work for the Department of Education on unserved and underserved communities. We consulted experts and stakeholders to identify potential options for addressing the needs of children and families currently missing out on ECEC. The need for new models of small or micro services was one of the options identified. Through the consultation work undertaken by ECA, examples of innovation or ‘pockets of promise’ were identified where community-informed or co-led solutions were in development or already in place. ECA found that where ECEC was operating successfully, certain conditions were in place to enable this, even where significant barriers existed. Where these conditions were not in place in communities or places that could be considered comparable, this was reflected in a lack of consistent, quality provision of ECEC.

Properly resourcing the piloting and evaluation of ECEC models for specifically defined rural and remote Australia that ensure safety, quality, inclusion, and the rights and best interests of children would be hugely advantageous to better quantify what is required to deliver ECEC provision to every child and family regardless of where they live. Not every remote setting will likely support an ECEC service without significant intervention (to address lack of viability and other barriers), but there are reasonable options that should be explored and quantified. ECA firmly believe that the children who sit outside the current provision of ECEC or experience tenuous provision should be a priority for future funding.

This is work that ECA would be keen and well-positioned to lead or co-lead but can be transferred to the Early Childhood Services Commission once established.



## Summary of Proposals

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### **Proposal 1: Early Childhood Services Commission**

Establish a new Early Childhood Services Commission with scope, remit and powers to build a universal system of early childhood services to support families, champion the early years and deliver high-quality early childhood education and care across all Australian communities, building on the capability established within ACECQA but expanding the mandate to incorporate system stewardship and sector reform. (Estimate \$450 million over three years 2027–30)

### **Proposal 2: Establish an ECEC Universal Access and Inclusion Program**

Replace the current Inclusion Support Program with a Universal Access and Inclusion Program (UAIP) tasked with delivering on universal access and inclusion, co-designed in consultation with Inclusion Agencies, service providers and families. This would include national coordination for inclusion support currently provided through the Inclusion Agencies and a new approach to financing ECEC services to increase staffing and upskill teams to deliver inclusive and culturally responsive services. (Estimate \$250 million over three years 2027–30)

### **Proposal 3: Invest in Sector Capability to Support Reform Initiatives**

Establish an Early Childhood Policy Dialogue tasked with contributing to strengthening safety, quality, access, inclusion and affordability across the early childhood service system. The early childhood sector would be better able to analyse policy and program proposals and alternatives, build consensus on potential solutions to current challenges and back-in reform initiatives if it was resourced to come together in a way that respects and values the diversity of families, communities, providers and educators. (Estimate \$2.1 million over three years)

### **Proposal 4: Professional Learning on Safety and Quality**

Build on the success of the ECA Learning Hub to invest in a comprehensive suite of professional learning that will support the transition to a universal system of early childhood education and care, reflecting the diversity of provider and service types while reinforcing the foundation of good practice that safeguards children and delivers high-quality and inclusive early education and care. (Estimate \$14 million over four years)

### **Proposal 5: Articulate Professional Expectations for Student Educators**

Commission the development of clear guidance on appropriate professional expectations for students, training providers and employers to ensure that everyone understands what is reasonable and what is not reasonable in relation to student educators engaged in qualification training. (Estimate \$150,000 over one year)

### **Proposal 6: Invest in a Community Needs Analysis and Mapping Toolkit**

Invest in the development of a community needs analysis and mapping tool that will support small communities to better identify the child and family services they need and support collaboration on solutions between stakeholders, providers, government funders and regulatory authorities. (Estimate \$250,000 over two years)

### **Proposal 7: Pilot and Evaluate Flexible Models of ECEC for Small Communities**

Pilot and evaluate flexible models of early childhood education and care specific to eligible small communities to identify long-term solutions for persistently unserved and underserved communities. (Estimate \$11 million over three years)



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VISION:  
EVERY  
YOUNG  
CHILD IS  
THRIVING  
AND  
LEARNING**

## **A Commitment to Put Children First**

*Putting the rights and best interests of children first in all decision making within early childhood service provision*

### **Background**

Australian Governments and the early childhood sector have a shared commitment to build a universal system of early childhood education and care, in which every child – regardless of location, household income or individual needs – can access high quality early learning.

To realise the goal of a universal system of ECEC, the Australian Government has commissioned two major reviews to inform future policy decisions – ACCC (2023) and Productivity Commission (2024). In addition, there has been significant national investment in improving affordability (Cheaper Childcare Bill, 2022) and access to preschool programs prior to school (Preschool Reform Agreement, 2023) as well as strengthening the early childhood workforce including a major investment in educator wage increases (Worker Retention Payment, 2024).

Recent coverage of quality failings and safety breaches have amplified the need to ensure that sector growth does not compromise the quality of services or the safeguards that ensure children are safe and thriving in early childhood settings. In a paper written to inform how we might achieve this in a mixed or hybrid sector where many of the providers are for-profit, Professor Paul Leseman recommends creating a social market with an overarching social mission, goals and required corporate responsibility, collaborative network behavior and professional performance. Essentially this means changing who can operate in the market to ensure only organisations or companies that commit to values-based governance, transparency and a genuine commitment to quality (including capped or moderate profit taking) are given a social license to operate subsidised service delivery.

The Independent Review into the NSW Early Childhood Education and Care Regulatory (June, 2025) included a recommendations to insert into National Law a new ‘paramount consideration’ provision to apply to all entities in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector including providers, services, their employees and other individuals working in the sector to ensure that the protection of the rights and best interests of children is their paramount consideration in decision making.

ECA has given consideration to how this might work in practice. We have identified commitments that could be adopted across settings and provider types, to prioritise the interest of children and families.

We put this forward to Australian Governments (Federal and State/Territory) to consider as they come together to steward the early childhood sector through current challenges and build a universal system that genuinely serves the best interests of all children and families.

## Provider Commitments

In order to put the rights and best interests of children first in all decision making within early childhood service provision, we commit to:

1. Demonstrate continuous quality improvement – beyond minimum compliance requirements noting the structural, process and systems elements that make up the National Quality Framework (NQF), ensuring that both operators and Nominated Supervisors complete training on the NQF.
2. Ensure there are experts in early childhood development and education on our governing body and across our senior executive team, so that all decisions are informed by an understanding of children’s best interests.
3. Limit profit or surplus to no more than 9% of revenue to ensure that investment back into service quality and the workforce are not compromised (rate subject to Australian research, including the Service Delivery Price research underway).
4. Adopt human resource management processes that prioritise child safety both within our own services and across the early childhood sector more broadly – ensuring that adequate background checks are undertaken, performance and disciplinary issues are managed appropriately, and inappropriate conduct is reported to authorities.
5. Embed Child Safe Principles and Standards across all service settings – including fostering a culture of reporting at all levels of the organisation from governance to service delivery, with support for whistle-blowers and those responsible for responding to concerns or complaints.
6. Embed ethical practice across our services and education teams, equipping them to act in an ethical way when unanticipated or complex situations arise and holding them accountable for their decisions.
7. Invest in ongoing professional learning for our educators, teachers and service leaders to build the capability of the profession and the quality of services provided (at or above a benchmark such as 1.5-2% annually of salaries expenditure).
8. Recognise and reward good practice that strengthens children’s wellbeing, development and learning outcomes, builds family confidence and contributes to the positive reputation of the early childhood sector.
9. Ensure practices prioritise safety and quality considering staff qualifications and experience, leadership capability within the centre, and ratios responsive to meeting the needs of children – beyond minimal legal requirements when appropriate.
10. Provide active guidance and supervision for trainees and students on placement to ensure they have effective on the job training and support to develop their knowledge and skills – excluding them from educator-to-child ratio calculations until they are competent.

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# Thriving Kids Initiative & Inclusion Agencies

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## Current Role of Inclusion Agencies

Inclusion Agencies are part of the Inclusion Support Program (ISP), there is an agency in each State/Territory, funded by the Australian Department of Education and delivered by a single not-for-profit or consortia of not-for-profits - ECA is one of the providers, delivering the NT Inclusion Agency. The role of the Inclusion Agency is to build capability within early childhood education and care services<sup>1</sup> (ECEC) and to facilitate access to additional supports and resources when needed.

While all ECEC services have a legal and ethical obligation to be inclusive, education teams work with groups of children and do not always have the skills and capability needed to respond effectively to the individual needs of every child – particularly when children have substantially different or additional support needs due to developmental delay, disability, serious medical or health conditions, neurodiversity or those presenting with challenging or trauma-related behaviours. Services may also need support to adopt culturally responsive practice and engage with communities to enhance inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families; children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and children at risk of social and/or economic disadvantage.

The work of the agencies is done by teams of Inclusion Professionals with qualifications and experience in early childhood education and care, special education, early childhood intervention and inclusive practice. They work with educators to identify needs, provide advice and assist with applications for additional resources. The additional resources that services can access include:

- Inclusion Development Fund (IDF) – a stream of funding for additional educators, innovative practices and top up funding (FDC).
- Specialist Equipment Library - lending equipment to support participation, in the NT we also offer a Sensory Tools and Equipment Library (*see attached one-pager for STEL detail*).
- In-service on online support for educators and education teams – including advice and coaching to increase knowledge, confidence and practice capability.
- Advice on referral pathways to facilitate access to developmental assessments, early childhood intervention or a diversity of family support programs.

## Integrating the Thriving Kids Initiative

There is an opportunity for the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing (DHDA) to coordinate with the Department of Education, to integrate some of the support to be provided through the Thriving Kids Initiative into the work of the Inclusion Agencies (subject to current procurement processes). ECA proposes that Inclusion Agencies could be contracted by DHAD to employ Thriving Kids Initiative Teams to work with children, families and communities, to organise and deploy early childhood intervention and allied health supports, as well as to help families navigate between systems including child and maternal health, general practice, allied health, NDIS.

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<sup>1</sup> Limited to services that are eligible to offer the Child Care Subsidy – eg Centre Based Long Day Care (embedded preschools), Family Day Care, Outside School Hours Care & Aboriginal Child and Family Services.

The TKI team would work in a complementary and collaborative way with the Inclusion Professionals, keeping TKI and ISP nationally consistent. They would be recruited for expertise in early childhood development and intervention, experience in working with children and families and knowledge of the service systems that young children can access. More work is needed to identify the appropriate mix of skills per jurisdiction and the appropriate workload in terms of team size responsive to the population but in essence, each jurisdiction might need:

- TKI Team Manager + admin support
- TKI Regional Coordinators (could be aligned to PHNs)
- Multidisciplinary Early Childhood Intervention Teams, for example:
  - Speech & language
  - Physical development
  - Cognitive development
  - Social and emotional development
  - Autism and neurodiversity
  - Cultural liaison
  - Parenting education

The scope of the TKI work could extend beyond ECEC services to reach a more diverse range of settings – playgroups, preschools and the early years of school. The TKI team would be able to assess the needs of children, families and communities and deploy resources in a responsive and flexible way, for example:

- Arranging a speech and language drop-in clinic to run on a regular basis across a region;
- Identifying additional locations that might be needed for some hard-to-reach cohorts (eg geographically or socially isolated communities);
- Assigning a speech therapist to work within or across settings to enhance the language skills of a cohort of children and identify children needing additional or tailored support.
- Arranging regular OT visits community settings, ECEC services and schools to deliver group programs as well as individual intervention or equipment fitting/refitting.
- Deployment of low-cost assistive technology and sensory tools.
- Establishing peer support networks for families of children with neurodiversity, disability or developmental differences.
- Coordinating access to early childhood intervention – through individual and organisation providers across settings including ECEC, schools, home and community settings.

Aligning the TKI and IA teams would allow for collaborative work such as mapping community needs, data analysis to identify cohorts of children at risk of disadvantage, reducing duplication and streamlining support for families by supporting information sharing particularly in transitions such as starting school. It would also allow TKI to leverage the existing capability and infrastructure of the Inclusion Agencies – premises, management capability, equipment library, service databases etc.

## Investment

More detailed work is required to determine the appropriate level of investment required to establish effective TKI teams but an initial commitment of \$100M per annum from the Australian Government with the option for State and Territory Governments to match that investment if they support the approach, would provide a solid foundation.

## Additional Thinking

1. Initially the IA Teams and TKI Teams might work alongside each other but eventually this could be reshaped into a community-based delivery model aligned to Primary Health Networks to deliver multi-tiered supports to young children and their families across education, home and community settings. This would build a multidisciplinary workforce – avoiding the problems of the individual funding model of the NDIS to a **community level commissioning approach**.
2. Rarely do children with developmental delay or disability have support needs that can be addressed by one service or professional – more typically, they need a range of supports and interventions that change over time and across contexts. A team approach that is focused on the holistic needs of the child and family is likely to be more effective as well as more efficient, the challenge is to **develop a fluid funding model that support adaptive support planning**.
3. **Decisions on priority allocation of resources needs to be made at the local and individual level** – some children identified as having a developmental delay may be very early in their journey and benefit from a slight adjustment in their education program or their home environments; others may be at a critical time of development where attaining skills in speech or toileting will make a significant difference to their trajectory - a more significant and urgent response is warranted.
4. **Community mapping, both in terms of services and supports available but also data on the vulnerabilities of children and families** (AEDC, SIFA etc) could be done and shared with local early childhood services and networks to build understanding and coordinated responses. This could also help identify and resource the "glue" between services that can promote integrated collaborative practice, streamline referrals and remove structural barriers to access.
5. Explore the use of screening tools (such as ASQ/ASQ Traks) that could be administered within early learning services with results activating TKI responses - direct additional funding, referral pathways (if required) and support enhanced educational programming and practice.
6. **National coordination of the IA and TKI roles** could be added to the mix to strengthen effectiveness by:
  - Building the evidence base for inclusive practice in early education and implementing best practice in early childhood intervention.
  - Sharing examples of resources and training packages.
  - Developing common protocols for sharing information, record keeping, data collection.
  - Partnerships and collaborations with other national capacity-building initiatives (Be You, Emerging Minds, Raising Children's Network etc.) to maximise impact and reduce duplication, building on the existing alliance approach between these initiatives.

## Changing Practice

### **Building Capability**

The Final Report on the Review of the Inclusion Support Program (Deloitte, 2023) describes a collaborative project between the Autism Association of WA and the WA Inclusion Agency to boost the skills, understanding and overall capacity of mainstream ECEC services to include children with autism. As part of this project, intensive training and support packages were delivered to 180 early childhood educators across 72 ECEC services with follow up sessions, titled 'Sustainable Autism Champions'. Services participating in the training identified an increase in their capacity and strategies to support autistic children in their service (as reflected by participants and in their Strategic Inclusion Plan and/or Quality Improvement Plans) and an increase in the participation of children with autism in their services.

*Instead of being an isolated project in one jurisdiction, this project (or similar) could be scaled up and offered nationally through IA and TKI teams - supporting families and a diversity of professionals working with children, in addition to education teams.*

### **Providing Resources**

ECA's Inclusion Agency team in the NT worked in partnership with Charles Darwin University, Faculty of Health (Occupational Therapy Department) to develop the Sensory Tools and Equipment Library (STEL) that provides ECEC services with access to tools, information and resources on sensory aware play and educational engagement. STEL 'lending packs' are taken out to services, these packs may include specific sensory tools such as lycra tunnels, muscle mats, balance boards, egg chairs, weighted animals, time turners etc. This resource is blended into the services program planning in line with needs that have been identified by the service. By way of example, a young child in an urban long day care service was struggling to participate and becoming overwhelmed, demonstrating behaviour that was distressing for other children and the educators. Although not diagnosed with a neurological condition, she was hypersensitive to her environment, nonverbal and disengaged. In consultation with her foster carers, the service introduced a lycra body stocking into the dress up box. The child found the body stocking soothing and calming when she wore it and it helped her settle and 'feel' less alerted enabling her to participate in activities such as story reading and musical play. In partnership with her foster carers, this child has been referred to allied health services for further assessment.

*If the TKI team were working alongside the IA team they could support the family to ensure this child not only receives further assessment and appropriate early childhood intervention but also has access to sensory tools at home and in other settings where she might benefit from them- ideally the support can follow the child across out-of-home care placements and engage with her extended family.*

### **Working in Partnership**

Forbes Preschool works in partnership with NSW Community Health, has become an NDIS provider and uses Start Strong preschool supplementary funding to provide a range of allied health programs and services – some of which are available to all children in the community, others are provided to children enrolled in the preschool. These include audiology programs and hearing screening, speech development enrichment and drop-in clinics, therapeutic services on-site.

*TKI has the potential to streamline funding for these programs and scale up this approach.*