

# Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Submission from the South Australian  
Government in relation to the first 1000 days

May 2023



# Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and respect Aboriginal peoples as the state's first peoples and nations and recognise them as traditional owners and occupants of land and waters in South Australia. Further, we acknowledge that the spiritual, social, cultural and economic practices of Aboriginal peoples come from their traditional lands and waters, that they maintain their cultural and heritage beliefs, languages and laws which are of ongoing importance, and that they have made and continue to make a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the state.

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# Foreword

This submission is provided by the South Australian Government. It aims to provide the Royal Commission with the government's views on the important role of the early years system in the first 1000 days with a particular focus on early childhood education and care (ECEC) and opportunities to leverage ECEC to enable greater engagement between families and the broader early years system.

Supporting children and their families in the first 1000 days is one of the most critical and foundational things we can do to give our children the best start in life.

Neuroscience has made clear that the first 1000 days of a child's life is an important foundational period that shapes a child's health, development and wellbeing. Access to high-quality ECEC in the first 1000 days has consistently been shown to improve children's developmental outcomes, with a particularly strong effect for children experiencing disadvantage.

ECEC is also an investment in the state's economic future. It supports children to start developing the social and emotional skills that will enable them to be successful at preschool, school, and the workforce, ultimately laying the foundation for skilled workers and active participants in society, as well as reducing a child's later interactions with the health and justice systems. Getting the early years right is critical to South Australia's economic priorities: it means a fairer and more inclusive economy, a labour force in which parents and carers are fully able to participate, and a strong and prosperous future for our children to inherit and which they are fully equipped to thrive in.

Not only this, but ECEC also benefits families and societies by supporting workforce participation, particularly for women. In a modern South Australia, as we strive for gender equality and seek to unlock the talent of working parents or carers, ECEC is an essential support for work or study. ECEC thus serves a dual purpose, enabling children to have rich developmental experiences while also supporting our economy now and into the future.

ECEC does not exist in isolation, however; it is part of the broader early years system that interconnects with a range of other services and interventions. While the Royal Commission is focusing primarily on the ECEC sector, it is important to recognise the links to maternal and child health, to parenting support, and to social and community services, especially in the first 1000 days. Consideration must also be given to cross-cutting commitments in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the SA Closing the Gap Implementation Plan.

These services are essential to supporting our community to thrive, and the government welcomes the Royal Commission's examination of opportunities to increase integration. There are opportunities to leverage ECEC as a platform for the delivery of a suite of health, parenting, support, and early childhood development services, including through leveraging the government's children's centres and through incentivising similar integration on non-government sites. There should also be consideration of how this integration can support the introduction of 3-year-old preschool and expanded access to out of school hours care.

The government, in its *Best Start for Every Child* policy, committed to an examination of the services and supports available to families in the first 1000 days across education, care, health, and parenting. The government remains committed to undertaking a separate review of health and parenting supports to complement the Royal Commission's findings in relation to ECEC. We know that the broader early

years system is inclusive of both ECEC and the health and parenting services and supports available to families in first 1000 days, and that they need to connect to form a cohesive whole.

In considering ECEC, as well as the first 1000 days generally, the government recognises the importance of both a strong universal system as well as targeted services for those who need extra support. A universal base is essential to supporting all families to raise healthy, thriving children, and to achieve an increase in equity for children experiencing disadvantage.

We know that there are families for whom extra support is needed. Evidence shows that engagement through universal services can provide a way in for many. The government welcomes consideration of the ways that ECEC can be both extended to all families who want to use it as well as being leveraged to better engage families who are experiencing disadvantage. The role of the universal ECEC system as a destigmatised front door to more intensive services is an important part of this picture. Cultural safety and appropriateness are also vital where support for Aboriginal families is concerned.

The government also recognises the enormous role of the non-government sector in the first 1000 days. While the state government provides important services in the ECEC system in the first 1000 days, we recognise that it is predominantly through the hard work of our ECEC providers, both for profit and not-for-profit, that children access ECEC. Key to success in the first 1000 days will be mechanisms for government to work with the non-government sector as well as with the Australian Government, local governments, Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Organisations. These solutions will need to be cognisant of differing levels of capacity and maturity across providers.

The government also recognises that, as with preschool, the quality of ECEC services in the first 1000 days is fundamental to their effectiveness. Noting the different levels of capacity in different parts of the sector, the government considers that expansion of service offerings should not be at the expense of quality. Time will be needed to build the workforce and the capacity of providers, and the expansion of services should be prioritised first in areas where there is the necessary workforce, there are existing models (such as children's centres) on which to build, and there is the greatest need in terms of developmental disadvantage.

The government understands the important role of data, and in particular a focus on using data to identify what services are most effective and where service delivery is most likely to have the greatest impact. To address developmental vulnerability, we need to identify it and intervene, and this requires an accessible, high quality data system for child development checks and associated services to achieve it.

The government has already taken steps to better use data through the Early Intervention Research Directorate, the Office for Data Analytics, and the Office for the Early Years. While data collection and sharing can be complex and can take time to get right, it is an important tool to ensure that investments are targeted appropriately; the government welcomes further efforts to strengthen data collection and to use this to inform decisions about what services to prioritise and where.

The early years are a window of opportunity to positively influence children's development. The government knows that not every family gets the support it needs. We want to ensure that all families, including those at risk or experiencing disadvantage, those living in regional and remote areas, and those from culturally diverse backgrounds, are accessing appropriate and effective services in the first 1000 days of their child's life. Prioritising these population groups, particularly at the early stages of parenthood and family formation, is likely to maximise our service impact and disrupt intergenerational

vulnerability through higher levels of engagement and trust in support systems earlier in the parenting journey.

Engaging with our diverse communities to ensure services meet their needs is critical. As outlined above, the government is increasingly taking a data-driven approach to identifying and addressing service gaps through evidence-based commissioning models that consider the avoided cost of interventions. It welcomes the Royal Commission's consideration of how to strengthen its efforts so that resourcing and need are as closely aligned as possible.

The government notes the key role of the Australian Government as a partner and significant funder of services in the ECEC sector. As was noted in the government's submission on 3-year-old preschool, the government welcomes recent initiatives by the Australian Government to identify systemic issues in ECEC and to understand the factors that drive the affordability of children. Noting the benefits of an accessible, affordable ECEC system to both state and national economies, the government welcomes further consideration of the way in which the Australian Government can be a funding partner in ECEC, including a funding model that supports a high-quality, accessible ECEC system, regardless of the sector that delivers the services.

The government notes the recent draft of a national vision for ECEC, developed by states and territories working with the Australian Government. The national vision is a call to action for all governments to ensure that the ECEC sector delivers optimal outcomes for Australian families. The government sees the Royal Commission as a once in a generation opportunity to ensure that South Australia is a leader not only in the ECEC sector but across the early years.

# The first 1000 days and the role ECEC

## The early years system in the first 1000 days

While this submission focuses on the role of ECEC, it is important to recognise that the early years system supports children and families in the first 1000 days across a spectrum of interconnected domains, including health and wellbeing, social support, child protection, culture specific services, parenting advice, and financial support as well as education and care. From conception, there is a universal platform of services supporting families, supporting parenting, and monitoring health and developmental progress during a child's life and operating alongside more targeted supports for those who need them most. Supporting early childhood development requires coordinated, integrated effort across this spectrum.

In particular, the very early period of a child's life, before they access ECEC, is a period where parents may experience post-birth physical health conditions, increased levels of stress, lack of confidence, and post-natal mental health conditions. This coincides with the most important period of a child's health and development, meaning that parental services delivered at this time can be crucial to families. Universal primary health care, delivered by private and public providers – including the Child and Family Health Service and the Women's and Children's Health Network – enable families to access the supports that help them understand and meet their child's developmental needs.

Giving every child the best start in life means ensuring that children are physically and emotionally healthy, learning and developing, and safe and well. The range of factors known to affect biological and developmental functioning during the first 1000 days that can have lifelong impacts is considerable, including genetic and epigenetic transmissions from parents and grandparents, factors such as stress and nutrition during pregnancy and trauma experienced during infancy.

An early years system should have a strong focus on improving social equity for every child. Those experiencing poverty or social disadvantage need to be supported at the earliest possible stage to provide them with the same opportunities as any other child in the community and to maximise the likelihood of them achieving their full potential.

An early childhood system that is connected to the wider health and social services system provides comprehensive care and support for families to thrive. This acknowledges that there are a myriad of determinants of health and wellbeing, including but not limited to the social, physical, and cultural environment in which we live. Further, for parents and carers to best able to support the growth and development of children in their care, parents and carers need to be well cared for themselves and be supported to navigate system complexities. An optimal early years system will take this wide view of wellbeing in delivering programs and supports that focus on both healthy development and the primary prevention of ill health.

Children in care are particularly vulnerable to developmental delays due to their experiences of trauma, abuse and neglect, including in utero. For children living in vulnerable families, a child's developmental delays can compound the family's challenges. Many families struggle to understand how to best meet the needs of their child and to navigate the pathways to support and other services. The ECEC sector can play a critical role in supporting early identification and access to services for vulnerable families.

# The role of ECEC in the early years system

As was noted in the foreword, the South Australian Government recognises the essential role that high-quality ECEC plays in the wellbeing of children and their families, and communities. A fundamental purpose of ECEC is to support all children to thrive – both for children themselves, who have the right to be healthy and happy citizens of our state, but also for the future of our community and economy.

Children who are supported in their early development have better outcomes across their life course and are more likely to success at work and less likely to interact with the health, justice, and child protection systems. This ultimately benefits the whole of the state through increased productivity as well as reduced downstream costs.

As well as benefits to learning and development, ECEC is an important support for parents and caregivers to engage in work and study. Parents or carers who want to work should have access to a high-quality ECEC service that enables them to do so.

Access to ECEC is particularly important to women’s workforce participation. Supporting more women to enter or re-enter the workforce is critical to a modern economy, not only from the perspective of unlocking significant workforce capacity but from the perspective of supporting individual women to pursue their careers through work or study.

Beyond its fundamental purpose of supporting learning and development and enabling workforce participation, ECEC can also help to facilitate the vitally important role that families play in children’s development and learning in the first 1000 days. Parenting is not easy and parenting skills need to be learned – it can be a difficult and confusing time, particularly for new parents or carers. Many ECEC programs aim to support and equip parents, families, and carers as the ‘first teachers’ of their children and to provide referrals to more intensive support where it’s needed.

Supporting children’s development is however not a role that ECEC can play alone; universal health is also a critical partner in the early period. Health, parenting, and ECEC providers can work together to build trust with families and to create connections to services. In this context, ECEC settings also represent an area of significant opportunity to improve health outcomes at population level, providing avenues for collaboration across all levels of government and the non-government sector and across health and education portfolios.<sup>1</sup> Through making resources available to educators and parent support providers – for example, around healthy eating – preventive public health programs and messages can extend their reach.

## ECEC in the first 1000 days in South Australia

While preschool in South Australia is delivered predominantly by government, this trend is reversed in the first 1000 days. The majority of ECEC is delivered by the non-government sector although the government provides many important and valued ECEC services, including rural and occasional care in preschools and facilitated playgroups through Learning Together Communities.

As was seen in the Royal Commission’s recent report on the long day care sector, South Australia has a rich ECEC sector delivered by a range of providers, from those with multiple services to nearly

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<sup>1</sup> Noble, K., Fetherston, H., Jackson, J. & Craike, M. (2020). Effective integration of health promotion in early childhood education and care settings. Policy paper 2020-02. Australian Health Policy Collaboration, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University



200 standalone operators delivering a single long day care service each.<sup>2</sup> These providers make an enormous contribution to our society by educating and developing our children while facilitating workforce participation for their parents. Not only this, the Royal Commission's report has also shown the way in which the sector supports its communities, providing important additional services (often not directly related to ECEC, such as operating food banks) and referrals into health specialists and other services.

Given the structure of the ECEC sector, the government has a critical role to play as the steward of the sector. The government recognises and values the contribution of the non-government sector and welcomes consideration of the ways in which it can incentivise the sector to build on its already strong offering in the first 1000 days.

The government also recognises that a variety of solutions may be needed to work with a diverse non-government ECEC sector – what works for a large provider may not work for a small provider, and small providers can more easily be overburdened by administrative processes or be too small to expand service offerings in a sustainable way. Cultural considerations are also critical – for instance, in Aboriginal communities, where a whole of community focus is integral to culturally appropriate service delivery models.

## Redressing disadvantage in the first 1000 days

Investing early in children has enormous benefits, including better health outcomes, improved social cohesion, and greater opportunities for the next generation. ECEC services play a vital role in fostering more connected communities and are often linking points.

While universal, accessible services in the first 1000 days of life have benefits for all, the strongest impact is for children experiencing disadvantage. ECEC can help level the playing field for children who might be falling behind. High-quality ECEC programs support young children's learning and play an important role in reducing inequity across the social gradient. While ECEC is and should remain a universal service, it has an important role to play in reducing inequity. The Royal Commission has recognised this in its draft recommendation that children at risk of developmental delay should be able to access additional hours of preschool. Barriers to ECEC access are discussed later in this submission, and the government welcomes the Royal Commission's consideration of the levers available to the government to drive up ECEC participation for children experiencing disadvantage.

Ensuring that children experiencing disadvantage can access (and do access) high-quality ECEC is often in itself an effective intervention. However, these children frequently also face barriers to access, such as acceptability, affordability, availability, access to quality and culturally appropriate ECEC, and challenges within families with a history of trauma. The government believes that whatever their experience, children need access to high-quality childhood systems and services in order to thrive,<sup>3</sup> as well as more intensive help for families who may be less willing to engage. In considering how to strengthen the ECEC system particularly for the most disadvantaged, attention needs to be directed towards breaking down these barriers.

The government also recognises that while ECEC is fundamental to mitigating the effect of disadvantage, it alone will not be enough for many children. Children are particularly sensitive to social

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<sup>2</sup> Mapping long day care and non-government preschool in South Australia, Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, March 2023

<sup>3</sup> Early Learning Strategy 2021 to 2031: All young children thriving and learning (education.sa.gov.au)

determinants, especially in the early years.<sup>4</sup> Children can face a range of risk factors such as unstable housing, lack of access to nutritious food, and family stress. ECEC can be a protective factor in these circumstances, but must be coupled with programs to support and engage parents and caregivers to help children to thrive. Integration between ECEC, parenting supports, health, and targeted interventions is critical to making the most of both universal and targeted services.

Children whose parents are engaged in their development and equipped to facilitate it will perform better at school and ultimately have better life outcomes in health, justice, and economic participation<sup>5</sup>. ECEC services must continue to support the crucial role of parents and carers in young children's development and involve them in services as much as possible, while taking advantage of the opportunity to increase the literacy of parents and carers around their child's health and development.

A strong early years system that also meets local community and family needs is crucial. The universal touchpoint that ECEC provides, with its high participation rates and absence of stigma, presents an opportunity to identify and redress developmental vulnerabilities (especially those that co-occur with disadvantage) through seamless access to targeted services.<sup>6</sup> The government is committed to ensuring all South Australian families have access to and participate in high quality playgroups, which engage families in their children's learning from birth. Playgroups aim to provide a supportive and safe environment for parents and caregivers to socially connect, to share experiences, and to normalise the struggles all parents face. There is a strong correlation between participation in playgroups and reduced rates of developmental vulnerability.

The ECEC sector can also play a critical role in supporting early identification and appropriate intervention of developmental delays and can facilitate access to a broader range of services for vulnerable families. For many families, developmental delays can add further to the challenges the family is facing, and there can be a lack of understanding about how to address delays or where to get support. Empathetic, non-punitive early identification and a strengths-based response can provide support while also building trust in the system.

To do this, it is important that ECEC educators are trained in understanding the impacts that trauma, abuse, and neglect have on development and have the skills to identify developmental concerns early so that they can help children and their carers access the right services. In saying this, however, the government is conscious of the workload and emotional burden already placed on many educators. Where ECEC is intersecting with other systems, and particularly where trauma or abuse are involved, there must be consideration of the fundamental purpose of educators as educators.

Educators must not be asked to take on too much, must be supported in their roles, and must be supported not to burn out. Integration of ECEC with other services that can support children who are affected by trauma, abuse, or neglect, can help to support educators by providing a pathway that educators can refer families into.

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<sup>4</sup> Moore, T., McDonald, M. & McHugh-Dillon, H. (2014). Early childhood development and the social determinants of health inequities: A review of the evidence. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the Royal Children's Hospital

<sup>5</sup> Emerson, L., Fear, J., Fox, S., and Sanders, E. (2012). Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research. A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau: Canberra.

<sup>6</sup> Mustard, F. 2008, Investing in the Early Years: Closing the Gap Between What We Know and What We Do, Department of Premier and Cabinet South Australia, Adelaide

# The role of data

Access to the right data at the right time is critical to designing effective programs and interventions. Data can play a particularly important role in the early identification of developmental issues, facilitating earlier referral and support.

The government notes the view expressed in the Royal Commission's interim report that it should establish an integrated child development data set and system, and that the Royal Commission will build on this interim finding in its final report. The government looks forward to the detail of this finding and provides the below information in support of the Royal Commission's inquiry.

The absence of data to track population-level development in the early years, as well as challenges in sharing data between services and jurisdictions, remains a significant barrier to integrated and evidence-informed service delivery in the first 1000 days. In the absence of effective data sharing systems, very young children requiring support may not be visible until preschool or school.

Under the leadership of the Early Intervention Research Directorate in the Department of Human Services, South Australia is progressing the use of linked data to quantify the impacts of interventions on preventing children from falling into the statutory child protection system. The Office for the Early Years in the Department for Education, which has strategic responsibility for improving population level child development outcomes, is now commissioning similar quantification of the impacts of changes to the universal system on child development and further life outcomes.

Linked data is a powerful tool to provide evidence around service need in communities across the state and inform commissioning to fill the gaps. As services are commissioned, they can be coupled with more rigorous data on their impact and reach, further filling out the picture of service delivery in South Australia.

The government has significant linked data assets that can be leveraged to support timely information sharing, and outcomes monitoring at the individual, program, and population level. However, as the Royal Commission is aware, addressing issues around bringing relevant data into one repository comes with some degree of complexity.

Part of this complexity is that many services in the early years are delivered by the non-government sector, with data held by individual services or by the Australian Government. Many services, both government and non-government, also rely on paper records or on in-house data that cannot be easily shared.

Building a shared data capability is critical to ensuring that services are impactful, appropriately targeted, and cost-effective, including through understanding the costs that are avoided through an intervention. Shared data, integrated across a range of relevant stakeholders or services, would enable multiple providers to understand the needs of the children and families, providing a point of coordination to ensure that no child falls through the cracks and that there are no duplicative services. Such a system would enable ongoing comprehensive monitoring of the effectiveness of the early years system and identify where if needed changes should be made. It can further identify where there are service gaps, enabling those gaps to be filled. The government notes the importance of embedding the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty in the collection, dissemination and use of data in ECEC. The commissioning of ACCO/ACCHO services, which aligns to the expectations of the Closing the Gap Agreements, can ensure that the principles are upheld.

# The support parents and caregivers need in the first 1000 days

There is a growing body of research that demonstrates the critical importance of parental involvement in children's learning from birth.<sup>7</sup> Children's development journey begins from birth in the family setting. Developing dispositions such as being curious, resourceful, purposeful, and persistent sets children up as effective learners. Supporting families fundamentally supports children.

The South Australian Government recognises that the provision of access to social supports and networks is an important part of growing parent and caregiver confidence and supporting healthy child development. It is also acknowledged that a broad range of supports can benefit parents and caregivers, including practical support, emotional or personal support, and information and advice.

In South Australia, CaFHS provides universally available best practice care and supports to South Australian families across a range of areas in child and family health, including:

- Breastfeeding
- Settling
- Sleeping
- Nutrition
- Child health and development
- Infant mental health
- Parental mental health
- Health promotion
- Adjusting to parenting and family life.

Among the key services in the first 1000 days, child development checks are recognised as a critical tool for identifying early in children's lives where they are doing well and are on track with their development, but also where there are developmental vulnerabilities. Child development checks can also be an important opportunity to support families to understand their children's developmental needs. Strengths and vulnerabilities are not always obvious, which is why evidence-based screening programs are important as we strive to improve developmental outcomes.

The government notes that the discussion of child development checks in the Royal Commission's report and welcomes further consideration of how checks can underpin both an individual service response as well as inform population-level service planning. In considering checks, it is important to link development checks with comprehensive health screening based on an agreed model. There is a critical nexus between child health and normative neurocognitive development that requires a dual focus on both developmental and health assessment, with timely access to medical support and health intervention where concerns are identified. This will support increased parental understanding of child development, developmental milestone achievements, and where and how to access support where required.

To support delivery of more checks, the government is taking a commissioning-based approach to expand the reach of child development screening. Child development check pilots are being implemented in a range of locations to test new and different service model elements to inform large scale implementation. The pilots also seek to provide a help and support pathway to ensure that

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<sup>7</sup> Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Gutman & Feinstein, 2007

children that are identified with developmental vulnerability are referred for assistance. ECEC services are a significant part of this work, as they are among the most accessed services during the early years. Going to where parents and children already are – at long day care centres, childcare, playgroups, family day care services, and Children’s Centres – is a key part of our strategy to drive uptake. A data system could support high quality service provision in this area, for example by following through on referrals.

ECEC providers can also play a critical role in building social capacity and delivering and facilitating access to essential support for parents and caregivers. In South Australia, playgroups are often one of the first post-natal services that a family accesses in the first 1000 days and can provide a ‘soft entry point’ to other service provision. Playgroup participation contributes to family support and early childhood development outcomes.

Supported playgroup programs can help families connect with other families and family friendly service providers, breaking down barriers and enhancing opportunities for interagency collaboration. Their role as a first touch point provides an opportunity to promote and support positive relationships between families and early childhood services and schools, including transitions from home to early childhood settings and schools.

Given the critical role parents play in their children’s early learning, providing a range of supports to enable parents to fulfil this role is a central part of an effective early years’ system, and ECEC is a vital facilitator in this context. Health providers also use ECEC spaces to increase families’ health literacy, while early childhood development messages are consistently delivered in ECEC settings through a range of initiatives.

It must also be recognised that many parents and caregivers will have their own experience of government services that colours their view of service offerings. Many families will be reluctant to engage with services because of their own history of trauma, and it is important that services respond to this.

Similarly, services must be culturally responsive for Aboriginal families and for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Any consideration of how to better leverage the ECEC sector to address societal inequities must recognise that connection to cultural identity and kinship structures are strong protective factors for children’s safety, wellbeing, and development. Any such integrated service model for Aboriginal children and their families should be an Aboriginal led-design process, informed by Aboriginal voices and consultation and supported by government.

The government is committed to Closing the Gap and, in the context of ECEC, notes the target to have 55% of Aboriginal children developmentally on track by 2031. The government is also committed to the Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan, which calls for shared decision-making and initiatives to build capacity in ACCOs. To support learning and development in Aboriginal children and to close the gap, it is critical that ACCOs be supported to play a role in measures to leverage the ECEC sector to support parents and carers.

## System navigation

Without initial engagement and support to navigate continued participation in programs and services offered in the first 1000 days, many families do not access the full range of supports available to them. For example, many families requiring intensive family support due to identified risks and vulnerabilities are not able to be successfully engaged. Because of the complexity of navigating the early years system

and the compounding effect of disadvantage, it is often those who are most in need who are most at risk of missing out on available supports.

First and foremost, the early years system should be easy to navigate. The government recognises that this is an area where non-government ECEC providers are demonstrating some strength through enabling referral pathways and additional community supports. However, for families experiencing higher levels of disadvantage, who may need access to a wider range of interventions, or who may resist engaging with services, the system can be complex.

Where there is unavoidable complexity in the system, system navigators can help to build capacity within families to access support, assisting the family to understand what local services are available, why they may be useful, and how to access them. The government welcomes consideration of how families can be supported to navigate the early years system in the first 1000 days as well as how it can make the system easier for families to navigate.

## Service co-location and integration

As has been discussed, ECEC does not operate alone – it forms part of a broader early years' system comprising not only education and care but also health and parenting supports. It also extends beyond universally available services to more targeted services for those families that need extra help.

Government and non-government providers deliver a range of health and social services in the first 1000 days, including antenatal care, child development checks, child and family services, mental health services, and domestic and family violence services. Effective integration of these services is important to achieve maximum impact for the families using these services, by reducing barriers and siloed working and providing seamless, convenient, and impactful interventions. By facilitating a whole of child view, integrated services provide an opportunity to monitor and drive child development outcomes.

ECEC, as a universal service with high rates of attendance, can serve as an effective base for integrated service offerings. This submission has already touched on evidence from the Royal Commission in building a picture of integration between non-government ECEC providers and other services. Within government, there is also the opportunity to partner with both government and non-government providers in expanding the reach of integrated services.

Children's centres were developed largely in response to Thinkers in Residence reports by Dr Fraser Mustard and Professor Carla Rinaldi in 2008 and 2013, respectively; copies of both reports were enclosed with the submission by the Department for Education's submission on 3-year-old preschool. The centres are based around delivery of preschool, but also bring together care, learning, family support, community development and links to health services.

Currently, the government operates 47 children's centres across South Australia. The majority of these serve areas experiencing higher levels of disadvantage. With the government's commitment to an additional year of preschool as well as expanded access to OSHC – and recognising that preschool and OSHC also form critical parts of ECEC and the early years more generally – there is an opportunity to further improve upon the offering to provide holistic, family-centred, genuinely integrated services.

The government notes the proposal in the Royal Commission's interim report for a commissioning-based approach to integrated hubs, and that further discussion of the evidence to guide the commissioning, governance and composition will be included in the Royal Commission's final report.

The government welcomes the Royal Commission’s consideration of how the model will provide opportunities to partner with non-government providers. Consideration must also be given to how to effectively engage with vulnerable families, including ensuring that core decisions are made with community members, that centres offered a tiered system of support, and that staff use relational and family-centred practices.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, consideration could be given to effective integrated service models for Aboriginal children and their families. Services for Aboriginal families should respond in holistic and culturally responsive way to the needs of the community and must be effective in facilitating the participation of Aboriginal children in quality ECEC as well as connecting families to other services.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Moore, T.G. (2021). Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability. Prepared for Social Ventures Australia. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, The Royal Children’s Hospital

<sup>9</sup> Access to services in the early years: barriers and enablers for families A review of recent literature September 2021 Prepared by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare for the Department of Education and Training

# Quality in ECEC services

ECEC is one of the critical and foundational factors to give children the best start in life and has consistently been shown to improve children's developmental outcomes; however, for ECEC to be effective, it must be of high quality.

The National Quality Standards (NQS) set a high national benchmark for ECEC services in Australia. They include 7 quality areas that are important outcomes for children. The notion of quality for ECEC is generally considered within the context of NQS assessment and rating outcomes, which include both structural and process quality domains.

The elements required to provide a high-quality ECEC program were discussed extensively in the Department for Education's submission to the Royal Commission on 3-year-old preschool. However, in summary, the following elements of quality service provision must be present:

- qualified educators, engaging in ongoing professional development
- strong educational leadership
- high adult to child ratios
- play-based learning centred around the whole child and their individual interests
- culturally safe environments.

The quality and capacity of the workforce is a key part of ensuring structural quality. The Royal Commission will already be well aware of challenges around the attraction and retention of a high quality ECEC workforce, as well as similar challenges in related services such as allied health and social work. The measures the government is taking to address these challenges were covered in the Department for Education's submission on 3-year-old preschool.

The expansion of ECEC services and the integration of ECEC with other types of services will depend on having the workforce available to deliver the services. To ensure that a focus on quality is maintained, the expansion of services should be staged to ensure that it is sustainable. A key area of focus should be regions of the state where there is both a high level of need and also existing capacity and infrastructure to support expansion, either in the government or in the non-government system.

It is also recognised that there will not be a single solution for all areas; what works best for one community may not be appropriate for another, or there may not be capacity in the system to support it. Decisions about the expansion of services must be informed by the profile of communities, by the size and maturity of providers, and by what those communities tell us they want.



# Barriers to ECEC access in the first 1000 days

The barriers to accessing and participating in ECEC are well documented. It is known that families who experience disadvantage and vulnerabilities are the least likely access and participate in ECEC, and that children living in rural and remote areas, children from non-English speaking backgrounds, children with disability, and Aboriginal children face the greatest barriers to ECEC, and yet often are the children that would benefit from it the most. Evidence tells us that the barriers that families experience are not isolated and can often be complex;<sup>10</sup> some of the main barriers to accessing ECEC services are discussed below.

## Geographical accessibility

ECEC services are not currently accessible to all children and young people. In South Australia, long day care (LDC) is predominantly delivered by private providers. However, because long day care is driven heavily by market demand, and because of factors such as difficulty attracting workers or high capital costs to enter the market, long day care is often unavailable in rural and remote areas or other areas with low demand. Even where care is available, it is often full, and families can face a waiting list to get the service they need.

A recent report by the Mitchell Institute suggests over one-third of Australians live in areas that would be considered childcare deserts, which are quantified as more than 3 children per childcare place.<sup>11</sup> The median in South Australian neighbourhoods is 0.34 childcare places per child, below the national median of 0.38 and only fractionally above the report's definition of a childcare desert (where there is less than one place for every three children).

If ECEC is to be truly recognised as an essential service that all children and families should be able to access, consideration must be given to ways to ensure that it is available in all parts of the state and that there is sufficient supply. In some areas, the government fills gaps in availability through rural care and occasional care services in preschools as well as through family day care; however, this is not sufficient to meet need.

It appears that a key element driving a lack of accessibility in regional and remote areas is the lack of viability of service provision in those areas in a market-driven model. There is a need to consider how access to ECEC can be supported in thin markets, including how non-government providers can be incentivised to operate more universally.

As outlined in its submission on three-year-old preschool, the government advocates for a national conversation about funding to ensure that ECEC is consistent with a vision underpinned by the principles of affordability, accessibility, quality, and equity. This could include consideration of how the Australian Government plays a strategic role in identifying and addressing gaps in the ECEC market, consistent with the Royal Commission's suggestion that the role of the Commonwealth be framed around accessibility and the role of states be framed around quality.

## Affordability

<sup>10</sup> Access to services in the early years: barriers and enablers for families A review of recent literature September 2021 Prepared by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare for the Department of Education and Training

<sup>11</sup> Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). *Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare?* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University

The cost for ECEC services can shape a family's decision on whether to use ECEC services. In a 2021 survey of almost 1,700 parents, the Front Project found almost half had made significant financial sacrifices to use ECEC services. A similar proportion found the system of subsidies difficult to understand and the costs of services opaque.<sup>12</sup>

Research suggests that as a household income increases, so does the likelihood of a child attending ECEC programs, leading to a widening gap between families who are able to participate and those who cannot afford to do so. Analysis by the Mitchell Institute estimated that childcare is unaffordable for around 386,000 Australian families, with 83 per cent of all families who pay for childcare spending more on ECEC than they do on utilities or clothing and 70 per cent spending more on ECEC than transport.

These findings suggest that participation in early years programs could increase with more financial assistance. ECEC should be affordable and within the reach of every South Australian family, particularly if ECEC is to serve as the backbone of integrated service offerings designed to engage with families experiencing disadvantage.

In this regard, the government welcomes the Australian Government's decision to have the Productivity Commission inquire into systemic issues affecting ECEC. The government would welcome consideration of how, in a market-based system, the Australian Government can work with the state government and non-government providers to ensure that all South Australian families who want to use childcare can do so.

The government also welcomes the Australian Government's recent changes to childcare subsidy to make childcare more affordable, as well as the Australian Government's decision to direct the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to inquire into the pricing of childcare. As with accessibility, the government notes the framing suggested by the Royal Commission in relation to the role of the Commonwealth in having a significant focus on cost reduction for families.

The government notes recommendations in the Royal Commission's interim report about how the government can address barriers to preschool participation and would welcome similar consideration of how to ensure that all forms of ECEC are within the means of families who choose to use them.

## Cultural responsiveness

As has been touched on already, there are particular barriers to ECEC participation for Aboriginal families. These include:

- a lack of cultural responsiveness in services and other cultural barriers
- an absence of Aboriginal involvement and leadership in service delivery
- social and community characteristics like past experiences of trauma and a lack of trust or understanding of available services.<sup>13</sup>

Aboriginal families and communities who have been impacted by intergenerational trauma and discriminatory policies that perpetuate disadvantage often have complex needs. These families and communities need targeted and intensive healing and support services that are culturally safe and that overcome deep system distrust.

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<sup>12</sup> Work and play: understanding how Australian families experience early childhood education and care, The Front Project, 2021

<sup>13</sup> Access to services in the early years: barriers and enablers for families A review of recent literature September 2021 Prepared by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare for the Department of Education and Training

The need for policy and decision-making partnerships with Aboriginal people at the local community level is vital. Similarly, training Aboriginal people in community to take on roles in ECEC and in health service provision to children in the first 1000 days is important to ensuring services are culturally responsive. Training whilst working keeps people on Country and allows them to feel culturally safe.

Through the Closing the Gap Sector Strengthening Plan for Early Childhood Care and Development, the government is working with the South Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Network to set out deliverables for increased investment in ACCOs and ACCHOs, providing Aboriginal people with meaningful choice about service delivery and ensure cultural safety and to ensure the system around them supports this to happen.

The South Australian Government is focused on providing effective and culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal families in the first 1000 days. Children and Family Centres that are focused on supporting Aboriginal families with young children are one example. Kalaya Children's Centre, for instance, is an integrated centre providing quality long day care and pre-school programs for Aboriginal children and children from the local community. The needs of Aboriginal infants, families, and kin must be woven into the services, policies, and solutions to ensure maximum impact, connection and outcomes, so they become part of routine practice and service offerings.

## Support for children with additional needs

Children with complex additional needs are among those who benefit the most from participation in ECEC but are among those cohorts less likely to access it.<sup>14</sup> While many South Australian children with disability are enrolled in and are accessing ECEC, poor rates of inclusion may relate to provider capability and capacity, the availability of suitably trained educators, and accessibility to inclusion supports such as through the NDIS.

The National Quality Framework requires the leaders of ECEC services, including approved providers, service supervisors and management, and educators, to build inclusion for all children, including those with disability. When services are more inclusive, they can contribute to the life experiences and development of children with additional needs.

The government is committed to continuing to work with the autistic and autism communities to make South Australia a leader on autism inclusion. Through consultation on South Australia's first Autism Strategy, autistic people and their families have shared the barriers they face to educational participation. The autistic community has identified that there is a need for greater knowledge and understanding of autism within ECEC settings to build the capacity of educators to support autistic children and their families. With increased capacity, educators will be able to have early conversations with families about autism and support autistic children to successfully participate in ECEC.

The government is taking steps to help the families of children with disabilities to access the services available to them. For example, MyTime is a free service offering facilitated peer support to parents and carers of children with a disability, developmental delay or chronic medical condition. MyTime groups help members build social connections with other families in their area, learn about local services and supports, and access evidence-based information. It is essential to support ECEC providers and other services to continue to build inclusive services that are able to identify and implement adjustments for children living with disability.

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<sup>14</sup> Productivity Commission. (2014). Childcare and early childhood learning. Inquiry report no. 73. Canberra: Productivity Commission