



Community
Child Care

Vision into Practice

National Care & Support Economy Strategy 2023

Prepared for

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Proposal from

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About us

From a small, grassroots beginning in 1971, Community Child Care Association (CCC) has grown significantly and is now the peak body in Victoria for community-owned education and care services. We support long day care, outside school hours care (OSHC), kindergarten, family day care and occasional care services and their educators, teachers, leaders, coordinators and directors. CCC's vision and purpose are underpinned by the belief that all children deserve the best possible start in life, regardless of their circumstances. Our vision is for excellent early childhood and outside school hours education and care for all and our purpose is to lead, support and advocate for accessible high-quality opportunities for children and families.

As a trusted sector leader, CCC provides leadership and advocacy, works with governments at all levels toward improvement in the sector and supports services with membership, quality professional development and consultancies. CCC equips and supports early childhood and outside school hours care services, educators and their communities with the skills and confidence to deliver high quality inclusive education and care services. Since 2016, we have also delivered the Victorian Inclusion Agency (VIA), which is part of the Inclusion Support Program. The VIA offers free inclusion support to eligible education and care services, giving all children the chance to thrive in education and care.

CCC's advocacy has been pivotal in enabling and strengthening the development and retention of Victoria's community-owned education and care sector.

For the purposes of this submission, early education and care (ECEC) will be used to refer to all of the service types mentioned above.

Introduction

As a peak body for community managed education and care services CCC appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the Care and Support Sector Draft National Strategy.

We recognise the importance of a cross sector approach to achieving the objective of the National Strategy to 'deliver high quality essential services to some of Australia's most vulnerable people'¹.

Broadly, we support the three high-level goals included in the draft National Strategy to deliver a sustainable and productive care and support economy that delivers quality care and support with decent jobs. These high-level goals reflect the value of the care and support sector to the community and when realised will ensure it remains viable into the future.

While the National Strategy's focus care and support sectors of aged care, veterans care, disability support and early education and care share some similarities, especially in relation to current and future workforce needs, it is important that the National Strategy also reflects their uniqueness.

¹ National Care and Support Sector Strategy terms of reference





We understand that the National Strategy is a high-level document and that the process to deliver the objectives under these goals will be set out in detailed action plans, which will be developed at a later date.

However, in order for the goals outlined in the National Strategy to be realised, it is important to note the unique characteristics of these various sectors, including early childhood education and care, which may mean that not all approaches are appropriate to be universally applied.

Below we identify the ways in which the ECEC sector varies in nature to the other focus sectors to assist with the further development of appropriate action and implementation plans resulting from this National Strategy.

ECEC is a broad and diverse sector, delivering care, education, early intervention and recreation across multiple service types from birth and across school age. It includes long day care, family day care, state funded preschools/ kindergarten and outside school hours care. ECEC serves the needs for not only children but also their families. It also provides a double dividend of both improved child health and development, alongside greater workforce participation. Investing in a healthy and sustainable ECEC sector is an investment in our current and future prosperity as a nation.

Early childhood education and care sector

Contribution to productivity and economic growth

We agree with the assertion in the draft National Strategy that the care and support sector has been inaccurately viewed and valued by policy makers in the past. Due to the history of the work originating as unpaid work within private households, it has been traditionally undervalued and seen as a cost instead of an investment in the social capacity and wellbeing of our country.

This is particularly so in the case of the ECEC sector. Research consistently shows that investment in the delivery of quality early childhood education and care provides significant returns on that investment. Improved workplace participation, increased tax revenue and improved future social and workforce capacity are just some examples of this.

For every dollar invested now, Australia receives \$2 back over a child's life², a return reflecting increased lifetime earnings and savings to government as the result of reduced social disadvantage and inequality.

Research also consistently shows that the greater the level of investment and quality of ECEC, the greater the economic returns. The Australia Institute estimates that if Australia were to increase its investment in ECEC to the level of OECD average, this would lead to an ultimate increase in total GDP of \$7.7 billion³. Higher workforce participation and increased tax revenue would *increase* revenue for governments at all levels by \$2.2 billion⁴.

² The Front Project, PWC: *A smart investment for a smarter Australia: economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school*. June 2019 <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/economic-analysis>

³ Grudnoff, M: *The Economic Benefits of High Quality Universal Early Child Education*, The Australia Institute March 2022 https://futurework.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/11/Economic_Aspects_of_ECEC_in_Australia_FINAL.pdf

⁴ Ibid





The Centre for Policy Development estimates that providing three days of free universal early education and care for every child and family who want it could result in a yearly return on investment of \$15 billion once the impacts were fully realised⁵.

The productivity and economic gains which come from investment in ECEC are substantial, and outweighs its budgetary costs. ECEC is a sector that more than pays for itself in benefits to the community, both now and in the future.

Dual role of education and care

ECEC is also unique in that it performs a dual function of providing both education and care. Both are inextricably linked. In an ECEC environment the provision of care cannot be separated from learning and education.

At early ages, children are learning critical social and emotional skills. Calming a crying child is a moment to support self-regulation and the identification of emotions. Mealtimes are an opportunity to reinforce healthy eating, the way the body works, turn-taking and sharing. Pack up develops listening skills and teamwork. Mat time develops muscles that prepare children for group learning at school.

Children cannot learn without their physical and emotional needs being met, and meeting those needs are also learning opportunities. Skilled and qualified educators at all levels understand this and integrate it into their daily practice.

The ECEC sector is plagued by persistent confusion and inconsistency of policy objective. While recognised in the terms of reference of the Productivity Commission Inquiry as ‘an essential part of Australia’s education system’⁶, it is also defined in this strategy as part of ‘the care and support sector.’

Federal government investment in ECEC has historically been through the welfare system as a workforce participation measure, while state governments have funded some, but not all aged groups in recognition of the educational outcomes.

Outdated distinctions between ‘care’ and ‘education’ and the ages at which these happen, must be resolved in order to ensure that the goals of this strategy align with the future vision for the early childhood sector.

Nature of the workforce

Meeting the future workforce needs sustainably is an urgent and critical issue. While it is true that variations in pay and working conditions can create conflict in demand between care and support sectors, it is not true that the skills and qualifications are interchangeable.

The ECEC workforce is highly skilled. It is a requirement of the National Quality Framework that at least 50% of all staff in an early childhood service hold at least diploma qualification or higher.

⁵ CDP: *Starting Better: A guarantee for young children and families*, Nov 2021 <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CPD-Starting-Better-Report.pdf>

⁶ Productivity Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care, Feb 2023 <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/childhood/terms-of-reference>





Certificate III qualifications are the minimum requirement for entry into the sector. While minimum qualifications are not universally required for outside school hours care (OSHC) educators, this is currently under review by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). It is Community Child Care's position that a minimum qualification requirement for OSHC is long overdue.

While there are some general skills that would apply across the care and support sector, the nature of the different needs of the people receiving the care and support mean that this can only ever be very limited. Even standard skills such as first aid vary in an ECEC setting compared to an aged care setting because of the nature of the people receiving care.

Meeting future workforce needs through standardising qualifications, or developing cross sector micro credentials runs the risk of effectively deskilling the workforce and undermining the quality of care and support provided. To meet the policy goal of person focused care and support, we need a workforce that is sufficiently skilled to meet an individual's specialised needs.

Improving future productivity

Improving productivity in the care and support sector is needed but must be handled carefully to ensure the quality of outcomes is not reduced.

The ECEC sector has operated under an established national regulatory framework since 2012. It is robust and is well supported by the sector. Opportunities to deliver future productivity gains in the ECEC sector through the review of these regulations is likely to be limited as it has already been reviewed twice since its inception.

Advances in technology to allow for the reduction of time spent on administrative tasks do represent a real opportunity to improve productivity in the ECEC sector. Support from the government to identify and promote the uptake of these opportunities would help the sector maximise the benefits.

However, it is important to note that technology is not always a safer option for reducing workload. The vulnerable nature of the people accessing care and support services must be recognised. For example, in ECEC a simple solution to free up staff may be to remove the requirement for an educator to be physically present in a room where children are sleeping. Monitoring could occur outside of the room by video monitor. While this seems reasonable and straight forward, unfortunately, child deaths have occurred due to SIDS under these exact scenarios⁷.

It is also important to recognise that the ECEC sector itself is a driver of current and future productivity which will help to cover the ongoing costs of providing a quality care and support sector. ECEC is a facilitator for increased workforce participation now as well as greater educational achievements, higher income levels and reduced disadvantage in the future. The greatest way to deliver improved productivity in the ECEC sector is to continue to invest in it.

⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-12-22/nsw-coroner-hands-down-jack-loh-childcare-death-findings/100718556>





Conclusion

CCC is supportive of the high-level goals and objectives set out in the Draft National Strategy. However, we stress that a universal approach to achieving all objectives may not be appropriate. By working with the sector and recognising the unique natures of the focus sectors as well as their similarities, we believe these measures will achieve the vision of a high quality sustainable care and support sector underpinned by decent jobs. We welcome the opportunity to support the process of developing the action plans further.

Contact us

Thank you for your consideration.

If you would like to discuss this proposal, please contact CCC on (03) 9486 3455.

We look forward to a conversation about this submission.

Yours sincerely,



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