



**Early Childhood  
Education and Care:  
Future Directions for  
Australia**

Response - June 2017

## Overview

Northside Community Service welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Australian Labor Party's consultation to reforming the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. We commend the Labor Party and Shadow Minister for Early Childhood Education Kate Ellis MP for undertaking this consultation.

Northside is committed to engaging in the national conversation around ECEC in Australia. As a community-based not-for-profit organisation, we strongly believe in the right of all children to access high quality ECEC – especially children experiencing vulnerability or trauma. The research on the importance of the first five years is unequivocal, and it is imperative that Australia develops policy settings that mean all children can access ECEC, regardless of their parents' work status.

Please find below our responses to selected questions provided in the Discussion Paper. Please note, we have chosen specific questions to answer but the responses will in many cases cover other similar questions presented in the Paper.

For further information on Northside's engagement with reform processes, the following submissions have been made to other consultation processes:

- Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Child Care Package) Bill, 2015 (<http://northside.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/senate-inquiry-submission.pdf>)
- Social Services Legislation Amendment (Omnibus Savings and Child Care Reform) Bill 2017 (<http://northside.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Senate-Inquiry-Mar-2017.pdf>)

## Responses

### What should be the 10-year vision for Australia's early childhood education and care system be?

We believe that any vision for Australia's ECEC system has to start from the following principles:

**All children have a right to access high-quality ECEC**

**The ECEC system should be viewed in the same way as the primary and secondary school systems**

**High-quality ECEC should be free for families**

We know these are big changes. But if we're going to think about a **vision** we should be bold. Tinkering around the edges with the current system is not producing the outcomes we need for children.

This is our vision for Australia's ECEC system in 2027:

**A child's right to an enrolment in high-quality ECEC is guaranteed in legislation.** As is the case in other countries (such as Germany), it is legislated that all children – no matter where they live or what their parents do - must have access to an ECEC place. The Federal, State/Territory and Local Governments all work together to ensure that this is enacted for every child.

**The ECEC system is viewed with the same respect and value as primary and secondary education.** Governments fund the system directly, and ensure that educators and teachers working in the system are well-paid, have access to high-quality professional development and are supported to ensure the learning and wellbeing of all children. Families view ECEC as just as important as sending their child to school.

**It is free for children to access ECEC.** Just like public schools, families do not pay any money for their child to attend ECEC. Federal and State/Territory funding provides for high-quality ECEC services in every community based on need, and a private/independent system operates on a strict not-for-profit basis.

This vision positions ECEC where the research tells us it needs to be – at the forefront of an approach to children's learning and wellbeing that sets children up to succeed, and for Australia to benefit in the generations ahead.

## Are there particular cohorts of children who are being let down by our current system?

Australia's current ECEC system works to disadvantage many groups of children. Specifically:

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children** – We know that Australia failed to meet the previous Closing the Gap target for access to early childhood education.
- **Children experiencing trauma and vulnerability** – Navigating the benefit system, the CCMS system and separate Federal/State requirements makes accessing ECEC for these children complex and challenging (including for services).
- **Children of low-income or unemployed parents** – The current system ties a child's right to access ECEC to their parent's contribution to the workforce. For families struggling with employment, or employed casually, this drastically affects a child's ability to access ECEC.

## How can early education outcomes be improved for all children?

Bringing ECEC fully within the national education system, and funding it in the same way, will allow for stronger implementation of the goals of the National Quality Framework. Australia will be able to respond to the latest research on what helps young children learn, as well as ensuring policy settings in the early years are supporting educational and policy goals in primary and secondary settings.

Policy should be focused on ensuring that the children who can most benefit from high-quality ECEC – the cohorts identified in the question above – have the *most* access to ECEC, not the least.

## Should children have to access an early learning entitlement?

Yes. Alongside a legislated right to an ECEC place, the research on the first five years is unequivocal that a minimum amount of ECEC is required for the benefits to be embedded and long-term.

It is also important to note that children who are at risk of vulnerability require a higher minimum entitlement of access.

## What action should government take to address accessibility and waiting list issues?

Bringing ECEC into the same Federally-funded and managed system as primary and secondary education will allow Government to ensure that ECEC services are targeted to areas of community need.

## **Are there effective ways to improve affordability for Australian families which are not being utilised?**

In considering long-term reform for Australia's early childhood sector, it is necessary to have the challenging conversation about the failure of the market-model (tied to workforce participation) to meet community need and expectation for the ECEC system. Governments moved to this model as a "solution" to issues of accessibility and affordability, but it is now clear that this policy shift did not resolve those issues.

As well as leading to the ABC Learning collapse and the associated risks to the community of that collapse, it has also led to the current situation where around \$1 billion of ECEC funding is leaving the community and going into profits for private organisations.

Just as in the primary and secondary school system, there is a place for public and private operation in the ECEC space. But private operators should be legally required to operate in a not-for-profit model, alongside a well-funded public system of ECEC that is free for all children to access.

While a market-based model continues to be the preferred model, the Government will not be able to control affordability.

## **How could government most effectively address the issues affecting the early childhood education and care workforce?**

The Government should actively support the current Pay Equity Case before Fair Work Australia, and if the Case is successful should commit to fully funding the required increases to educator wages.

Funded professional learning and development should also be reinstated to ensure that educators are fully-equipped to support the learning and wellbeing of children.

## **What implementation issues are expected with the Government's child care changes? How could these concerns be best addressed?**

Northside has significant concerns with the content and implementation of the Jobs for Families Package. As well as potentially locking out the identified groups of children who would most benefit from increased access to ECEC, there is still a great deal of uncertainty around how these structural reforms can be implemented. Details of the Safety Net are still unavailable, and it is still unclear how an hourly fee cap will affect operating models.



## About Northside Community Service

We are a community-based, not for profit organisation established in 1976 through the efforts of concerned people wanting to provide and develop support and services for residents of North Canberra.

Today we employ over 150 staff, along with an active volunteer program and operate an annual budget of over \$11 million. In responding to the needs of our community we currently deliver a diverse range of services, including:

- early childhood education
- services for older people and people with a disability
- home support, transport and social programs for seniors
- support programs for young people and families
- women's housing and support for formerly homeless people
- venue hire for community activities

## About Northside Children's Services

Northside manages four Early Childhood Centres in the ACT located in Civic, Dickson, Turner and Harrison. All Northside Centres operate under the National Quality Framework, and are committed to supporting the Early Learning of young children through high-quality, play-based educational programs and professional practices in a safe and enjoyable environment. Northside also operates the ConnXtions Early Childhood Program, an early childhood program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Our Centres work with children from six weeks old to school-age, and are open 51 weeks a year. Each Centre is committed to working closely with children and their families to support every child's early learning and wellbeing.

Northside feels strongly about advocating for the importance of all children's birth right to high-quality early education, and actively works within the local and national community to improve understanding and knowledge of issues affecting children and Early Childhood.

Early Childhood Education can change lives. We know that giving children a love of learning, and supporting wellbeing at an early age can drastically improve the opportunities and life-long outcomes for every child – and in turn, the whole community.