



POSITION STATEMENT: COVID19 AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The early years are critical for children and quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) contributes to the development of lifelong skills, resilience and well-being that can protect against future disadvantage and harm.

The unprecedented situation of COVID19 means that we as not-for-profit providers are at risk of not being able to continue to provide the essential service of early childhood education and care for children across the ACT.

We are already experiencing the impact of COVID19 on our services. Families are choosing to exclude their children from services in order to physically distance themselves, families are no longer in work due to unemployment and our staff are working in highly stressful conditions of uncertainty.

This will also have significant impact on the broader community sector, as our ECEC services make up a significant amount of our overall organisations.

Like Government our priority is to ensure that our children are continued to be provided with high quality ECEC during these challenging times and families are supported.

The viability of our services is essential in ensuring stability for our staff, children and families. Our priority is to ensure that our staff are provided with appropriate supports and that children and families are able to continue to access high quality early learning services.

During these unprecedented times we are calling for the following actions to support our services to be able to provide ECEC to children in the ACT:

- Immediately extend the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) to be paid to ECEC services during this time regardless of whether they remain open or forced to close due to public health advice to ensure viability of the sector.
- Extend the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) to Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) from when pupil free days were declared in the ACT in response to COVID19.
- Receive daily updates from the ACT Education Directorate on COVID19 and get advice on closures due to public health reasons ahead of the public.
- Review administrative requirements for ECEC services to allow our workforce to focus on the care and education of children during these rapidly changing these times.
- Work with Governments to determine how to provide ECEC for children who it is required for even in the event of closures due to public health reasons.

Each of these areas are detailed below.

Immediately extend the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) to be paid to ECEC services regardless of whether they remain open or forced to close due to public health advice to ensure viability of the sector

While ECEC services remain open, we are experiencing the immediate impacts of COVID19 as families are withdrawing their children from services. This is expected as advice from Government is for people to stay at home. Without forced closures occurring due to public health reasons, ECEC services remain open as they are considered an essential service. This has meant that ECEC will not be viable to continue to operate as services are experiencing significant losses places extra stress on our workforce.

The early childhood education workforce already experience a range of pressures. Early childhood educators earn below the general workforce average wage and early childhood teachers (ECTs) often have substantially worse pay and conditions compared with primary school teachers.¹ This is particularly the case for ECTs working in early learning centres, as they generally offer lower salaries, longer hours and fewer holidays.²

It is now more important than ever to support our workforce and ensure their wellbeing is considered in the current environment of uncertainty due to the impact of COVID19. While the commitment from the Australian Government to extend the CCS to ECEC services in the event of closures due to public health advice was initially welcome. It has become clear that immediate financial support is needed for the ECEC sector to remain viable during this time of uncertainty.

Given ECEC services have been deemed an essential service, immediate support for services is needed so they can remain open to provide education for care and children. We are calling on the Government to extend the CCS payment to ECEC services during this time of emergency in response to COVID19 to support the viability of the ECEC sector regardless of being required to stay open or forced to close. For ECEC services to remain viable during this time and to return after the event of closures due to public health advice the CCS payment should be backdated to enrollment numbers as at February 2020.

Extend the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) to Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) from when pupil free days were declared in the ACT in response to COVID19

The uncertainty surrounding attendance numbers at school has had a direct impact on the provision of Out of School Hours Care (OSHC). Our services have continued to provide OSHC as per normal because the attendance numbers are not known as a result of the introduction of additional pupil free days in response to COVID19. The decision to require OSHC programs to remain open during the period of pupil free days places additional financial stress on our organisations. Not knowing what the demand will be for OSHC places makes it difficult to plan for staff requirements each day. To support the viability of the program, extension of the CCS payment to OSHC places backdated to enrolment numbers from when the pupil free days have been declared in the ACT is crucial.

¹ NSW Government (2017). *Literature Review Early Childhood Education Directorate: Early Childhood Education Workforce issues in Australian and international contexts*. Education NSW: Sydney

² Ibid

Receive daily updates from the ACT Education Directorate on COVID19 and get advice on closures due to public health reasons ahead of the public

The unprecedented situation of COVID19 means that we as not-for-profit providers are at risk of not being able to continue to provide the essential service of early childhood education and care for children across the ACT. In this rapidly changing environment, all providers would appreciate daily briefings from the Education Directorate to ensure that we are receiving up to date information to provide to our ECEC services. Like Government, our priority is to ensure that our children are continued to be provided with high quality ECEC during these challenging times and families are supported. Being informed of ECEC services and school closures and other relevant issues ahead of the public will allow us to prepare communications to staff and families. It is crucial that the Government and the sector are providing the same information and essential in our responsibility as employers to our staff to help reduce anxiety and stress in these rapidly changing times.

Review administrative requirements for ECEC services to allow our workforce to focus on the care and education of children during these rapidly changing these times

Access to quality ECEC develops lifelong skills, resilience and wellbeing that can protect against future disadvantage and harm. Greater exposure to quality ECEC enhances the employment and economic prospects of children when they become adults.

All staff in our ECEC services are committed to providing high quality ECEC. During these unprecedented times the priority of our staff is ensuring the health and wellbeing of our children and families. To provide greater supports to allow our staff to focus on continuing to provide high quality education and care we are calling on the Government to:

- Pause the Assessment and Rating processes during this time of uncertainty.
- Assess the current ratio requirements to ensure that children are able to continue to access ECEC.
- Review minimum qualification requirements to ensure backfilling is possible if required.
- Review the evidence and level of paper work required for low grade incidences placed through the ACECQA incidence reporting portal .

It is crucial that these amendments to the current system does not compromise the quality of education and care delivered but provides services with flexibility to support staff, children and families.

Work with Governments to determine how to provide ECEC for children who it is required for even in the event of closures due to public health reasons

As we work through these challenging times we are aware that in the event of closures due to public health reasons, there will be some instances where there will be requirements to continue to provide ECEC for children. We are committed to ensure that our staff are provided with appropriate supports and that children and families are able to continue to access high quality early learning services. For families where parents and carers are providing essential services, access to ECEC may be a requirement for them.

There will also be a requirement for our services to ensure that ECEC for children experiencing disadvantage is continued. Consistency and trust is essential for children and families that experience barriers in accessing ECEC. It is important that any changes to ECEC as a result of COVID19 does not cause in additional barriers for children and families. This is particularly important as we begin to implement the universal access to ECEC for three-year-old children. We recognise

that we will need to work with Government to ensure that that the health and wellbeing of staff, children and families is prioritised when access to ECEC is essential.

About the Children First Alliance

The ACT Children First Alliance (the Alliance) is a network of longstanding for purpose providers of children's service in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), including early learning centres (ELCs), family day care, preschool and outside school hours care.

There is a significant body of research that demonstrates the importance of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) on a child's social, emotional, educational and economic wellbeing across the lifespan. Despite this, more than one in five ACT children were developmentally vulnerable when entering school. The Alliance was established to develop and communicate a shared vision for ECEC in the ACT and to ensure that all children have access to ECEC.

The nine community ECEC providers that make up this Alliance operate 43 ELCs. Together these ELCs provide 3,491 places to children. The Alliance has nine Founding Members:

- Anglicare NSW South, NSW West & ACT
- Belconnen Community Service
- Communities@Work
- Community Services #1
- Goodstart Early Learning ACT
- MOCCA
- Woden Community Service
- YMCA Canberra
- YWCA Canberra