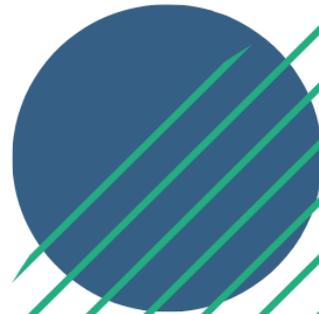




Children First
Alliance

2022-2023 PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION



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About the 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 ten community ECEC providers that make up this Alliance operate 45 ELCs. Together these ELCs provide over 3,500 places to children. The Alliance has ten Founding Members:

- Baringa Early Learning Centre
- Anglicare NSW South, NSW West & ACT
- Capital Region Community Services
- Communities@Work
- Community Services #1
- Goodstart Early Learning ACT
- Northside Community Service
- Woden Community Service
- YMCA Canberra
- YWCA Canberra

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Introduction

Children can thrive and be healthy when they have what they need to develop well. When we support children’s development in the early years, we increase their health and wellbeing, and the success of their communities both now and in the future. The early years are critical for children because during these years children experience the most rapid period of growth and change across the human lifespan.¹

Quality Early education and care (ECEC) develops lifelong skills, resilience and well-being that can immunise against future disadvantage and harm. In the ACT over half (59.2 per cent) of children aged between 0 to 5 years attend CCS approved child care. High quality ECEC makes a significant and lasting impact on children throughout their lives, resulting in them being more likely to succeed in education, economically and socially.

Families across the country including the ACT have experienced an extreme amount of stress and pressures of the last two years. As not-for-profit providers of ECEC, Alliance members are extremely proud of their services in how they have been able to support families during these challenging times.

The ECEC sector has experienced a significant impact as a result of COVID19 and continues to manage the ongoing challenges. Ensuring is sustainable for families and services will ensure that all children across Canberra can experience the benefits of ECEC. The majority of families attending Alliance members services also supports this with 80 per cent supporting the extension of free Government preschool to three-year-old children in the ACT.

The Government’s investment in providing access to three-year-old children to ECEC contributes directly to the ACT’s Wellbeing Framework, ‘Education and life-long learning’ domain. This domain focuses on “tracking the quality of access to early childhood education in the years before pre-school”.²

The COVID19 pandemic has again highlighted the pressure the ECEC workforce is facing and the immediate need for greater investment. While the fundamental changes and improvements to pay and work conditions set by Federal Government is essential. The ACT Government has a role in investing and supporting the ECEC workforce to ensure that children are accessing high quality ECEC services. A literature review on determinants of quality in child-care found that, overall, the most influential factors affecting quality, across age groups and service settings, are the education, qualifications, and training of the workforce.³

Early childhood educators are some of the most vital workers in the country. Their valuable contribution to our children lives and our communities needs to be recognised. Investing in our early childhood educators has never been more important. As a community, now is the time to be demonstrating how much we value our educators and the important work they do.

The Alliance has outlines five key policy actions in this Pre-Budget Submission to ensure that the ACT has a strong quality ECEC sector that provides our children the best start in life. To ensure healthy, vibrant and thriving communities, we need to focus on the earliest years of life and support our young children now.

¹ Van Leer, B. (2006). *A Guide to General Comment 7: ‘Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood’*. UNICEF: United Nations.

² https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1498198/ACT-wellbeing-framework.pdf

³ Huntsman, L. (2008). *Determinants of quality in childcare: A review of the research evidence*. NSW Department of Community Services, Centre for Parenting & Research: Sydney

Recommendations

1. Introduce an ECEC voucher for families in the ACT to use across all setting types, including long day care, before and after school care, and vacation programs.
2. Invest in an *Incentives Program* for qualified early childhood educators to enter or return to the ECEC sector to support the implementation of the universal access to ECEC for three-year-old children.
3. Invest \$960,000 a year for an ACT Early Childhood Educators Professional Development Fund to support the ongoing need for professional development in the ECEC sector.
4. Review the daily sessional fee for the universal access to ECEC for three-year-old children program to ensure it remains relative to average fees in the ACT and the CCS cap for Centre Based Day Care.
5. Invest in flexible funding models of transport so children experiencing disadvantage can access their local early learning centre.

Five actions for Early Childhood Education and Care in the 2022-23 Budget

1. Provide one-off financial support for families to access ECEC services

During 2020 and 2021, families across the ACT managed working from home and remote learning while schools and early childhood education and care services were operating under public health orders. This put a particular toll on families, not only financially but also general wellbeing.

The NSW Government in early 2022, introduced a Before and After School Hours Care Voucher. This entitles families with children aged 4 to 13 years that attend a primary school in NSW can receive a \$500 voucher per child to reduce the out-of-pocket costs of before and after school care. Vouchers can be redeemed with a before and after school care provider from 28 February to 31 December 2022, with voucher credit can be used for services until 30 June 2023. The vouchers assist up to approximately 60 sessions for children attending Before and After School Hours Care Voucher.

ECEC services in the ACT provide services for families that children go to school in the NSW. Services have report that families that attend Before and After School Hours Care in NSW but attend Vacation Care in the ACT have been seeking to transfer of their vouchers for the Vacation Care in the ACT.

Families across the ACT are continuing to manage the ongoing challenges presented by COVID19, with various schools returning to online learning for short periods, and children not being able to attend due ECEC services due to either contracting COVID19 or the common cold. This meaning that families continue to manage working from home, reduced work hours, remote learning and children being at home.

The introduction of a ECEC voucher similar to NSW would support families manage the ongoing pressured caused by COVID19. An ECEC voucher for the ACT would extend the NSW approach to include all ECEC services, long day care, before and after school care, and vacation programs.

Recommendation:

1. Introduce an ECEC voucher for families in the ACT to use across all setting types, including long day care, before and after school care, and vacation programs.

2. Attract early childhood educators to work in the ACT to provide quality education and care to children

A strong qualified workforce is essential to delivering quality Early Childhood Education and Care services. High quality early childhood education and care services make a significant impact on children, throughout their lives.

The ACT Government's *Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT*, which includes a key foundation area of 'Valuing educators, values children'. The Strategy includes a range of actions that focus on supporting the ECEC workforce.

It is well documented that across the country the ECEC is facing a workforce crisis, which has been exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic. 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.⁴ This is particularly the case for ECTs working in early learning centres, as they generally offer lower salaries, longer hours, and fewer holidays.⁵

Services across the ACT are experiencing constant challenges attracting staff to work in ECEC settings. As of 17 May 2022, there were 169 job advertisements on Seek for roles within ECEC services including long day care centres and Outside School Hours Care services.

In 2021, the Victorian Government introduced the *Victorian Early Childhood Teacher Financial Incentives* program to support and expand the sector's workforce in line with the statewide roll-out of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten in 2022.⁶

The program offers qualified early childhood teachers joining or returning to the ECEC sector, as well as those coming from interstate and New Zealand, with financial incentives. Individual Incentives worth \$9,000 are available for qualified early childhood teachers working in a different sector to take up a role in any service in Victoria delivering Three-Year-Old Kindergarten. Returning teachers re-joining the sector will also be able to access additional professional learning to help with their career move.

Location incentives of between \$9,000 to \$50,000 are also available for qualified early childhood teachers who secure new roles at selected services, in areas that include hard-to-staff programs in metropolitan Melbourne and regional and rural Victoria, and available to the current workforce or those joining the profession. Relocation grants are available for teachers who move more than 200km to take up a position in a hard-to-staff location.⁷

Like the Victorian Government, the ACT Government's committed to the introduction of universal access to ECEC for three-year-old children is a welcomed policy supporting children access quality early childhood education and care. As the universal access to ECEC program continues to be implemented across the Territory there will be an increased pressure of community sector services to manage the workforce challenges.

A financial incentives program modelled on the Victorian program to attract people to return to the ECEC sector or start their career in the ACT would support services in trying to manage the current workforce challenges they are facing.

Recommendation:

2. Invest in an *Incentives Program* for qualified early childhood educators to enter or return to the ECEC sector to support the implementation of the universal access to ECEC for three-year-old children.

3. Provide greater opportunities for Early Childhood Educators to participate in professional development

Professional Development for educators is vital to ensuring that ECEC is high quality and results in outcomes that prepare children for school and beyond. In particular, research has drawn a direct link between the quality of teachers and educators and positive outcomes for children. Professor Edward

⁴ NSW Government (2017). *Literature Review Early Childhood Education Directorate: Early Childhood Education Workforce issues in Australian and international contexts*. Education NSW: Sydney

⁵ Ibid

⁶ <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/new-financial-incentives-boost-early-childhood-jobs>

⁷ <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/professionals/profdev/Early-Childhood-Teacher-Incentives-Guidelines.pdf>

Melhuish, a world leading expert on ECEC, indicated that an effective and efficient way to improve the quality of ECEC is to provide in-house professional development to educators.⁸

During the 2020 ACT Election, the Government announced that “ACT Labor will invest in local educators, supporting more people to get a degree qualification and ensure educators have access to professional development.”⁹

In March 2022, the ACT Government announced the *2022 Early Childhood Degree Scholarship Program*, which provides eight \$25,000 scholarships. This Program provides eight individuals who are working in the ACT non-government education and care sector financial assistance to gain an approved early childhood degree qualification.¹⁰ However there is no funding available for educators or teachers to access other forms of professional development or leave for study release to access professional development.

There are currently 367 centre-based ECEC services in the ACT.¹¹ A grants program for professional development and support for leave for study release should be established by the ACT Government. Funding for professional development opportunities that support children experiencing disadvantage, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other marginalised groups should be prioritised. There is also a need for professional development for trauma-informed practice to better support children experiencing trauma or neglect. The program could offer grants up to \$8,000 per annum per centre, reaching at least 120 services per year. This funding will support ECEC’s to access the necessary skills to provide this training to their staff and to backfill positions while staff are accessing this professional development.

Investing in professional development opportunities for early childhood educators across Canberra will demonstrate their value and contribution to the community. Access to ongoing professional development is key to ensuring that early childhood educators are supported

Recommendation:

3. Invest \$960,000 a year for an ACT Early Childhood Educators Professional Development Fund to support the ongoing need for professional development in the ECEC sector.

4. Review the funding for the universal access to ECEC to three-year-old children to ensure sustainability

The Alliance welcomed the Government’s increased investment in the universal access to ECEC to three-year-old children in the 2021-22 Budget. Alliance members are proud to partner with the Government in delivering this program to ensure the long-term aim that all children have access to quality ECEC is realised. The latest data from the Report on Government Services (RoGS) reports that the ACT has the highest rate across the country of 3- and 4-year-old children enrolled in a preschool program across all jurisdictions, 73.5 per cent and 97.4 per cent respectively.¹²

⁸ Professor Melhuish presentation to ACT Members of The Legislative Assembly, 6 October 2017

⁹ <https://www.actlabor.org.au/blog/act-election-announcements/free-early-learning-for-every-three-year-old-child/>

¹⁰ ACT Education (2020). Website: Early Childhood Degree Scholarship Program, <https://www.education.act.gov.au/early-childhood/information-for-businesses-and-employees/careers-and-training>

¹¹ <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-05/NQF%20Snapshot%20Q1%202022%20FINAL.pdf>

¹² ROGS (2022) data, Table 3A.18 Children aged 3 to 6 years old enrolled in a preschool program (a), (b), (c)

Lessons from the first two years have demonstrated that appropriately funding the program is important for its sustainability. The changes in the last years budget to fund the program at a daily session that brought it closer in line with the national funded CCS model. This allowed for services to deliver quality education and care while also having adequate support to undertake the administration requirements, workforce planning, support staff undertake professional development and complete the increased compliance activities.

The latest data from the Report on Government Services data indicate that the median weekly cost for ECEC in the ACT for 2021 was \$620.¹³ The current CCS cap for Centre Based Day Care – long day care and occasional care is \$12.31.¹⁴

To ensure that the program is sustainable and is able to reach its target of “Every three-year-old child in Canberra will have access to one day a week of free early learning by the end of the next term of government.”¹⁵ It is essential that the daily session fee for the universal program is reviewed each financial year to support the not-for-profit sector in the provision of quality educational outcomes as part of the program.

Recommendation:

4. Review the daily sessional fee for the universal access to ECEC for three-year-old children program to ensure it remains relative to average fees in the ACT and the CCS cap for Centre Based Day Care.

5. Support families experiencing transport disadvantage to access ECEC

There are several barriers to children and families accessing ECEC, including challenges getting to and from centres, limited access to specialist supports for children with additional needs, complex paperwork and enrolment processes, lack of trust and access and availability.¹⁶

Early Learning Centres (ELCs) can be best placed to identify early learning or health issues, provide information on strategies to support early learning at home, build supportive relationships with families who aren't engaging with other services and connect families with other support services.¹⁷ Engaging children and families who experience disadvantage in ECEC requires ELCs to be linked in with their communities and with services that can provide additional support.

The Preschool Readiness Program (PRP) in Alice Springs is an example of a program designed to address barriers to participation in preschool for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The PRP involved finding and connecting families with health and education providers to enhance the child's wellbeing and participation in preschool.¹⁸ The evaluation of the PRP found that it was effective in increasing the number of children participating in preschool and supported continuing attendance. Key findings from the evaluation found that the PRP was able to offer practical support

¹³ ROGS (2022) data, Table 3A.22. Median weekly cost of 50 hours of Australian Government CCS approved child care services, by selected service types, 2020-21 dollars (a), (b), (c), (d)

¹⁴ <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/type-child-care-you-use-can-affect-child-care-subsidy?context=41186>

¹⁵ ACT Labor (2020). ACT Election Announcements. Retrieved from: <https://www.actlabor.org.au/blog/act-election-announcements/free-early-learning-for-every-three-year-old-child/>

¹⁶ O'Connell M, Fox S, Hinz B and Cole H (2016). *Quality Education for All: Fostering creative, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable learners*. Mitchell Institute: Melbourne.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Fox, S and Geddes, M. (2016). *Preschool - Two Years are Better Than One: Developing a Preschool Program for Australian 3 Year Olds – Evidence, Policy and Implementation*. Mitchell Institute: Melbourne.

such as transport and clothing for children as well as long-term, relationship-based support to help sustain ongoing participation with families.¹⁹

Accessing ECEC has been identified as a barrier to engaging in ECEC. The Regional community organisations across Canberra have identified community transport as an area that needs addressing in order to support families and children experiencing disadvantage.

The investment in flexible funding models to allow organisations to tailor transport needs for each family will assist families and children experiencing disadvantage engage in ECEC across Canberra. The Education Directorate has also identified this as an area of need based on the feedback from families and ECEC services as part of the three-year-old initiative. Providing flexible and tailored transport options to families experiencing disadvantage so they can get to and from their early learning centre within their community will provide additional support that is needed. The Education Directorate held an initial workshop with Alliance members in 2020 to explore potential transport options in supporting families' access ECEC.

The five ACT Regional Community Service Organisations are reporting an increase in families requiring support for community transport. This support includes assistance in accessing health services, social groups, schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC). Current eligibility criteria under existing programs provide limited community transport options for suitable for families. Community transport vehicles are also limited in having the correct car seats required for transporting children and the space to transport both the parent/s or carer and the children.

Developing an innovative and flexible community transport option designed to support families would contribute to achieving numerous goals across the ACT Government. Creating family oriented community transport contributes to a range of Government strategies, such as the *First 1000 days Strategy*, *Future of Education Strategy*, *A Step Up for Our Kids Out of Home Care Strategy 2015-2020*, and *Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT*. Family oriented community transport also supports families currently accessing or trying to access Government funded programs such as Universal Access to ECEC for three-year-old children, services through the Child and Family Centres and Out of Home Care.

Recommendation:

5. Invest in flexible funding models of transport so children experiencing disadvantage can access their local early learning centre.

¹⁹ Ibid