



Children First Alliance Policy Statement - 2019

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 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

The Alliance's approach involves:

- Developing policy and program priorities based on the evidence-base and experience of Alliance members;
- Working with the ACT Government to progress these reforms;
- Working collaboratively with like-minded stakeholders; and
- Communicating information about these reforms with the ACT community.

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Key points

- All children should have the best start in life.
- 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 childhood education and care (ECEC) contributes to the development of lifelong skills, resilience and well-being that can immunise against future disadvantage and harm.
- For children experiencing disadvantage, these benefits are even more profound.
- However, we know that children experiencing disadvantage are less likely to attend ECEC.
- The ACT Government has acknowledged the importance of ECEC through their commitment to the development of the *ACT Early Childhood Strategy (Strategy)* and to introduce universal access to ECEC for three-year-old children.
- The Alliance has identified four priorities for ECEC to work collaboratively with the ACT Government to ensure all children have the best start in life.
- These four priority areas for action are:
 1. Support children and families experiencing disadvantage to access and engage in ECEC.
 2. Work with the Australian Government to provide ongoing universal access to ECEC for four-year-old children and continue work to extend access to three-year-old children
 3. Value and invest in the ECEC workforce to ensure high quality education for children.
 4. Ensure that planning processes support the development of a strong ECEC sector.

Summary of priority areas and recommendations

1. Support children and families experiencing disadvantage to access and engage in ECEC.

- Establish a framework and process that enables strong working relationships between the Community Services, Health and Education Directorates to ensure that there is continuity of services for children who access Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and require other supports.
- Support wrap around services for children in ECEC who have complex needs, that allows flexibility to provide the range of services that children may require to keep them healthy, safe and well.
- Fund Liaison Officer Positions within the community sector to work alongside and within Early learning Centres (ELCs) to act as a point of contact between ELCs, community and health services across the Government and for purpose sectors to ensure continuity of education and care for children.
- Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to improve access for ECEC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Work with the Australian Government to improve the processes used by the Inclusion Support Programme (ISP) to ensure that children who require additional assistance to engage in ECEC and Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) have timely access to the funding and supports.

2. Work with the Australian Government to provide ongoing universal access to ECEC for three and four-year-old children.

- Work with the Australian Government to establish a permanent and ongoing commitment for access to 15 hours of preschool per week for four-year-old children.
- Work towards the introduction of universal access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for three-year-old children as committed to in July 2018 and ensure that adequate support and services are available for children experiencing disadvantage.
- Adopt the principles identified by the Children First Alliance in introducing universal access of ECEC for three-year-old children. These principles are:
 - Prioritise children experiencing disadvantage;
 - Grow, develop and value the ECEC workforce; and
 - Focus on quality.

3. Value and invest in the ECEC workforce to ensure high quality education for children.

- Support the development of a new national Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce strategy to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and enhanced professionalisation of the workforce, thereby improving service quality and children's outcomes.
- Ensure that the focus on 'workforce and qualifications' in the *ACT Early Childhood Strategy* includes funding to support professional development opportunities across the ECEC workforce and backfilling to allow educators to be away from work to engage in these opportunities.
- Work to address the difference in pay and conditions for ECTs and Educators working in the ECEC sector.
- Provide registration under the Teacher Quality Institute (TQI) for ECTs working in ELCs in the ACT.

4. Ensure that planning processes support the development of a strong ECEC sector.

- As occurs with ACT schools, introduce a need, viability and proximity assessment for new ELCs in the ACT that considers:
 - The need for the centre as determined by the existing demand for services and consideration of current and projected population changes and growth.
 - The proximity of the centre to other existing centres.
 - The impact of the centre on the viability of existing centres, including their capacity to ensure that centres are able to be staffed by qualified ECEC educators and teachers.

Early Childhood Education and Care can make a difference

All children should have the best start in life. We know that 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.² Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) contributes to the development of lifelong skills, resilience and well-being that can immunise against future disadvantage and harm.

Quality ECEC improves school readiness and education outcomes, results in children being less likely to require extra support at school and makes children more likely to complete year 12. Quality ECEC also makes a significant and lasting impact on children throughout their lives, including resulting in higher levels of employment, income, financial security and reduced crime.³

For children experiencing disadvantage, these benefits are even more profound. However, we know that children experiencing disadvantage are less likely to attend ECEC. Access to quality ECEC can contribute to ending intergenerational disadvantage, by ensuring that children do not start school behind their peers. One in five ACT children are developmentally vulnerable when entering school.⁴ This is concerning because children who enter school developmentally vulnerable often fail to catch up, with 10 per cent remaining behind through middle school years.⁵ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than non Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.⁶

The ACT Government recognises the importance that ECEC can have on a child's life. The ACT Government has committed to the development of the *ACT Early Childhood Strategy* (Strategy) that will prioritise increasing access, equity and affordability; enhancing workforce and qualifications; and ensuring seamless transitions from education and care to school.⁷ The ACT Government has also committed to introducing universal access to ECEC for three-year-old children, prioritising children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability from 2020.⁸

The Alliance has identified four priorities to progress ECEC in the ACT and looks forward to continuing to work with the ACT Government to ensure all children have the best start in life. These priority areas for action are:

1. Support children and families experiencing disadvantage to access and engage in ECEC.
2. Work with the Australian Government to provide ongoing universal access to ECEC for four-year-old children and continue work to extend access to three-year-old children
3. Value and invest in the ECEC workforce to ensure high quality education for children.
4. Ensure that planning processes support the development of a strong ECEC sector.

Future directions

1. Support children and families experiencing disadvantage to access and engage in ECEC

Access to ECEC results in a range of positive outcomes throughout the lifespan. This effect is most profound for children experiencing disadvantage, who benefit most from access to ECEC. The benefits to accessing ECEC for children experiencing disadvantage are most apparent for children accessing 30 hours of ECEC per week.⁹ However, children experiencing disadvantage are often less likely to access ECEC. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up three per cent of children from birth to five years in the ACT, but only 1.6 per cent of these children were accessing ECEC in 2017.¹⁰

There are several barriers to children and families accessing ECEC, including limited access to specialist supports for children with additional needs, complex paperwork and enrolment processes, lack of trust and access and availability.¹¹

Invest in wrap-around services to help address barriers to children and families

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.¹² However these additional tasks can be very time consuming, emotionally demanding and require additional skills and services beyond the scope of the educator or teacher. 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 Western Sydney University report, *Evaluation of Early Childhood Schools and the Koori Preschool Program* in the ACT found that some referrals to ECEC from other agencies have taken place, however the process is inconsistent and largely based on relationships, rather than formal protocols.¹³ The Evaluation went further to suggest that there is opportunity to use the *Human Services Blueprint* as a framework to strengthen inter-agency collaboration and referrals. The *Human Services Blueprint* is a framework for collaboration between government agencies and community organisations in the human services sector. Launched in 2014, the *Human Services Blueprint* enables community, health, education and justice systems to work in alliance to join up support to people and families. An overarching principle is that people 'tell their story once'.¹⁴

Koori Preschools in the ACT are another example of ECEC which provides a wholistic approach. The ACT Government's Koori Preschool Program provides three to-five-year-old children with play-based experiences aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the curriculum.¹⁵

According to *Evaluation of Early Childhood Schools and the Koori Preschool Program* in the ACT, a key feature of Koori Preschool Program is the co-location and integration with schools and proximity to health and community services.¹⁶ Partnerships between Koori Preschools, ACT Child Development Service and Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Services support access for children and families to community and health services including speech therapy, occupational therapy and hearing testing.¹⁷

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 with families, health checks, developmental assessments and intervention work to determine and address child needs, preschool enrolment and adjustment support and partnerships between 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 such as transport and clothing for children as well as long-term, relationship-based support to help sustain ongoing participation with families.¹⁹

These examples demonstrate how services beyond ELCs can be engaged to ensure children and families are provided adequate support. There are existing services within the Canberra community such as the ACT Government operated Child and Family Centres that provide broader supports to families. These Centres provide a range of support programs to assist parents and children in the early stages of life. These Centres are operated by a multidisciplinary team and provide services and support focusing on children pre-birth to eight years.

Despite these services existing, they are often not linked well with ELCs or the services that provide ECEC. For standalone ELCs there is a need to provide access and connections to community and health services that can support children who are experiencing disadvantage. A possible model would be to fund positions that work within and alongside ELCs to act as Liaison Officers to be a point of contact between ELCs, community and health services across the Government and for purpose sectors to ensure continuity of education and care for children.

Strengthen Out of School Hours Care to ensure children experiencing barriers are included

Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) supports families by providing care before and after school and vacation care programs. OSHC programs are operated in primary schools across the ACT and some also provide care for preschool children.

As with ECEC, OSHC is required to comply with the National Quality Standards (NQS) which ensure that the programs are operated in safe and appropriate environments with adequate facilities, have adequate staffing arrangements and have appropriate management structures in place. OSHC also has a framework linked to the Early Years Learning Framework – *My Time, Our Place*, which “aims to extend and enrich children's wellbeing and development in school age care settings”.²⁰

There is some difficulty in accessing additional support required for children accessing OSHC. The latest Report on Government Services (ROGS) data highlights that 11.1 per cent of children aged six-to-12-year-old children have disabilities in the ACT. However, only 2.6 per cent of these children access OSHC. This suggests that there is a gap in access.²¹

Currently Inclusion Support Programme (ISP) funding exists for children with additional needs to allow them to access OSHC and other ECEC. The ISP is Australian Government funded. Each state and territory is serviced by an Inclusion Agency except for the ACT, which is serviced by the New South Wales (NSW) Inclusion Agency.

The processes to access this funding is complex, convoluted and often requires the provider to agree to supporting the child before the additional support is available and without knowing if the support will be available. The process for accessing ISP Funding needs to be streamlined to ensure that children who require extra support receive it when they need it.

Recommendations:

- Establish a framework and process that enables strong working relationships between the Community Services, Health and Education Directorates to ensure that there is continuity of services for children who access Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and require other supports.
- Support wrap around services for children in ECEC who have complex needs, that allows flexibility to provide the range of services that children may require to keep them healthy, safe and well.
- Fund Liaison Officer Positions within the community sector to work alongside and within Early learning Centres (ELCs) to act as a point of contact between ELCs, community and health services across the Government and for purpose sectors to ensure continuity of education and care for children.
- Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to improve access for ECEC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Work with the Australian Government to improve the processes used by the Inclusion Support Programme (ISP) to ensure that children who require additional assistance to engage in ECEC and Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) have timely access to the funding and supports.

2. Work with the Australian Government to provide ongoing universal access to ECEC for four-year-old children and continue work to extend access to three-year-old children

Two years of preschool provides greater benefits to children experiencing disadvantage, for whom one year of preschool may not be enough to close the achievement gaps.²² The Council of Australian Government's (COAG) report, *Lifting our Game* report recommends "Progressively expanding access to quality early childhood education, for example preschool, for all three year olds." The report goes on to say "In terms of improving school outcomes through early childhood interventions, the evidence points to this as the single most impactful reform Australia could undertake, with international comparisons highlighting it as the biggest gap in the current system. The case for this investment is compelling."²³

More specifically the report recommends that:

- "Australian governments agree to permanent, adequate funding for Universal Access in the year before school and the National Quality Framework."²⁴
- "Australian governments progressively implement universal access to 600 hours per year of a quality early childhood education program, for example preschool, for all three-year-old children, with access prioritised for disadvantaged children, families and communities during roll out."²⁵
- "Australian governments promote and support full participation by three-and-four-year-old children in quality early childhood education programs, in particular to maximise participation by vulnerable or disadvantaged children."

In 1998 the United Kingdom (UK) Government introduced subsidised preschool for four-year-old children. This was later extended to three-year-old children in 2004 and two-year-old children experiencing disadvantage in 2013. In September 2017, this was increased from 15 hours per week to 30 hours per week. Sweden offers all three-to-five-year-old children 15 hours of free ECEC per week and Italy offers 40 hours of free ECEC for all three-to-six-year-old children.²⁶

The *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* (EPPE) study assessed the impact of ECEC on participants' longer-term outcomes. The study found that the more months a child spends in quality ECEC, the better their language skills will be, and that an early start (aged two or three years) is linked with better intellectual attainment at school entry. The researchers concluded that two or more years in a high-quality preschool environment had the biggest statistical impact on intellectual development and early literacy skills.^{27,28}

The Mitchell Institute Report; *Quality Early Education for All* identified, "Commencing work on planning the extension of Universal Access to three year olds would bring Australia into line with international norms."²⁹ Providing two years of preschool would have the greatest impact on child outcomes and would provide greater benefits for children experiencing disadvantage for whom one year of preschool is not adequate to close the achievement gaps.³⁰

Approximately two thirds of Australian three-year-old children (66 per cent) access ECEC.³¹ In the ACT 71 per cent of children access ECEC.³² Of the 66 per cent of three-year-old children accessing ECEC in Australia, just 21 per cent attend a preschool program.³³ Preschool is defined by the Mitchell Institute Report Preschool: Two years

are better than one as “A defined learning-focused program, usually with minimum hours of attendance for children in the year or two before school and delivered by a qualified Early Childhood Teacher.”³⁴ However there is no nationally defined program of preschool for three-year-old children in Australia.

The current *National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education* for access to preschool for 15 hours in the year before school has been extended to the end of 2020.³⁵ This funding is reconsidered each year and extended on a year-by-year basis. Australian Governments need to move away from this ad hoc short-term commitment to preschool and commit to funding in an ongoing way, including supporting multi-lateral agreements over several years.

In July 2018 the ACT Government announced that it has “set a goal of 15 hours per week, 600 hours per year of free, universal quality early childhood education for three-year-old children as a key part of the ACT Early Childhood Strategy.” The announcement included an in-principle commitment that “progressively every three-year-old child in the ACT has access to free, high quality early childhood education.”³⁶

In the 2019-20 ACT Budget, funding was allocated for a new *ACT Early Childhood Strategy*. The Budget papers stated that “The strategy will include a program of transitioning to free universal access for three-year-olds to quality early childhood education and care already foreshadowed by the ACT Government. This initiative will commence in 2020 targeting children experiencing vulnerability in Canberra and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander three-year olds.”³⁷

The Alliance welcomes this announcement and has developed principles for the implementation of free early childhood education for three-year-old children. These principles are:

1. Prioritise children experiencing disadvantage;
2. Grow, develop and value the ECEC workforce; and
3. Focus on quality.

These principles are elaborated upon in the separate policy document [Principles for universal access to early childhood education for three-year-old children in the ACT](#). To ensure the implementation of universal access to three-year-old children is effective, it is important that the ACT Government acknowledges that prioritising children experiencing disadvantage in ECEC requires additional supports. There are several barriers to children and families engaging in ECEC including limited access to specialist supports for children with additional needs, complex paper work and enrolment processes, lack of trust and access and availability.³⁸ Engaging children and families who experience these barriers in ECEC requires ELCs to be linked in with their communities and with services that support people experiencing disadvantage. ELCs can also 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.³⁹ However these additional tasks can be time consuming and emotionally demanding.

An investment in the ECEC workforce is also particularly crucial with the prioritisation of three-year-old children experiencing disadvantage accessing education. Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) and Educators must be equipped with the relevant skills and tools to provide education and care for children with more complex needs. This investment must go beyond professional development and include personal support for staff, such as counselling services. The roll out of universal access of ECEC for three-year-old children will require a comprehensive approach to supporting and valuing the ECEC workforce including providing funding and support for professional development to continue to improve the skills and qualifications of the workforce and ensuring that adequate supports are in place for ECTs and Educators to access personal support, such as counselling services.

For the positive effects of universal access to ECEC to be realised, it is vital that the ELCs provide high quality education and care. The Alliance supports the objectives, guiding principles and ongoing implementation of the *National Quality Framework* (NQF); and the minimum benchmarks of quality in the NQS. It is important that the ACT Government works with ELCs to improve their quality rating by providing adequate support and resources for Centres to ensure they are in a position to deliver a high-quality universal program for three-year-old children.

Recommendations:

- Work with the Australian Government to establish a permanent and ongoing commitment for access to 15 hours of preschool per week for four-year-old children.
- Work towards the introduction of universal access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for three-year-old children as committed to in July 2018 and ensure that adequate support and services are available for children experiencing disadvantage.
- Adopt the principles identified by the Children First Alliance in introducing universal access of ECEC for three-year-old children. These principles are:
 - Prioritise children experiencing disadvantage;
 - Grow, develop and value the ECEC workforce; and
 - Focus on quality.

3. Value and invest in the ECEC workforce to ensure high quality education for children

A strong qualified workforce is essential to delivering quality ECEC. High quality ECEC services make a significant impact on children, throughout their lives. 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.⁴⁰

The latest Report on Government Services found that 61.7 per cent of the ECEC primary contact staff in the ACT had a relevant formal qualification at or above Certificate level III.⁴¹ This was the second lowest (NT with 61.1 per cent) proportion of all staff across jurisdictions. The ACT also had the lowest rate of staff who completed in-house training in the previous 12 months, with 78.1 per cent engaging in this form of professional development.⁴²

Develop strategies to support the ECEC workforce

The Australian Government *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2012–2016* expired in 2016 and has not been renewed.⁴³ Two Australian Government sources of funding for professional development: the Professional Support Coordinators (PSC) and the *Long Day Care Professional Development Program* (LDCPDP) also ceased in 2016 and 2017 respectively.

The PSC was funded by the Australian Government to provide professional development to the ECEC sector in the ACT. The PSC was a single organisation selected through a tender process and provided with funding to support sector-wide professional development. The LDCPDP was another Australian Government investment of \$200 million to support ECEC with the cost of accessing professional development and upskilling educators to meet the requirements of the NQF.

The lapse in these policies and funding programs has occurred at a time when there are significant and ongoing changes in the ECEC sector. This includes the introduction of the revised National Quality Standards on 1 February 2018 and the implementation of the Reportable Conduct Scheme in the ACT which commenced on 1 July 2017. Support for workforce development needs to be for both formal qualifications and ongoing professional development in day-to-day operations of ELCs.

The COAG report *Lifting our Game* recommends that there be a focus on “quality improvement and workforce issues, given the importance of quality to child outcomes, and the importance of a skilled and stable workforce in delivering this. Dedicated, strategic approaches to both issues are required. Investing in quality and a stable, well-supported and professional workforce is vital.” More specifically the report recommended that:

- “Australian governments agree to a new national early childhood education and care workforce strategy to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and enhanced professionalisation of the workforce, thereby improving service quality and children’s outcomes.”
- “The strategy should consider, at a minimum, opportunities to improve:
 - a. service leadership capability
 - b. pre-service training quality and content

- c. ongoing professional development of the workforce
- d. responsiveness of pre-service training and ongoing professional development providers to the sector
- e. consistency and applicability of workforce registration and professional standards
- f. workforce attraction, stability and retention, including medium and long-term career paths
- g. the impact of remuneration and conditions on workforce stability and retention, and quality of practice
- h. workforce diversity, including Indigenous communities
- i. the status of the profession
- j. responses to localised issues, including in regional and remote areas
- k. engagement with parents.”

New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland have specific strategies relating to the ECEC workforce. The high-level goals of these strategies are outlined below.

Jurisdiction	Strategy or Plan	Goals
NSW	Early Childhood Education Workforce Strategy 2018-2022	<p>Promote the role of early childhood educators and teachers as a critical part of a child’s educational journey, and early childhood education as an attractive and meaningful career.</p> <p>Support the workforce to obtain qualifications and experience to prepare them for the workplace.</p> <p>Build the skills and capability of the workforce by supporting educators and teachers to participate in professional development.</p> <p>Support all service types to embed sustainable practices that contribute to workforce stability and reduce the impact of staff turnover</p>
Queensland	Early Childhood Education and Care 2016–2019 Workforce Action Plan	Being valued Qualifications Skills

The *ACT Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2012-2014* expired five years ago. The ACT Government is in the process of developing an *ACT Early Childhood Strategy* and ‘workforce and qualifications’ has been highlighted by the Government as a key theme as part of the development process.

To support and grow the ECEC workforce, the new *ACT Early Childhood Strategy* must include workforce development as a key strategic area. This should include clear targets for the expansion of the qualified workforce that is costed to ensure that the sector continues to focus on the need to improve qualifications and services to improve outcomes for children.

Invest 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 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.⁴⁴

The ACT Government's *Advisory Council into Early Childhood Education* identified "workforce and qualifications" as a priority for the *Early Childhood Strategy*. This is an important first step in developing key strategies that focus on valuing the ECEC workforce. The ACT Government also supports the *Early Childhood Degree Scholarship Program* which provides funding up to \$25,000 per scholarship and funding for backfilling for employers for students working in a non-Government ECEC environment.

The Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOSS) *Rural and Remote Early Childhood Teacher Scholarship Program 2017-2019* is an example of an initiative that provides support for Diploma and Advanced Diploma qualified educators working in ELCs in rural and remote Queensland communities to gain an approved ECT qualification.⁴⁵ Scholarship funding goes towards subjects studied for the duration of this program (2017 to 2019).

Scholarship recipients receive financial assistance of \$400 per enrolled subject (equivalent to approximately 50 per cent of the average higher education institution course fees for a Commonwealth Supported Student). Scholarship recipients also receive support through an individualised study plan developed with QCOSS through the Rural and Remote Workforce initiative. This initiative is part of the *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Action Plan 2016-2019* and includes *Indigenous Remote Support Coordination (IRSC)* and *Growing Our Own Program (GOOP)*.

A literature review found that there is a lack of support and training for staff to provide effective and inclusive services to children with additional and complex needs.⁴⁶ This is a critical component of supporting the ECEC workforce in the ACT with the prioritisation of children experiencing disadvantage as part of the introduction of universal preschool for three-year-old children. Professional development opportunities that support children experiencing disadvantage include trauma-informed practice to better support children experiencing trauma or neglect.

Addressing pay and work conditions affecting the ECEC workforce

A NSW Government literature review of *Early Childhood Education Workforce issues in Australian and international contexts* found that early childhood educators earn below the general workforce average and early childhood teachers often have substantially worse pay and conditions compared with primary school teachers.⁴⁷ This is particularly the case for ECTs working in ELCs, as they generally offer lower salaries, longer hours

and fewer holidays.⁴⁸ There is a mismatch between the pay and conditions available in the sector, and the work skills and qualifications required.

The issue of wages of the ECEC workforce has been well reported as some of the lowest in the country.⁴⁹ When looking at the latest data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics the average full-time weekly earnings in Australia is \$1,633⁵⁰, this is well above the weekly minimum wage of a ECEC Certificate III staff under the Children Services Award of \$862.50.⁵¹

The literature review found that the majority of Australian and international academics and experts agree on the need to improve pay and working conditions. This includes offering the same pay as school teachers with similar qualifications and experience, and an increased status that recognises their responsibilities.

In the ACT there is no requirement for ECTs working in a preschool not attached to a school to be registered under the Teacher Quality Institute (TQI). This means that ECTs working in ELCs in the ACT are unable to be professionally registered. This leaves ECTs working in the ACT at a disadvantage to their New South Wales (NSW) counterparts. In NSW registration is a requirement for ECTs working in an approved centre-based setting to be accredited under the NSW Education Standards Authority.⁵²

This lack of registration is an issue for ELCs across the ACT in attracting ECTs, as they are more inclined to work in a school-based setting in the ACT or in an ELC in NSW where registration is required.

The lack of registration will continue to put pressure on ECEC in the ACT with the NQF requirement to have two ECTs for services with more than 60 children by 2020.⁵³ This is a concern when we know ECTs are choosing to work elsewhere. Registration for ECTs would require support from the ACT Government to ensure ongoing professional development.

The need to improve pay and working conditions of ECEC educators and teachers cannot be ignored. The challenge will always be recruiting and retaining teacher qualified staff in these circumstances and until these differences are addressed – this challenge will be ongoing.

Recommendations:

- Support the development of a new national ECEC workforce strategy to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and enhanced professionalisation of the workforce, thereby improving service quality and children's outcomes.
- Ensure that the focus on 'workforce and qualifications' in the ACT Early Childhood Strategy includes funding to support professional development opportunities across the ECEC workforce and backfilling to allow educators to be away from work to engage in these opportunities.
- Work to address the difference in pay and conditions for ECTs and Educators working in the ECEC sector.
- Provide registration under the Teacher Quality Institute (TQI) for ECTs working in ELCs in the ACT.

4. Ensure that planning processes support the development of a strong ECEC sector in the ACT

Currently consideration is not given to the need for an ELC when approving new centres or the proximity of the centre to others in the local area.

After planning approvals are granted, applications are submitted to Children’s Education and Care Assurance (CECA) for new services, however CECA’s role is to ensure that facilities and service operations comply with relevant legislation. CECA does not assess the need for a new service in a specific geographical location.

The Discussion Paper – Review of Early Childhood Education and Care in the ACT indicated that historically there have been general shortages of ECEC places in the ACT, particularly between 2008 and 2012. However, in recent times, there has been significant growth in the sector, resulting in underutilisation of centres.⁵⁴ The Review also indicates that the sector has grown 3,230 places or 39 per cent since 2011.

An analysis of more recent data shows that the number of ‘long day care’ centres in the ACT has increased from 113 to 152 over four years, an increase of 35 per cent. This is demonstrated in the table below. It is difficult to ascertain whether these centres are at full capacity. However, the 46 centres operated by the nine community ECEC providers that make up this Alliance operate at 60-95 per cent capacity, with an average of 80 per cent. Management have identified that the capacity of services has declined in recent years, due to the increasing number of ELCs across Canberra. The table below outlines the increase in ELCs in Canberra.

ECEC Type	Q4 2015 ⁵⁵	Q4 2016 ⁵⁶	Q4 2017 ⁵⁷	Q4 2018 ⁵⁸
Family day care*	6	17	13	11
Early learning centres	113	136	145	152
Preschool	93	99	95	93
Outside of school hours care	90	99	101	100
Total	302	351	354	356

The rapid expansion of the sector has implications for the provision of quality care. The quality provision of ECEC is essential to achieving positive lifelong effects for children and requires involvement from a qualified workforce. Attracting educators and teachers to ELCs can already be challenging for providers because of the lower wages and higher hours of work, particularly for people who have a teacher qualification and can work in the school system. If there are too many ELCs in the ACT, then the ability to adequately staff these centres becomes increasingly difficult.

Planning for a strong ECEC sector needs to consider how finite resources are allocated across the sector to provide quality early childhood education to all Canberrans. Planning decisions relating to the number, location and size of ELCs impacts on the whole sector. This is because finite resources, including adequately qualified staff, are required to ensure that the services being provided are of the highest quality and providing the greatest possible outcomes for children.

The core consideration in determining the need for new ECEC centres should be the outcomes of the child. Children do not benefit when there are too many centres and staff are spread thin, putting at risk the capacity to provide quality care.

The *Education Act 2004* (ACT) S.14 (Austl) outlines the process for the application of Government and non-government Schools in the ACT. For ‘in principle approval’ for a proposed registration of a non-government school the person must apply in writing to the Minister for approval at least two years, but not more than four years, before the opening day of the school. The Director-General of the Education Directorate must then give public notice of the proposed registration and written comments on the proposed registration be made to the Minister.

Decisions regarding the in-principle approval of the registration of a school must consider the viability and need for the school and potential impact on existing schools. More specifically:

‘(1) In deciding whether to give in-principle approval for the provisional registration of a school, the Minister must have regard to—

- (a) whether the proposed school would undermine the viability of existing schools; and
- (b) whether there is, or is likely to be, demand in the community for the proposed school, including—
 - (i) any increase, or likely increase, in the number of school age children in the area where the school is to be located; and
 - (ii) the level of registration of interest shown by the community for the proposed school.

(2) In deciding whether to give in-principle approval for the registration of a school at an additional campus, the Minister must have regard to—

- (a) whether the provision of the additional campus by the school would undermine the viability of other existing schools; and
- (b) the demand for the additional campus, including the level of registration of interest shown by the community for the proposed provision of the additional campus by the school.

(3) In deciding whether to give in-principle approval for the registration of a school at an additional educational level, the Minister must have regard to—

- (a) whether the provision of the additional educational level by the school would undermine the viability of other existing schools; and
- (b) the demand for the additional educational level, including the level of registration of interest shown by the community for the proposed provision of the additional educational level by the school.¹⁵⁹

When a new ELC is planned for development in the ACT, there is no consideration of need, viability or impact on existing centres. A new ELC can open next door to another centre and several centres can open in the same neighbourhood, with no consideration given to the impact on existing centres.

Recommendations:

- As occurs with ACT schools, introduce a need, viability and proximity assessment for new ELCs in the ACT that considers:
 - The need for the centre as determined by the existing demand for services and consideration of current and projected population changes and growth.
 - The proximity of the centre to other existing centres.
 - The impact of the centre on the viability of existing centres, including their capacity to ensure that centres are able to be staffed by qualified ECEC educators and teachers.

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