



Name: Playgroup Australia

Submission date: 4/06/2025

Participant background

1. For the purposes of this consultation, which of the following best describes you:
I am an industry or advocacy organisation, professional association or peak body
2. Which of the following care sectors will your feedback relate to? Please select all that apply.
Early childhood education and care
3. What kind of care supports, services and programs do you have experience with, and in what jurisdictions?
The participant did not respond to this question.

1. Reform of quality and safety regulation to support a more cohesive care economy

1. To what extent do differences in quality and safety regulation make it costly or complex to provide or access care services?
The participant did not respond to this question.
2. What are the reasons for your answer?
The participant did not respond to this question.
3. To what extent should quality and safety regulations be more aligned across the different care service sectors and jurisdictions?
The participant did not respond to this question.
4. What are the reasons for your answer?
The participant did not respond to this question.

2. Embed collaborative commissioning to increase the integration of care services

1. What is your experience with collaborative commissioning

Playgroup Australia has extensive experience delivering community-based programs that operate in partnership with other service systems, including early childhood education, health, disability, and family support.

Local playgroups are embedded within their local communities where playgroup facilitators collaborate with local health, education and social service partners and playgroups are often utilised by service providers as soft entry points for their programs.

Across every state and territory, playgroup associations work with health, disability, aged

care and First Nation led organisations, community and all levels of government to develop and deliver responsive programs relevant to their communities' unique needs.

2. What are the benefits of pursuing greater collaborative commissioning?

Collaborative commissioning offers a powerful opportunity to:

- Identify and address local needs early, especially in communities experiencing disadvantage or service gaps.
- Reduce duplication and confusion by aligning programs across health, early education, and social care.
- Maximise the impact of universal and voluntary services (such as playgroups) by formally recognising their role in prevention and early support.
- Enhance trust in services by embedding them in existing community infrastructure.

Playgroups are often the first point of structured social and developmental support for families, yet they are frequently under-recognised in formal commissioning arrangements. Along with other grass-roots community programs, playgroups represent an opportunity to access community members in trusted settings that they are already accessing. With collaborative commissioning service providers can access community by leveraging established pathways, and to add value to existing community initiatives.

3. What are the barriers to collaborative commissioning, and do you have any suggestions for solutions that would lead to better collaboration in the commissioning of care services?

Barriers to collaborative commissioning can include:

- Rigid, siloed funding that excludes or undervalues flexible, relationship-based programs.
- Lack of shared outcome frameworks that recognise "soft" outcomes (e.g., parental confidence, social networks). Grass roots community organisations are more likely to deliver programs where the return on investment is less tangible in the short term.
- Prevention and capacity building activities require measurement of the absence of negative outcomes as well as the presence of positive ones. Due to the challenges in measuring the absence of negative outcomes, they are often overlooked or not considered at all.
- Capacity challenges for smaller community organisations to participate meaningfully in co-design and governance. This is a particular challenge for community organisations and not-for-profits where funding is limited. Co-design and collaborative commissioning processes can require resources beyond those available to smaller, place-based organisations and community initiatives, but their input is critical to any true collaborative commissioning process.

Recommendations:

- Expand the scope of collaborative commissioning to include a focus on universal and informal supports like playgroups as valid service partners.
- Fund local backbone organisations or networks that can coordinate planning, evaluation, and community engagement across sectors.
- Develop outcome measures that include early signs of wellbeing, relational connection, and community capacity, in addition to system-level impacts.

3. A national framework to support government investment in prevention

1. What are the main barriers to governments investing in evidence-based prevention programs across the care economy?

- Prevention programs like playgroups often produce long-term, cross-sector benefits (health, education, social inclusion), making it difficult to attribute return on investment to one portfolio.
- Quantifying the impacts of prevention present a challenge due to the nature of attempting measuring the absence of negative outcomes.
- Many community-led or relationship-based programs lack clinical or standardised outcome data, even though their benefits are well documented qualitatively.
- Funding cycles are too short to allow for meaningful longitudinal evaluation or community trust-building.
- Prevention outcomes (such as improved parenting confidence or reduced social isolation) are often seen as "intangible" or low priority compared to acute care needs.

2. What are some examples of successful prevention programs (this could include discontinued programs)?

- Community playgroups contribute to social capital, child development, and early engagement with services. Children who participate in playgroup are 1.4x more likely to be developmentally on track (Lam et al 2024). Playgroups also deliver benefits to parents, supporting social connection, improved wellbeing and increased parenting confidence. Playgroups are a perfect example of a low-cost, high-impact initiative, delivering \$3.60 return on every dollar invested (Daly, Barret & Evans, 2019).
- Supported Playgroups have consistently demonstrated impact on early child development, school readiness, and parent-child relationships, particularly for vulnerable families. They are able to offer targeted supports to cohorts with an identified need using a flexible, low pressure, supportive approach.
- Play and Learn Supported and Play Together (funded by the Department of Social Services) support children with disability or developmental delay and their families by providing an inclusive, low-stigma environment for early support. They also build the capacity of established community organisations and programs to ensure they too are accessible and inclusive.

3. How can governments better support investment in prevention activities that have broad and long-term benefits for the Australian community?

- Develop a national framework that includes a shared outcomes approach, recognising both short- and long-term benefits across sectors (e.g., education, health, family wellbeing).
- Enable co-investment across portfolios and tiers of government, particularly where early investment reduces later service demand (e.g., child protection or NDIS entry).
- Support community-led, place-based approaches that are flexible, culturally safe, and embedded in the communities they serve.
- Invest in capacity-building and shared evaluation tools that help smaller organisations demonstrate the value of their preventive work.