

Playgroup Australia's Response to the "Delivering Quality Care Efficiently" Interim Report

About Playgroup Australia: The National Playgroup Alliance

Playgroup Australia is the peak body representing an alliance of organisations that deliver playgroups across Australia. Our vision is that every child and family benefits from participation in playgroup.

This submission is endorsed by Playgroup Australia's members...



About Playgroups

Playgroups are groups of young children (birth to school age) and their parents or carers who meet regularly to play and socialise. They are unique in that they engage both parent and child, providing opportunities for play-based learning, social connection, and enhanced home learning environments.

There is a strong and growing evidence base on the benefits playgroups provide for children in their critical first five years of development. Children who participate in playgroup are 1.4 times more likely to start school developmentally on track¹. The nation benefits when all children, parents, and carers have access to affordable, inclusive local playgroups.

Playgroups make a significant contribution to family wellbeing and to improving early childhood development outcomes in Australia by providing:

- Play-based learning and opportunities to support development across all domains;
- Social support for parents and carers; and
- Connections that build communities.

Playgroups exist in many forms, each with their own purpose, cohort, and focus. Parent- and volunteer-led playgroups are initiated by families within their own communities to address a self-identified need. They strengthen their community while supporting the wellbeing of children, parents, and carers. Our members also deliver supported playgroups, which are led by a paid facilitator and build community inclusion and participation for children and families with particular needs.

¹ Lam B, Terauds V, Brinkman S. (2024). Causal Inference in the AEDC - analysis of the impact of ECEC attendance on child development. Commissioned report for Playgroup Australia

Introduction

Playgroup Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into *Delivering Quality Care Efficiently*. Evidence shows that early, preventive investment is both ethical and economically sound. The Front Project (2024)² estimates that late intervention costs Australia \$15.2 billion annually across health, education, child protection, justice, and welfare systems.

Community, place-based programs such as playgroups represent a highly cost-effective mechanism for reducing these pressures. By investing in prevention, governments can reduce long-term costs while supporting stronger developmental, social, and emotional outcomes for participants across all care settings.

Aligning Quality and Safety Regulation

Playgroup Australia strongly supports a national approach to worker screening that establishes a gold-standard benchmark across all sectors, including early childhood, aged care, NDIS, and veteran's services. The current fragmented system where each state and territory operates separate clearance requirements creates duplication, inconsistency, and administrative burden for organisations and staff. A single, robust national system would streamline compliance, enabling workers and volunteers to engage with one clearance process while ensuring rigorous, consistent protections for all participants across sectors.

Across jurisdictions, notification processes for contractors and agency staff are inconsistent. Typically, only the direct employer or agency receives updates, leaving host organisations reliant on the agency's diligence. This creates a gap in accountability and transparency. Many community and recreation activities are already subject to screening but coverage is inconsistent, and gaps remain. A nationally consistent approach is needed to ensure safeguards apply wherever children participate, regardless of the type of activity or jurisdiction.

Integrated or multi-service settings, such as intergenerational playgroups, illustrate the practical challenges of the current system. Staff and volunteers may require multiple checks for aged care, child-facing roles, and police clearances across different jurisdictions. These administrative complexities can delay or deter service provision.

It is important that reforms find the right balance: maintaining strong safeguards while avoiding disproportionate compliance burdens for volunteer-led initiatives like playgroups, which are distinct from formal early childhood education and care. Playgroups already prioritise child safety by aligning with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations and relevant jurisdictional legislation. Screening approaches

² O'Connell, M. 2025, *The Cost of Late Intervention 2024*, The Front Project, Melbourne.

should therefore remain proportionate and flexible, ensuring child safety without unintentionally overburdening community-based volunteers, parents, and grandparents.

Our Recommendations:

- **National Worker Screening:** Extend a single, national clearance to all workers and volunteers in regulated roles (including early childhood, aged care, NDIS, and veterans services), ensuring rigorous, gold-standard requirements are consistently applied across sectors and jurisdictions.
- **Safeguarding Resources:** Provide accessible, practical training and guidance tailored for community-led and multi-sector service settings, recognising that smaller organisations may lack dedicated compliance teams.
- **Strengthen Accountability for Contractors and Agency Staff:** Ensure real-time clearance and reportable conduct notifications are provided to both the direct employer/agency and the host organisation, closing gaps in accountability and transparency across jurisdictions.
- **Proportionate Oversight:** Maintain safeguards that protect participants while ensuring volunteer-led initiatives like playgroups can prioritise child safety without being overburdened by unnecessary compliance.

Collaborative Commissioning to Integrate Care

Playgroups are trusted, place-based organisations that often engage participants disconnected from formal services. They provide a critical entry point for families and individuals, particularly in communities experiencing disadvantage. Evidence demonstrates measurable outcomes for both children and adults engaged through these programs:

- Children participating in playgroups demonstrate improved developmental and social outcomes³.
- Parents and carers report reduced isolation and improved wellbeing, which has flow-on benefits for their families⁴.

Playgroups should be recognised as partners in collaborative commissioning, particularly for engaging families not otherwise connected to services and for addressing local gaps. To be effective, frameworks must create space for community-based prevention and connection initiatives like playgroups, alongside clinical and health services.

³ Lam B, Terauds V, Brinkman S. (2024). Causal Inference in the AEDC - analysis of the impact of ECEC attendance on child development. Commissioned report for Playgroup Australia

⁴ McShane, I., Cook, K., Sinclair, S., Keam, G and Fry, J. 2016: Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups. A Research Report Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Melbourne: RMIT University.

Playgroup Australia and State and Territory Organisations can contribute localised insights, including participation data, AEDC trends, and family feedback, to strengthen needs assessments and planning. Investment in playgroups through commissioning would support integration, reduce isolation, and help lower demand for higher-cost, tertiary services.

Playgroup Australia supports collaborative commissioning models, which offer opportunities to integrate services and pool resources effectively. However, careful design is required to avoid unintended consequences.

Our Recommendations:

- **Balanced Leadership:** Commissioning should not be led solely by health agencies. Equal weight must be given to community services to ensure social, emotional, developmental, and relational needs are addressed alongside clinical outcomes.
- **Recognition of Playgroups:** Acknowledge playgroups as universal, community-led, preventative supports that complement formal care settings.
- **Embedded Community Expertise:** Involve community-led organisations directly in identifying local challenges and designing solutions, moving beyond consultation to genuine partnership.
- **Equitable Resourcing:** Provide dedicated funding for smaller organisations to participate in commissioning processes. Without this, valuable local insights risk being excluded.

A National Prevention Investment Framework

The Front Project (2024)⁵ and other analyses demonstrate that early intervention delivers significant returns: every \$1 invested in quality early programs can yield up to \$4 in long-term benefits. Playgroups are a proven prevention model, yet the current funding landscape is fragmented, requiring organisations to navigate multiple funding streams across departments and jurisdictions. Each funding stream brings separate compliance, reporting, and evaluation requirements, creating inefficiencies that divert resources from direct service delivery.

Playgroups are an evidence-based prevention platform that strengthens child development, parent wellbeing, and protective factors in the early years and beyond. They align with national frameworks such as the Early Years Strategy, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), and the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, all of which emphasise the importance of early development, safety, and family connection. Playgroups also deliver strong cost benefits. They are often

⁵ O'Connell, M. 2025, The Cost of Late Intervention 2024, The Front Project, Melbourne.

volunteer-led and reduce future expenditure by supporting family resilience and improved outcomes early.

Evidence:

- Cost-benefit analysis shows playgroups deliver a \$3.60 return per \$1 invested.⁶
- Research confirms that playgroups improve mental health, belonging, and connection for carers⁷, with positive flow-on effects for children and families.

The proposed Prevention Advisory Board should explicitly consider universal, community-based initiatives like playgroups as core investments in prevention. It is essential that a national prevention fund strikes a balance between supporting programs with strong evidence of effectiveness, established programs informed by evidence but not yet formally evaluated, and innovative approaches with the potential to improve outcomes. Restricting funding only to formally evaluated programs risks excluding proven community-led initiatives. At the same time, the fund should encourage innovation, allowing new approaches to be tested and scaled if successful.

By maintaining this balance, the fund can support proven interventions, sustain effective community practices, and foster the development of new solutions to emerging social and care challenges.

Our Recommendations:

- Establish a National Prevention Fund: Pool federal and state investment to create a cohesive funding stream. This would reduce duplication in grant applications, reporting, and program evaluation, while supporting consistent program delivery across jurisdictions.
- Comprehensive Program Funding: Fund programs in their entirety, rather than fragmenting resources across portfolios such as health, education, human services, or aged care. This reduces administrative burden and ensures programs operate with fidelity to their intended design.
- Long-Term Evaluation Funding: Recognise that prevention benefits often accrue over decades. Dedicated evaluation funding, including retrospective studies of long-running programs such as playgroups, is essential to capture long-term outcomes for participants.
- Balanced Investment Approach: Ensure the national prevention fund supports a mix of rigorously evaluated programs, established programs informed by

⁶ Daly, A., Barrett, G. & Williams, R (2019) Cost Benefit Analysis of Community Playgroup, Playgroup Australia, Canberra.

⁷McShane, I., Cook, K., Sinclair, S., Keam, G and Fry, J. 2016: Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups. A Research Report Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Melbourne: RMIT University.

evidence but not yet formally evaluated, and innovative initiatives with potential to improve outcomes.

A national prevention investment framework will enable scaling of effective programs, reduce administrative duplication, and support consistent, high-quality outcomes across all sectors of care.

Conclusion

Playgroup Australia strongly supports the Commission's reform agenda and urges that community-based services are recognised as essential partners in delivering efficiency and quality. Playgroups are a proven, evidence-based model that improves child development, strengthens families, and reduces long-term demand on higher-cost services.

By...

- implementing a gold-standard national worker screening framework across early childhood, aged care, NDIS, and veterans services,
- embedding community-led organisations, including playgroups, in collaborative commissioning processes, and
- establishing a national prevention fund with sustained program and evaluation support,

governments can build a care system that is efficient, equitable, and sustainable.

Crucially, reforms must balance robust safeguards with proportionate oversight, ensuring volunteer-led and community initiatives like playgroups are empowered rather than overburdened.

Investing in prevention and connection is both cost-effective and foundational to a care economy that supports children, families, and communities now and into the future.

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