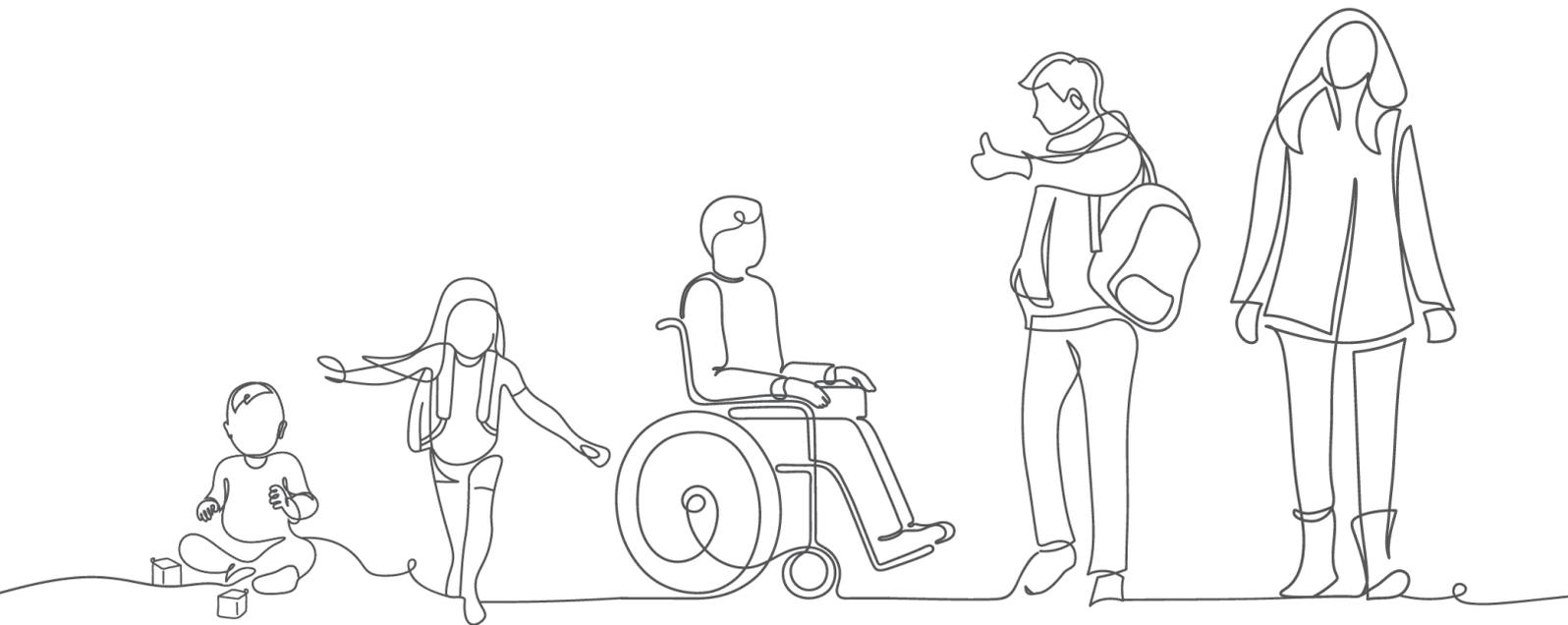


TASMANIAN GOVERNMENT
SUBMISSION

Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector

(June 2023)



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Introduction

The Tasmanian Government welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector, including centre-based day care, preschools, family day care, in-home care, and outside school hours care (the Inquiry). The Tasmanian Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) aims to deliver cross-portfolio early years programs, in recognition of the fact that the early years are vital to a child's health and learning.

The Tasmanian Government continues to invest in our youngest learners for successful transitions through their early years of learning and into school. DECYP has a unique way of working, co-designing initiatives with children, parents, services, and community. This holistic approach is reflected in Tasmania's [Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework](#) and [Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy](#). Together, they provide a connected and consistent approach to quality service delivery across the early years. The Strategy, 'A Tasmanian Village', was developed as a whole-of-government initiative. It has a specific focus on the first 1000 days of a child's life with a vision that 'children and young people in Tasmania have what they need to grow and thrive'. The Framework provides a contemporary definition of child and youth wellbeing. Its primary aim is to ensure that all Tasmanian services and communities have a strong, shared understanding of child and youth wellbeing.

The Tasmanian Government sees the availability of high-quality learning environments for all children as the most important factor for ECEC services. The value of a child's early years cannot be understated; a child's experiences, relationships and environments in the first years of life have a major impact on their development and can have a long-term effect on the lifelong wellbeing of a child. Improving ECEC availability also enables greater workforce participation for families. There is significant evidence that the return on investment for improving outcomes for young children and their families is greater in the early years than in later years of schooling, higher education, or training. This is particularly the case for children experiencing vulnerability, and the evidence is unequivocal that investing in the early years is key to helping break the cycle of disadvantage.

Through ECEC we want to give every child the best opportunity, irrespective of where they live, their background or their circumstances. This submission will outline the Tasmanian early years context and highlight the Tasmanian Government's successful work and significant state investment in the early years space in accordance with state priorities, including our aspiration to provide access to early learning for all 3-year-old children in Tasmania.

Tasmania's early years context

The Tasmanian Government has a strong history of investing in early learning. State-funded initiatives such as Launching into Learning, Kindergarten, Learning in Families Together, Child and Family Learning Centres and Libraries Tasmania give families the skills and resources they need to best support the development of their children. DECYP is also delivering new initiatives including the Passport to Learning project, which rewards families with picture books to encourage repeat attendance at early learning sessions. In 2022, Passport to Learning provided over 9 000 children and families with quality picture books to foster literacy development at home.

Tasmania's early learning context is unique in that we are one of only two jurisdictions that provide Kindergarten in schools. As a result, Tasmanian families see Kindergarten as the first year of school, fostering high enrolment and attendance rates of 99 per cent and 85 per cent respectively in 2022¹.

¹ Attendance in 2022 have been impacted by COVID stay at home policies and are not reflective of long-term trends.

The Tasmanian Government has committed to provide universal access to pre-school for every child in the year before kindergarten to give them a great start in life and learning.

The 2023-24 State Budget provides \$6.04 million over four years to commence a pathway to provide universal access to Early Learning for Three Year Olds. In 2024, trial sites will be established across the state to test different models of service delivery that are responsive to community need, in close partnership with the ECEC sector, families, communities and other services for young children and their families.

In partnership with the Education and Care Sector (ECEC) we have successfully delivered the Working Together program, which supports three-year-old children to access 960 hours of free, high quality early learning delivered in ECEC settings in the year before Kindergarten.

While the Tasmanian Government does not provide childcare places directly, it has a regulatory role that covers childcare services within the State, to support services to provide quality care.

Through the Industry Skills Compacts, the Tasmanian Government continues to work closely with industry peaks and other stakeholders to raise the profile of the sector and focus on strategies to attract, recruit, upskill and retain employees. In addition, Fee-Free courses to include Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care (a joint initiative of the Tasmanian and Australian Governments) are being offered by TasTAFE in 2023.

To ensure the ongoing development of a highly skilled workforce, DECYP continues to provide quality and evidence-based professional learning, resources and supports for early years educators. This includes targeted professional learning for our Kindergarten teachers to ensure learning programs are designed to support early development.

Tasmania also has a number of state-funded initiatives that help families address the barriers to access and participation in early learning. Many of these initiatives have an emphasis on children and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children and families with additional needs, including referrals into other service supports as needed.

Kindergarten

Tasmania has developed an effective Kindergarten system. At our Kindergartens, children learn through play and inquiry, nurturing engagement with learning. Although Kindergarten is not compulsory, nearly all Tasmanian children attend Kindergarten, illustrating the success of the Tasmanian model.

Tasmania delivers Kindergarten for 600 hours a year through just over 150 public schools and 60 non-government schools. Ten hours per week are funded by the State, with the remaining five hours per week funded through the [Preschool Reform Agreement \(PRA\)](#). Under the PRA, States and Territories must pass on the Commonwealth's per-child contribution to benefit children in the setting in which they attend. In 2022, this will be around \$1340. The PRA delivers approximately \$9.84 million in funding for Tasmanian kindergarten places in government, Catholic and independent schools over four years (2022 - 2025). In 2022, quality early childhood education programs for four year olds were delivered in just over 120 long day care centre-based services. However, because these were not registered Kindergarten programs, they did not attract PRA funding.

We know that the cost of ECEC is a financial barrier for families. Tasmania's high number of disadvantaged families who could not afford to participate in ECEC was a significant factor in the 1968 decision to embed Kindergartens in the school system. There was evidence that the children who were most in need of a Kindergarten education were those most likely not to be receiving it and attaching Kindergarten to the school system was a successful strategy in alleviating this risk with almost all eligible children in Tasmania attending Kindergarten since then. The effectiveness of this approach was illustrated in the 2019 Nous review of the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education where

Tasmania met all the benchmarks that were able to be measured and has continued to do so – the only jurisdiction to do so.

Other than the PRA, no Commonwealth childcare subsidies/rebates are paid in respect to the Kindergarten year in government schools in Tasmania. The Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) is a mechanism to estimate how much funding a school requires to meet the educational needs of its students. The SRS covers funding for students from prep to grade 12; no States' early years or preschool expenditure is captured through the SRS. As a result, Tasmania's substantial investment in early years education and additional expenditure through the provision of Kindergarten in a school environment is outside the scope of the calculation of the SRS. The Tasmanian final share for government schools in Tasmania will reach 75 per cent of the SRS by 2027. If this investment equating up to 4 per cent of the SRS was included in the SRS calculation, the Tasmanian Government contribution would exceed 75 per cent.

The Tasmanian Government's investment in early years education contributes significantly to Tasmania meeting its obligations under the PRA and to its commitment to achieve meaningful and sustained improvement in educational outcomes in Tasmania. The Tasmanian Government's total expenditure on Preschool services is available in the early childhood education and care section of the [Report on Government Services \(Productivity Commission\) Table 3A.6](#).

Kindergarten Development Check

The Kindergarten Development Check (KDC) has been used as a screening tool in Tasmanian Government Schools since 1994 to identify students at risk of not achieving expected development outcomes. Screening tools like the KDC are used to identify children who are at greater risk of a poorer outcome than those who are at lower risk, with the aim of following up those with greater risk with detailed assessment. There are multiple developmental screens for children during their early years in Tasmania, though the KDC is the only screen that occurs during the year prior to children's first year of full-time schooling.

Kindergarten students are screened by their Kindergarten teacher twice per year against each of the 21 developmental markers (including 13 gross marker sub-indicators) in the areas of:

- Gross Motor Skills
- Fine Motor Skills
- Personal and Social Behaviour
- Listening, Speaking and Understanding
- Cognitive Development

The KDC provides critical information that informs the teaching and learning program and triggers referrals to specialist support where necessary to ensure students are on track in their learning. In 2022, 60.1 per cent of children demonstrated achievement against all markers which is a slight decrease from 61.5 per cent in 2021.

In Tasmania, evidence indicates a number of Kindergarten students continue to show developmental delay in the areas of gross motor skills and listening, speaking and understanding. To address this, targeted approaches were implemented in schools, and with staff and families to recognise and enhance child development.

These approaches include targeted professional learning for teachers and staff in Child and Family Learning Centres and community focused social media campaigns such as the Playing Together Builds Brains series, the Visiting Community Services series and a concerted campaign encouraging families to engage with Passport to Learning.

Expansion of Early Learning for Three Year Olds

In August 2022 the Premier of Tasmania announced the Government's commitment to provide universal access to early learning for every three year old in the year before Kindergarten.

The 2023-24 State Budget provides \$6.04 million over four years to support the delivery of the first stage of this commitment and establish trial sites across Tasmania, each designed alongside communities to test models of service delivery that best respond to local community need.

Outcomes of the trial sites will aim to build a picture of how existing services can work together to ensure three year olds who are currently not engaged in early learning are provided with an equitable opportunity to do so.

In designing local solutions to improve access to early learning, ECEC services will be the preferred provider, in recognition of the importance of growing and sustaining the sector for the benefit of all young children and their families who need access to education and care services.

Other options may be explored where there is no ECEC service or the service has no capacity, including for example CFLCs, schools or local libraries.

In each trial site the Department will work in partnership with families, community members, ECEC providers and other key early years services to co-design a place-based approach to quality Early Learning for Three Year Olds. Agreed principles for the design for early learning services in each trial site are:

- Quality, age-appropriate and play-based
- Delivered by a qualified workforce
- Accessible to all three year olds for up to 15 hours distributed over a week
- Place-based, flexible, innovative and meet local needs
- Children and their wellbeing are central to decision making
- Cost will not be a barrier to participation
- Informed by evidence and research.

Trial sites will commence service delivery from 2024 with an independent evaluation and findings from the trials informing the approach to the broader implementation of universal access to learning for three year olds in future years across Tasmania.

Early findings from workshops held across the State early 2023 March that are relevant to the Productivity Commission's inquiry areas indicate the following:

- Participants talked about the challenges in accessing early learning and support for children and families, including barriers such as cost, transport and housing. They also raised a lack of other services for families such as health, allied health and support services, particularly in rural and remote communities.
- Participants talked about the value of existing early learning programs and services, including ECEC services, kindergarten, playgroups, Launching into Learning, and Rock and Rhyme at local libraries, as well as the benefits of informal interactions between families with small children in the community and at home.
- Participants wanted any new early learning service to be embedded in the community, to build on the strengths of existing local services and to provide even greater flexibility to meet the diverse needs of young children and families.

- Workforce challenges were common and raised as a key issue across most communities, including concerns about ECEC sector employment conditions, training and development opportunities and attracting and retaining staff with the right skills and attributes to deliver quality services.
- There was desire for more quality early learning experiences where parents, carers and families could participate with their young children, to connect with other families or even to access supports themselves.
- Participants talked about the benefits of linking or co-locating services on one site to improve accessibility to wrap around supports for families, particularly for those experiencing vulnerability.

Pregnancy to four years projects

There are six existing state-funded projects in Tasmania that focus on early learning education during the pre-Kindergarten years (pregnancy to four years). These programs are not funded under the PRA or through other Commonwealth funding streams. They support participation in early learning and access to support services for those families living in disadvantage and facing vulnerability, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We know that there are children and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability in all areas of Tasmania, so we work directly with families to explore how we can be responsive to local community needs.

Our state-funded early learning initiatives support our youngest learners to access quality learning opportunities across schools, Child and Family Learning Centres, and Libraries. These projects are outlined below.

Aboriginal Early Years Program

Aboriginal Education Services emphasises early literacy, language development and school readiness with their work in Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs) and Launching into Learning programs. Aboriginal Early Years Education Workers (AEYEWs) provide professional learning and advice to early years staff and agencies to enable them to reach Closing the Gap targets, outcomes, and actions.

AEYEWs are situated throughout the State in CFLCs and schools. They work closely with families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from birth to five years of age to engage their children in a wide range of early years activities and programs that nurture and stimulate young children's learning. This helps children and their families be well prepared for school. AEYEWs play a key role in building connections between schools and families with young children by supporting families to engage in CFLCs and other early years providers.

Aboriginal Education Services is structured in four regional teams to support staff, build their professional capacity, and encourage Aboriginal Community connections.

B4 Early Years Coalition

B4 Early Years Coalition (B4) as a 'collective impact' model aims to connect, support, engage with and encourage individuals and organisations to work together to ensure every child in Tasmania is cared for and nurtured, no matter what. B4 has a particular focus on the first 1000 days as a critical period of a child's development.

The B4 Coalition works with Tasmanians to ensure they have the awareness, skills, knowledge, resources and a role to support children's healthy development from pregnancy to 4 years of age. B4 operates on the premise that by working together, Tasmanians can create strong communities that support families to allow their children to thrive – and when every child thrives, all Tasmanians benefit.

Child and Family Learning Centres

Integrated Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs) provide place-based affordable and flexible early learning that parents can attend with their children. Through CFLCs, families can also connect with other relevant services such as adult learning, allied health, and social supports.

CFLCs provide free access to drop-in play and support to attend early learning. CFLCs support developmental and educational outcomes through access to inclusion services, allied health and assisted transition to school.

CFLCs promote collaboration across government agencies and community-based services and provide a single point of contact for children and their families to connect with coordinated, universal, targeted and specialist services and access programs.

The Tasmanian Government has committed a total of \$28 million in capital funding since 2018 to deliver the six new CFLCs across Tasmania. Funding of \$3.8 million for professional support staff in CFLCs has been allocated over four years, including \$1.08 million in 2023-24. This additional allocation increases number of professional support staff in CFLCs, including school psychologists, social workers and speech and language pathologists.

CFLCs support the ECEC sector by:

- Decreasing the demand on the ECEC sector especially for families that do not need full time care for their children
- Coordinating support to families with seamless and accessible referral pathways
- Providing access to parenting programs and adult learning, leading to workforce participation and contributing to productivity
- Providing an alternative to a regulatory environment
- Decreasing barriers to participation, such as travel and financial constraints
- Limiting the financial limitations for parents as CFLCs are free
- Providing flexibility in attendance hours and participation
- Increasing the social connections and autonomy of parents, building community connectedness
- Increasing parenting skills through parenting programs, peer-led activities, and role modelling
- Providing an alternative for parents experiencing high levels of anxiety leaving children, particularly trauma impacted families or parents with a child with developmental delay or disability

Early Childhood Intervention Service

The Early Childhood Intervention Service (ECIS) supports children with a disability or developmental delay from birth to school entry, as well as their families. ECIS builds on opportunities for learning and development that are provided at home or through birth-4 programs and assists with transition to Kindergarten.

ECIS is a state-wide service of DECYP, funded by DECYP. ECIS has bases in Hobart, Launceston, Burnie, and Devonport. ECIS supports children and families to access and take part in early years programs and supports in their community. This maximises learning and supports successful transitions through appropriate adjustments.

ECIS recognises families as children's first and most important teachers. Families are the primary role model in children's learning and development. The service focuses on partnering with families in education and

community settings to plan for each child's inclusion. Inclusion means all children can successfully take part in quality learning programs that acknowledge their individual strengths and interests. This provides all children with the chance to learn and interact with their peers.

ECIS works alongside the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Early Childhood Approach to provide therapeutic intervention for children with a developmental delay or disability. The early intervention educational services it provides are separate to the therapeutic services available through the NDIS. By implementing a whole of community approach, in collaboration with other support services and in partnership with families, DECYP aims to deliver better outcomes for children and families.

The Tasmanian Government is committed to providing a more inclusive education system for all children with a developmental delay and/or disability. This commitment aligns with Commonwealth legislation and *Disability Standards for Education 2005*.

High quality inclusion for all children is promoted through a whole community, shared approach by:

- Collaborating with all services to support families access local early learning environments
- Making appropriate adjustments to meet the child's development needs
- Connecting families in their local community
- Promoting community awareness of inclusion for all children with diverse needs
- Supporting successful transitions for children and families through collaboration
- Building a team around the child by working with other early childhood intervention services, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Early Childhood Approach (ECA)

The Productivity Commission should consider options that improve or support:

- The affordability of and access to quality ECEC services that meet the needs of children with a disability or developmental delay from birth as well as the needs of their families.
- Maximising learning and supports for children with developmental delay or disability to enable them to successfully transition to school through appropriate adjustments.
- Building the capacity of the ECEC workforce to implement and embed quality inclusive practices into their delivery of learning programs to all children. This includes supporting the sector with appropriate, flexible funding for the Inclusion Support Program and the continued, appropriate resourcing of and provision of specialist equipment libraries.
- Ensuring barriers to participation are addressed for families with children with developmental disability or delay, including providing appropriate funding for ECEC facilities that support access and participation.
- To consider a flexible delivery model that acknowledges the role of the parent/carer and individual needs of the child. This includes families living in rural and remote communities and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- Enabling the ECEC sector to work alongside the NDIS Early Childhood Approach to provide therapeutic intervention for children with a developmental delay or disability. A whole of community approach, in collaboration with other support services and in partnership with families, will deliver better outcomes for children.

Launching into Learning

Launching into Learning (LiL) is a free program available in all government primary schools for children from birth through to age 4. Facilitated by qualified teachers, LiL programs are designed to support the learning

and development of children aged from birth to four years, with a specific emphasis on child wellbeing and foundational literacy and numeracy development.

In 2022, 6586 children were enrolled in LiL programs. This accounts for almost one third of Tasmanian children aged birth to four years.

LiL aims to give Tasmania's youngest children the best possible start in life by:

- empowering families as their child's first and most influential teacher
- building positive relationships between children, families, schools and community
- reaching families with highest need
- creating opportunities for children and families to learn and develop together through play in supportive environments provided by their local school
- facilitating a positive transition into Kindergarten.

A state-wide Early Learning team supports consistent approaches to the ongoing implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework, which underpins the work of LiL teachers. Our data indicates that children who have attended LiL have a demonstrable increase in academic performance compared to children who have not attended LiL. Examples include:

- Kindergarten Development Check Markers - a 6.5 per cent increase in developmental check markers
- Reading in Prep assessments - a 5 per cent increase. This trend continues through Year 3 NAPLAN data
- Maths in Prep assessment - a 5.5 per cent increase. This trend continues through Year 3 NAPLAN data.

A longitudinal study of LiL shows that children from all socioeconomic backgrounds made significant gains in educational performance from regular participation in LiL. However, children from disadvantaged and low socioeconomic backgrounds benefited most.

Learning in Families Together

Learning in Families Together (LIFT) is a state-funded initiative that supports schools to engage with parents and carers with children in Kindergarten to Grade 2. Family engagement in children's learning is a valued practice in all schools because children learn everywhere, not just at school. LIFT builds families' confidence and skills to support literacy and numeracy learning at home.

The initiative encourages collaboration between home, school, and the community for improved learning outcomes, by:

- valuing families as a child's first and continuing teacher
- building on the respectful relationships built in the *Launching into Learning* (LiL) program
- creating pathways for two-way communication between families and schools
- building shared expectations about learning for children
- connecting learning at home and school
- providing opportunities for families to understand early literacy and numeracy learning to positively influence their child's education
- involving families in decisions about their children's learning.

109 Primary and Combined Schools have been provided funding from 2020 to deliver the LIFT program. Eligible schools were identified using the Early Years Needs Index.

Responses to the 2022 Parent Satisfaction Survey showed that parents or carers had a higher satisfaction rate with literacy and numeracy program supports and engagement when their child participated in a LIFT program in schools that received LIFT funding.

Let's Talk Reading resources have also been developed through LIFT, supporting families and carers to have access to up-to-date literacy information, guidance and supports for our early learners.

Libraries Tasmania

Libraries Tasmania provides informal, beyond-the-classroom learning opportunities for children and young people. Libraries Tasmania provides early learning programs including Baby Play and Rock & Rhyme sessions for babies and toddlers, and Storytime sessions for pre-schoolers, encouraging parents and carers to introduce their children to language, stories and books from the earliest age.

Working Together – supporting early learning

The Tasmanian Government's *Working Together – supporting early learning* program provides access to free, quality early learning for eligible children, holistic support for the child and their immediate family and a supported transition to Kindergarten in the following year.

Working Together supports children and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability to build capacity to overcome barriers to access and participation in early learning. The program achieves this by providing fully funded places in quality early learning centres across Tasmania, offering tailored support to the child and family for up to two days per week over 50 weeks in the child's year before Kindergarten as well as service referrals.

Working Together is available to children who are three years old by 1 January in the service delivery year, are not currently accessing early learning through a ECEC service and:

- whose parents/guardians are Health Care Card holders
- who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- who are receiving support or intervention from the Child Safety Service, and/or
- have two or more concerns identified from the Parental Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS) assessment.

Working Together provides fully funded professional learning opportunities and quality practice support to its ECEC service partners to enable the delivery of quality, culturally inclusive early learning and family engagement.

The Tasmanian Government has committed up to \$10.5 million per annum to provide access to free preschool early learning opportunities for children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage.

Working Together is being rolled out in a phased approach to ensure the codesign process continues to provide the right wrap around support for families. Currently, Working Together supports 120 children annually across Burnie, Ulverstone, Launceston, and the greater Hobart region. In August 2022, Premier Rockliff announced the next implementation phase would occur in 2024 through an expansion of Working Together to support 240 children, increasing to 360 annually from 2025. In 2025, the community need for Working Together will be reviewed along with the capacity of ECEC sector to support further expansion of the program.

Currently children's participation in Working Together is fully funded by the Tasmanian Government. The Australian Government recently approved Working Together to make Child Care Subsidy (CCS) gap payments on behalf of children accessing the program. This has enabled DECYP to begin collaborating with the Australian Government to implement a CCS integrated funding model of the program.

Strong Partnerships

DECYP and the Education and Care community are committed to working in strong partnerships to ensure the best outcomes for Tasmania's children and families. The [Strong Partnerships Framework](#) (the Framework) shows how DECYP and the Education and Care community work collaboratively for the children and families at the centre of our work.

The Framework provides a range of tools and resources, across seven domains, to support all DECYP and Education and Care services, whether co-located or not, to work in stronger partnerships. Through this partnership approach we are forming mutually respectful relationships and supporting stronger and more successful transitions between ECEC and school.

Education and Care Unit

The Tasmanian Government recognises the importance of high-quality ECEC services. DECYP'S Education and Care Unit (ECU) plays a critical role in supporting this. The ECU is the Regulatory Authority in Tasmania and works collaboratively and in partnership with DECYP colleagues, other agencies and organisations, the community and the ECEC sector to support a sustainable, quality, and professional sector. The ECU ensures high quality education and care opportunities are provided through:

- Regulatory functions
- Quality assessment
- Funding support
- Professional learning support and education.

Our children deserve the best experiences while attending education and care services. The ECEC sector plays a vital role in the Tasmanian community, supporting children and families by providing safe and caring environments in which children can play, learn and grow.

National early years context

Availability and access

The Tasmanian Government considers the most important factor for ECEC services to be the availability of high-quality learning environments for all children. A by-product is the enabling of greater workforce participation by families. Children must remain at the centre as the core consideration. If governments focus first on enabling workforce participation, it reduces the emphasis on quality early learning programs. Although not the primary concern, prioritising workforce participation can also negatively impact community understandings of ECEC services, reversing the growing awareness of the professionalism of the sector and creating a perception that the role of ECEC services is simply to provide supervision for children.

The Tasmanian Government is aware of the continuing workforce issues impacting the sector and are currently involved in a significant amount of work with the Commonwealth and other States and Territories through the National Workforce Strategy as well as the Tasmanian specific Early Years and School Age Care Sectors Workforce Strategy. We are also collaborating to reform approaches to Early Years education and

resolve issues that may impede the best outcomes for children, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in our communities. The complexity of workforce issues cannot be resolved quickly and therefore this continues to be a multifaceted approach.

Workforce

There are currently no Australia-wide planning processes that ensure that ECEC supply meets demand, resulting in some areas with no services, and other areas with more services than required. The ECU within Tasmania does not have a role in planning, and therefore is required to respond by assessing every application for a service approval. This can be a barrier to service accessibility for children and families. Ideally funding provided by the Commonwealth should incentivise service provision to enable access and equity.

DECYP has provided funding to Early Childhood Australia (Tasmania Branch) to support the implementation of Tasmanian workforce initiatives. Through this funding, Early Childhood Australia have employed a Project Manager to undertake a number of projects, working closely with ECEC services.

In the 2021 Tasmanian Budget, the Government committed approximately \$3 million over three years to support the *Local People into Local Jobs* initiative, in response to a recommendation of the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC) Report. This project is supporting Tasmania's Community Services sector to meet projections of an additional 4,000 jobs by 2024. The approach is whole of sector that includes Aged Services, Disability Services, Early Childhood Education and Care, and other Social Services. Cross sector collaboration across the broader sector aims to complement stakeholder commitment and foster further collaboration in areas of common interest to help meet workforce shortages.

The Tasmanian Government is finalising an Industry Skills Compact for the Early Childhood Sector which recognises, and promotes the importance of industry-led workforce planning. The Industry Skills Compacts contain a formal outline of multiple commitments and agreements which aim to ensure that the industry and government work collaboratively and each actively deliver on its areas of strength and responsibility for training and workforce development. These are supported by industry-specific Priority Action Plans which are designed to be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. The Tasmanian Government is committed to collaboration with other jurisdictions to identify and address workforce issues, develop strategies to address workforce environment concerns and progress aligned workforce initiatives. The National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (the Strategy) aims to address long-term issues with the attraction and retention of the ECEC workforce, but accelerating the actions is unlikely to result in immediate improvement to workforce shortages. Jurisdictional workforce initiatives, complementary to the National Strategy, will continue to play an important role in addressing workforce shortages.

The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan is underpinned by implementation funding, however the ECEC Strategy is not. This makes it more difficult to fast track actions or to broaden the scope. It is also indicative of a lack of professional recognition for the education and care workforce.

A key action in the ECEC Strategy is the implementation, in every jurisdiction, of teacher registration for early childhood teachers in ECEC. Tasmania is one of four jurisdictions where teacher registration is not currently in place. There are significant legislative and policy barriers in Tasmania that need to be addressed to resolve this. For instance, three-year qualifications approved under the National Quality Framework (NQF) are not currently acceptable for teacher registration.

DECYP is developing a roadmap to identify what needs to be done to enable teacher registration for early childhood teachers in Tasmania. Discussions with peak bodies has commenced and broader consultation with the ECEC sector will occur as a part of this process.

There continues to be concern nationally about the quality of ECEC training, particularly VET courses that are being fast-tracked by some registered training organisations. Qualifications need to be delivered efficiently

to address workforce shortages, but this should not compromise course quality. One example is the current difference in Tasmania between qualifications approved under the NQF, which includes three-year university level qualifications, and those approved as Initial Teacher Education qualifications supported by teacher registration processes. Anecdotal feedback is that three-year early childhood qualifications can be more focused on the skills needed for the early years than the Initial Teacher Education courses.

While there are advantages in ECEC educators studying for higher qualifications, it can also be challenging for those educators to achieve work life balance. This is particularly evident when workforce shortages limit opportunities for educators to study and to be supported to study while working. Although Tasmania initiated an ECEC Scholarship Program in 2019 and 2020, take-up did not meet expectations and the program had a significant attrition rate due to educators' personal circumstances. Currently only 6 students remain in the Program from an initial availability of 20 places.

Workforce challenges are also a barrier to the expansion of existing services and the development of new ones. Staff shortages are a particular challenge in regional and remote areas. Recently, a Tasmanian service in a remote area had to close for a period due to staff shortages. There have also been a number of instances where families were not able to access care services outside of school hours in their community.

These workforce challenges are complex as outlined in the *Early Years and School Aged Care Workforce Strategy (Tasmanian 2021 & Beyond)* Industry Plan, with intersecting issues of attraction, retention, sustainability and quality. Quality outcomes for children depend on a highly skilled, well supported and professionally recognised workforce.

Across the sector it is essential to provide a supported pathway to learning within industry to aid worker retention, training outcomes, as well as levels of assistance and care provided. Mandated qualifications means that trainees are on the floor immediately, with critical staff shortages this support is even more important. Currently, at least 50 per cent of Educators in an Early Education Centre must be qualified at Diploma level or higher, all other educators must be qualified at Certificate III level, and services must engage or have access to an early childhood teacher, depending on the number of children in attendance.

The Tasmanian Government strongly supports access to high quality early learning programs, including in ECEC services, to enable lifelong positive outcomes for children. Quality early learning ensures children have a strong sense of identity, are connected to their world, have a strong sense of wellbeing, are confident, empowered and engaged learners and can communicate effectively. We acknowledge however, that current workforce shortages have the potential to negatively impact the quality of those programs.

The Tasmanian Government supports the recently announced budget measures to support the skills and training in the ECEC workforce. With First Nations services and ECEC in regional and remote locations being a priority in the first 12 months, we believe these measures will encourage Tasmanian educators to take on additional study.

The availability of ECEC services is largely market driven, with both Federal and State Governments having little capacity other than to respond to the market. As providers of ECEC services are businesses, viability is a significant factor in determining where they consider opening a services. The way in which Commonwealth funding is currently made available to providers does not incentivise operating in thin markets. This means there are areas where there are no or limited services because providers have determined that the demand for ECEC is not strong enough. Tasmania has some large providers who operate services in outer regional areas, but these often face difficulties with demand and retaining adequate workforce.

Funding

Access to education through primary and secondary school is recognised as a fundamental right in Australia. Given the breadth of research supporting the value of early learning, there is a strong case that we should

extend that recognition to ECEC services. Australian Government investment in the sector should aim to maximise outcomes for children and benefits for all families, regardless of where they live. It is important that Australian Government investment is structured in a way that complements State-funded early learning programs and has the flexibility to adapt to the needs of different communities. For example, what may work in inner Sydney may not work in regional Tasmania.

Funding to support universal access to early learning for all three-year-olds would enable better and more equitable outcomes for our children. However, ideally it should be broader, recognising the importance of the first 1000 days and providing appropriate support for families of young children, particularly vulnerable families.

Outcomes for children and families

There is no one size fits all in today's modern multicultural society. Nationally and within each jurisdiction, ECEC services should be places of cultural safety, whether for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, those experiencing vulnerability, disadvantage, disability, trauma or coming from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. There also needs to be different approaches to subsidies and support to draw in these children and meet the needs of families. It is also important that families facing vulnerability and living in disadvantage have supports to overcome barriers to receiving specialised interventions.

Evidence indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to be engaged in early childhood services that are designed, led and owned by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. Working in real partnerships such as this, drives change within systems to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Conclusion

The Tasmanian Government's submission outlines the context of the early years education programs in Tasmania and highlights the Tasmanian Government's successful work and significant state investment in the early years.

The Tasmanian Government supports the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the ECEC sector and the importance to reinforce the priority of governments to ensure that every child and young person is known, safe, well and learning. The Inquiry must recognise the importance of cross-agency, cross-sectoral and inter-jurisdictional collaboration in the early years and be designed together with children, parents, and community.

From a Tasmanian context, significant investment in early years education programs and Kindergarten programs are not reflected in SRS calculations. The programs outlined in this submission represent a crucial pre-investment to engage children and their families in the school environment ultimately improving educational outcomes and acting as a driver to Tasmania's high early childhood participation programs.

Research clearly indicates that there is a greater return on investment in the early years compared to investing more in reactive programs in years Prep to 12, with returns particularly high for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.