

Commissioner Gropp, Commissioner Stokie and Associate Commissioner Brennan
Australian Government Productivity Commission
Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care sector in Australia

Dear Commissioners

Submission to the Australian Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care sector in Australia

The National Child and Family Hubs Network (the Network) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the draft report from the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) 'A path to universal early childhood education and care'.

The Network commends the Commission for a developing a robust report and seeks to highlight opportunities for integrated Child and Family Hubs to play a critical role in improving quality, equity and access to ECEC services. The Network's submission includes two key recommendations below and responds to selected findings and recommendations outlined in the draft report.

Recommendations

Investing in integrated Child and Family Hubs across Australia should form part of the reform to the Early Childhood Education and Care policy and service landscape. Hubs have the potential to significantly improve outcomes for children and families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage. The National Child and Family Hubs Network recommends:

The Commonwealth Government invest in integrated Child and Family Hubs nationally, with specific financial investment to include:

1. A national approach to implementing, funding, and evaluating Hubs (outside the services themselves) including:

- 1.1. Agreed core components and appropriate governance structures for Child and Family Hubs based on evidence.
- 1.2. Support existing Hubs to improve integration via funding for the 'glue'. * The 'glue' is a vital component of Hubs funding that supports the integration of services and supports to reduce fragmentation.
- 1.3. Establish new integrated Child and Family Hubs within the ECEC setting, targeted to areas of significant disadvantage, including establishment, infrastructure, and 'glue' funding to ensure success.
- 1.4. Build in guidance and support for ongoing quality improvement and evaluation of Hubs through a harmonised set of process and impact measures.

2. Build on the National Child and Family Hubs Network, as an existing national coordinating body for Hubs, to build capacity, reduce fragmentation, and identify best practice by undertaking research, evaluation, and quality improvement to support and scale integrated Child and Family Hubs across Australia.

* 'Glue' funding allows greater integration of services and supports across Hubs and can be broadly grouped into funding for business oversight, staff supports, community engagement and shared information and technology systems. **Attachment A** provides more information on 'glue'.

Who we are - the National Child and Family Hubs Network

The [National Child and Family Hubs Network](#) (the Network) is a multidisciplinary group established in 2021 that brings together Australian Universities, research centres, medical research institutes, non-government community-based organisations, Commonwealth and State government departments. The Network's members are actively involved in conducting research, implementation, training, communication, and advocacy related to innovative (and sustainable) integrated Child and Family Hubs, to support the health and wellbeing of children and families. In addition, the philanthropic sector is a key stakeholder in the early years space and a Network partner with a critical role to play shaping investment in child and family initiatives. Since the Network launched, it has attracted over 850 members from a wide range of sectors across all jurisdictions.

An integrated Child and Family Hub provides a 'one stop shop', where families can access a range of supports that improve child development as well as child and family health and wellbeing. Integrated Child and Family Hubs have two critical roles:

- improving access to a range of health, education, and social services using a family centred approach; and
- providing opportunities to build parental capacity and for families to create social connections.^{1,2}

The social function of a hub means that there is a natural and safe place for families with young children to meet and connect with other parents and children in their community.²

The Network's vision is that across Australia:

"families are able to walk through a Child and Family Hub's welcoming front door and receive the right care and support for the child and family at the right time, leading to improved and equitable health and development outcomes".¹

Hubs may be located in a variety of settings including ECEC, primary schools, primary health care, non-government organisations, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and available virtually. Hubs are not necessarily a physical building and can take virtual forms or be a network of existing services.



Each setting provides a potential equitable service platform to engage a wide population of children and their families, particularly those living with adversities. The services within these Hubs are able to identify and respond to emerging developmental issues, health, education, and social issues early in a child's life. Hubs also support the promotion of protective supports such as high-quality education, assisting with the transition to school, supporting and connecting families, promoting positive parenting, supporting culture, and providing other safeguards for children's development, conveniently, all in one place where the benefits of the whole are greater than the sum of its parts.

Child and Family Hubs enact recommendations from the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (service system), particularly focus area 2, relating to improved service navigation, collaborative care and access and equity.³ The Network has identified core components of Child and Family hubs:

Community level:

- A welcoming and safe space for families
- Participatory approaches to service design and implementation
- Ongoing family/community input and involvement in governance
- Strong links with community services outside of the Hub

Service level:

- High quality services with quality frameworks and standards
- Relational practice/family centre care
- Workforce development and ongoing support
- Local leadership and administration to support integration
- Coordination/Navigation/Link staff
- A focus on social determinants of health
- A multi-disciplinary approach
- Mapped referral processes

Individual/family level:

- Outreach services to connect high need families
- Culturally safe policies and practices
- Support to build parenting capacity

Response to the Productivity Commission's draft report

The Network's response to the draft report is focused on the themes of support for a universal ECEC system, integrated services, an independent ECEC Commission and system navigator roles.

UNIVERSAL ECEC SYSTEM

The Network **agrees** with the key finding that 'A universal ECEC system means making quality services accessible to all children and families. Achieving it will require tackling availability, affordability and inclusion gaps.'⁴ A universal ECEC system will need targeted approaches for children and families

experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability; therefore, the Network **calls for investment in integrated Child and Family Hubs** within ECEC:

- For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, managed through Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) supporting self-determination and with sustainable funding models.
- Designed to specifically respond to the needs of children and families experiencing disadvantage.
- With targeted responses to rural, regional and remote communities; with urban responses informed by neighbourhood deprivation.
- That include services responding to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- That ensure mainstream services are provided with training and support to foster culturally safe services.

The Network **supports** the call for a universal ECEC system with up to 30 hours or three days per week of quality ECEC available to all children aged from birth to five years.⁴ This measure will improve accessibility by reducing many of the barriers faced by children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. There is potential for new and existing Hubs to offer Early Childhood Education and Care services as part of the roll out of a universal ECEC system providing quality ECEC of up to 30 hours or three days per week.

The Network also **supports** the report finding that the Australian Government should provide additional funding to support the establishment of appropriate services via block funding in communities with 'thin' markets or complex needs. It will be critical to work in partnership with communities in the design and delivery of ECEC services and co-design is a core component of high-quality integrated Child and Family Hubs and place-based approaches.

The Network **supports** the position that affordability should not be a barrier to accessing ECEC services. Families on low incomes require measures such as receiving the maximum rate of the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) and removing the activity test to reduce barriers to accessing ECEC services.

INTEGRATED SERVICES

The Network **agrees** that integrated services -combining ECEC with other services- can make a significant difference for children and families and particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. In early years settings, the evidence demonstrates that integrated care and supports are associated with improved school readiness, parental knowledge, and confidence.^{5,6,7,8} When comparing non-integrated models of care and support with co-located and integrated models of care in early years and primary school settings, there is a trend toward improved child academic outcomes in the latter settings.⁹ An evaluation of NSW Aboriginal Child and Family Centres demonstrated improvements in health checks and immunisation rates among children as well as first time engagement with early childhood education and care services for 'hard to reach' families.¹⁰

Child and Family Hubs, including those based in ECEC, provide an opportunity to integrate services to provide early intervention to those children experiencing a disability, developmental delay or developmental concerns, including those who are ineligible for National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) funding. Currently due to strict eligibility criteria and limited support outside the NDIS, children

experiencing developmental delays are not being identified early and supports are not available.¹¹ Hubs provide a non-stigmatising setting that can improve access to developmental surveillance^{12,13} and early intervention for those children who need it, potentially reducing the cost of NDIS to the government, reducing wait lists and family stress. There is the potential to test how effective Hubs are in supporting children ineligible for NDIS via piloting this approach in already established Hubs that operate within a broader place-based approaches across states and territories.

An integrated approach has been adopted in the design of [Health to Health Kids](#) hubs, located in 15 communities across Australia to support the mental health and developmental needs of 0-12 years olds as part of the [National Children's Mental Health Strategy](#).

The Network **welcomes** the acknowledgement that the integration function for services is often unfunded. A key recommendation of the Network in this submission and previously made to the National Early Years Strategy is for investment in 'the glue'. 'Glue' funding allows greater integration of services and supports across Hubs and can be broadly grouped into funding for business oversight, staff supports, community engagement and shared information and technology systems. **Attachment A** provides more information on 'glue'. Service Coordinator and Navigator roles form part of the glue function.

According to Australia's National Children's Commissioner, "*Integrated service models should be the default. Anyone who wants to run siloed services should be required to answer why, because none of the traditional models are designed based on what people need.*"¹⁴

The Network **supports** the following draft recommendations which are relevant to service integration:

Draft recommendation 7.1 - Ensure integrated services are available where needed.

An ECEC Commission (draft recommendation 9.2) should be responsible for advising governments on the need for integrated early years services involving ECEC and the communities in which they are needed.⁴

However, this advice should be founded on good evidence of child and family vulnerability to ensure an equitable approach to access.

AN INDEPENDENT ECEC COMMISSION

Draft recommendation 7.2 – Support connections between ECEC and child and family services

As part of its role in assessing access to ECEC, an ECEC Commission (draft recommendation 9.2) should be responsible for examining connections between ECEC and other child and family services and identifying the most suitable way to address any gaps.⁴

The ECEC Commission should work with the National Child and Family Hubs Network to support integrated Child and Family Hub models as a means of providing inclusive, quality ECEC services. Integrated Child and Family Hubs are a model the ECEC commission should consider for both investing in existing ECEC services and commissioning new services. Five short videos available on the Network's [website](#) illustrate the value of integrated Child and Family Hubs.

Recommendation 2 of this submission requests the Productivity Commission build on the National Child and Family Hubs Network, as an existing national coordinating body, to build capacity, reduce fragmentation, and identify best practice by undertaking research, evaluation, and quality

improvement to support and scale integrated Child and Family Hubs across Australia. This is a critical element to ensure the quality and evidence base for Hubs across Australia. This is exemplified by Network members contributing to the development of a Child and Family Hubs Framework to inform the design, implementation and evaluation of evidence-based Child and Family Hubs in Queensland and broader Australian contexts. The Framework, developed by [Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership](#) - under the auspice of the [Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth](#) - will be a valuable resource to guide existing and future hubs across Australia.

SYSTEM NAVIGATOR ROLES

The Network considers system navigator roles as a core component of an integrated Child and Family Hub, including in ECEC settings. There is a need for the Commonwealth Government to invest in system navigator roles. These roles are essential for building trusting relationships with families, working collaboratively with families to identify their strengths and needs and then link in with appropriate supports and services. Long term funding for service navigator roles with flexibility to respond to community needs is required. To support some families' initial engagement with systems and supports, outreach approaches as well as system navigators may be required. This may be actioned through more flexibility in current service provider roles. However, system navigators alone will not increase integration of services within a Hub and the National Child and Family Hubs Network calls for broader funding of 'glue' as outlined in the previous point.

Consultation

This submission has been informed by consultation with members of the National Child and Family Hubs Network (Network) Steering Committee. Membership comprises:

- National Children's Commissioner, Human Rights Australia
- Centre of Research Excellence in Childhood Adversity, Centre for Community Child Health, at Murdoch Children's Research Institute
- Sydney Local Health District / University of Sydney / Sydney Health Partners
- Children's Health Queensland
- ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families Across the Life Course and the Telethon Kids Institute
- Social Ventures Australia
- SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children
- Karitane
- Our Place
- University of New South Wales/ Early Life Determinants of Health, Sydney Partnership for Health, Education, Research and Enterprise
- University of Sydney / Sydney Health Partners Child and Adolescent Clinical Academic Group
- University of Tasmania, Menzies Institute for Medical Research
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)
- Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership

Background and supporting material

Key documents informing this submission include:

- The Network's policy submission outlining the need for investment in integrated Child and Family Hubs to the Commonwealth Government as part of the National Early Years Strategy Consultation in 2023 (**Attachment A**).
- The Network's policy submission to the South Australian Government's Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care (**Attachment B**).
- The Network's 2023 paper '*Child and family hubs: an important 'front door' for equitable support for families across Australia*' (**Attachment C**).
- The 2023 Social Ventures Australia publication '*Happy, healthy and thriving children: Enhancing the impact of Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia*' (**Attachment D**).

The Network commends the work of the Productivity Commission in identifying ECEC reform measures to improve outcomes for children and families experiencing disadvantage. The Network strongly supports the equity measures inherent in the call for a universal ECEC system with up to thirty hours of quality ECEC available to all children aged from birth to five years. Investment in Child and Family Hubs – via improvements to existing services and establishing new services in areas of need that include integrated support and early childhood education and care - has the potential to make a significant difference to children and families across Australia. In addition, adequately funding the 'glue', or service integration, will be critical to the success of such models.

I would be pleased to provide additional information on the National Child and Family Hubs Network's submission to the Productivity Commission

Yours sincerely

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Attachments

Attachment A – National Child and Family Hubs Network – Submission to the National Early Years Strategy consultation.

Attachment B – National Child and Family Hubs Network – Submission to the South Australian Government’s Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Attachment C – National Child and Family Hubs Network - Child and family hubs: an important ‘front door’ for equitable support for families across Australia

Attachment D – Social Ventures Australia - Happy, healthy and thriving: enhancing the impact on our integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia

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- ¹ Honisett S, Cahill R, Callard N, Eapen V, Eastwood J, Goodhue R, Graham C, Heery, Hiscock H, Hodgins M, Hollonds A, Jose K, Newcomb D, O’Loughlin G, Ostojic K, Sydenham E, Tayton S, Woolfenden S. and Goldfeld S. (2023). Child and family hubs: an important ‘front door’ for equitable support for families across Australia. National Child and Family Hubs Network. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.22031951>
 - ² Moore TG. (2021b). Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability [brief]. Prepared for Social Ventures Australia. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, The Royal Children’s Hospital.
 - ³ Australian Government. National Childrens Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. 2021. Available at: <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/9f2d5e51-dfe0-4ac5-b06a-97dbba252e53/National-children-s-Mental-Health-and-Wellbeing-Strategy-FULL>
 - ⁴ Productivity Commission (2023). A path to universal early childhood education and care. Draft Report. Canberra.
 - ⁵ Cattan S, Conti G, Farquharson C, Ginja R, Pecher M. (2021). The Health Impacts of Sure Start. Available from: <https://ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN332-The-health-impacts-ofsure-start-1.pdf>
 - ⁶ Sammons P, Hall J, Smees R, Goff J, Sylva K, Smith T et al. (2015). The Impact of Children’s Centres: Studying the Effects of Children’s Centres in Promoting Better Outcomes for Young Children and Their Families, DFE-RR495. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/485346/DFERR495_Evaluation_of_children_s_centres_in_England_the_impact_of_children_s_centres.pdf
 - ⁷ Moore TG. (2021). Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability. Prepared for Social Ventures Australia. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, The Royal Children’s Hospital. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.14593890>
 - ⁸ Taylor C, Jose K, van de Lageweg WI, Christensen D. (2017). Tasmania’s child and family centres: a place-based early childhood services model for families and children from pregnancy to age five. *Early Child Dev Care*. 2017; 187(10):1496-510.
 - ⁹ Newman S, McLoughlin J, Skouteris H, Blewitt C, Melhuish E, Bailey C. (2020). Does an integrated, wrap-around school and community service model in an early learning setting improve academic outcomes for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds? *Early Child Development and Care*. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1803298>
 - ¹⁰ Social Ventures Australia (SVA) & Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH). (2023). Exploring the need and funding for integrated child and family centres.
 - ¹¹ Australian Government. NDIS Review. Available at: <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/resources/fact-sheet/new-connected-system-support-and-new-early-intervention-ndis-pathway>
 - ¹² Edwards K, Rimes T, Smith R, Fernandez R, Stephenson L, Son J, et al. Improving Access to Early Childhood Developmental Surveillance for Children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Background. *International Journal of Integrated Care*. 2020;Apr;20(2).
 - ¹³ Edwards K, Fernandez R, Rimes T, Stephenson L, Smith R, Son J, et al. “Happy, Healthy, Ready – working with early childhood non-government organisations for developmental surveillance for vulnerable children”. *Australian Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 2020; 37(4).
 - ¹⁴ Stated in the NCFHN November 2023 webinar ‘A vision for a better system: the role of Child and Family Hubs’. www.childandfamilyhubs.org.au/resources/news/2023/hubs-webinar/