



RESPONSE TO DRAFT REPORT:  
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION &  
CARE INQUIRY:  
Australian Government  
Productivity Commission

The Hive, Mt Druitt (United Way Australia)

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## The Hive, Mt Druitt

The Hive, Mt Druitt (United Way Australia) is a place-based, Collective Impact initiative operating in the suburbs of the Mount Druitt postcode in Western Sydney, NSW. The goal of The Hive is for all children in Mt Druitt to start school well, with equal opportunity to learn, be healthy and participate in quality community life.

The Hive is guided by the belief that all children deserve to start school well despite the postcode they are born in. We recognise that investment in our youngest citizens will benefit whole communities and assist in breaking cycles of disadvantage and stigma within areas of entrenched vulnerabilities. The Hive believes that for outcomes for children to be improved, an ecological approach must be embraced to recognise that children belong to families, who live in communities who are affected by policies and systems and as such a holistic approach must also be considered in Australia's Early Education & Care system.

The Mt Druitt postcode has a long history of entrenched intergenerational poverty and social stigma with some of the postcode's twelve suburbs having exceptionally high rates of unemployment, crime, financial insecurity, and issues of domestic violence and mental health. According to the Australian Early Development Census, in certain Mt Druitt suburbs, 2 in 3 children start school considered developmentally vulnerable, which is significantly higher than the national rate of 1 in 5 children. The percentage of children classed as developmentally vulnerable is only increasing, and so is the gap between Mt Druitt children and the rest of NSW. Living in a region of socioeconomic disadvantage, these children are starting school already behind compared to children from other communities, and without significant investment in Mt Druitt suburbs, these children will struggle to break out of the cycle of poverty.

The Hive work individually with families to overcome barriers in accessing early education and care, as well as investing in early education centres and educators across the postcode through professional development opportunities and mentoring to ensure children can access a high-quality education, and that educators are more equipped to support children who enter their service.

### **Areas of strong agreement in the draft report:**

It is undisputed that universal early childhood education and care would offer immense benefits to children, parents, and the economy. The recommendations outlined in this draft report are highly positive and aligned with changes The Hive have advocated for at a policy level as well as on a local level with families. The vision for an ECEC sector focused on availability, affordability, inclusivity, and flexibility is an admirable one, and one that considers the needs of children experiencing disadvantage, those who typically face increased barriers to ECEC access and those who would benefit the most.

We know that children in disadvantaged communities require a unique approach to ensure they can succeed, and we believe that the ECEC sector should consider vulnerable children in every outcome and priority area. If the ECEC sector supports the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, all Australian children will benefit.

The specific recommendations that The Hive are encouraged to see are outlined include:

- Increasing the ChildCare Subsidy to 100% for low-income families
- Removing the Activity Test
- Reducing the administrative complexity to make CCS more accessible
- Increase funding for the Inclusion Support Program
- Increasing in availability of longer hours of care for preschool programs & primary school
- Investing in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in operating childcare services
- The development of an ECEC Commission

The acknowledgement of barriers to accessing ECEC were also appreciated as they are often overlooked yet inhibit the access of ECEC to many families in areas of social disadvantage or remote areas. Specifically, transport barriers families may face which prevents accessing ECEC, and broader complexities and vulnerabilities that families may be facing which impact accessing ECEC and the need to provide wrap-around family support.

### **Areas where further consideration may be needed:**

While the above recommendations are supported by The Hive, we believe that action should be taken further, and that there are also areas that have not been considered in the draft report.

- ***Reduce administrative requirements of the Inclusion Support Program & increase support for educators*** – The support and funding provided to children through the ISP is highly beneficial. However, the administrative requirements for educators to apply for the ISP for each individual child is immense, particularly for centres with significant number of children with additional needs. This administrative burden is unrelenting, with weekly update reports on each child required to sustain the funding. Educators are already struggling with the staffing shortage, and there is no backfill available for educators to take time off the floor to complete these applications and obtain the supporting paperwork. The funding provided through the ISP is only for the children, however, there needs to be consideration in the ISP for funding to the centre for additional staff as well as professional development opportunities for educators. As the number of children with disability in the centre increases, the ratios of staff per child should also increase to ensure the provision of a high quality of care individualised to each child's need. Additionally, the support offered by Inclusion Support Coordinators to ECEC services should be increased to not only provide phone call check ins, but site visits and professional development for centres with a high

level of developmental need.

- **Increasing cultural capability and sustainable funding for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations** – The Hive agree strongly with this, however considering the small number of ACCO's in some areas, there should be further incentives around attracting First Nations staff into the ECEC sector, and for services to employ First Nations staff to increase the cultural capability of all ECEC services.
- **Reducing administrative burden of accessing ECEC and CCS through Linker roles** – This was acknowledged, as well as that some services are providing support to families. Since 2019, The Hive have been delivering an 'Early Learning Linker' role who supports families to find ECEC services that are accessible for them with vacancies, complete enrolment paperwork, apply for CCS, access birth certificates, provide brokerage to overcome financial barriers such as enrolment fees or bonds, and advocacy to families to ECEC services about the family's situation if needed. It would be beneficial to have these Linker or Family Support roles funded and embedded in ECEC services, particularly in disadvantaged areas, or perhaps in other government spaces such as Service NSW for coordination of Centrelink subsidies and Birth Certificates.
- **Increasing support by ACECQA to lift quality of services** – Assessment is a significant time for ECEC services and can bring a lot of stress without much support from the assessing agency. The Hive suggest the role of ACECQA could be one that invests in services in between and leading up to assessment, to provide mentoring and support to services to make changes and increase the quality of service they provide to children. More regular touch points and engagement is required as many services go significant periods without contact with ACECQA. ACECQA should also consider how services in different areas deliver their programming to account for the needs of children and caregivers, and that services in different socio-economic areas will differ and this is consideration of an equity approach which ACECQA should value, rather than expect uniformity.
- **Acknowledgement that families facing disadvantage or vulnerabilities impact ECEC access** – There is a general acknowledgement that some families need additional support for the ECEC sector to be equitable however there were little tangible suggestions made in the draft report. Practical supports for low socio-economic areas could include an increase in equity funding to employ social workers or Linkers available within ECEC services, or funding for services to be able to access their own bus to transport children to childcare, or utilising ECEC services as Hub models with available wrap-around support.
- **Increasing ratios** – To increase service quality ratings, as well as the support given to children with developmental challenges, the staff to child ratios should be increased. While this presents a challenge in the current staffing shortage, increasing ratios will allow for educators to complete administrative tasks relating to the ISP or supporting parents with vulnerabilities, as well as providing greater 1:1 support to children who need it most, and reducing stress experienced by early educators, ultimately believed to reduce the amount of educators leaving the sector.
- **Removing bonds** - A financial barrier that had not been mentioned in the draft report is that of childcare bonds required to enrol in a service. The cost of a bond is often too expensive for parents to afford. While daily fees are subsidized and manageable for families, the bond is calculated at the full un-subsidized fees which can be hundreds or thousands of dollars required to confirm the enrolment. Some long day care centres have quoted \$2000 for two

children five days a week which is unrealistic for most families, especially those in low socioeconomic communities.

- **Birth Certificates** - Children often don't have a birth certificate or weren't registered at birth. Families don't know the process to get a birth certificate, and the registration process is complex and requires access to the internet and technology. The cost of paying for a birth certificate is also a barrier for families. This is a barrier to accessing ECEC and considerations such as waiving the requirement for a birth certificate, or simplifying the birth certificate application process and waiving the fee are possible solutions.
- **Increase ECEC quality through strengthened service-level indicator data** – The Hive partner with the Restacking the Odds project and support their recommendations outlined in their submission, in particular the increased availability of lead data indicator to ensure their service is quality. This data would include attendance data, waitlist data, priority population demographics & workforce data. The availability of this data to service providers would provide them the opportunity to reflect, upskill on data utilisation and overall improve their practice.

### Conclusion

The Hive, Mt Druitt is excited to see the Draft Report by the Productivity Commission and are encouraged by many of the recommendations made. We believe if these recommendations are undertaken, this will lead to an ECEC sector that is equitable and accessible for children that currently struggle to access this important form of early intervention and education. We welcome any further opportunity that we can partner with the Commission moving forward to form a ECEC sector that is equitable for all children.