

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

Northern Territory Submission

Through *Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong: 10-Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory*¹, the Northern Territory (NT) and Australian governments, along with the community sector, have committed to better outcomes for children, young people and families.

The Education NT Strategy 2021-25² also commits the Department of Education (the department) to build the foundations for learning through 3 key strategic actions:

- Design and implement a contemporary early childhood system for Territory families, to provide equitable access to quality services.
- Extend access to quality early learning to ensure all children can access 2 years of quality early learning in the years before school, following the Early Years Learning Framework and delivered by qualified staff in partnership with families.
- Strengthen transitions to school through early identification of children with additional needs, and collaboration with other NT Government agencies, to provide timely wrap around support.

The department is currently undertaking several reviews into early childhood programs and services in the NT to inform the delivery of these strategic actions. Although this work is still underway, it is clear that current systemic and structural barriers will continue to challenge the reform required in the NT.

The following areas will need to be addressed to ensure the NT has an early childhood system that meets the needs of all Territory children and families.

- Sustainable, integrated and responsive funding
Current funding arrangements, including the Child Care Subsidy and short-term funding agreements, are a barrier to promoting more efficient integrated and place-based service provision. This is particularly relevant in remote and very remote communities where the cost-of-service delivery and the needs of children and families are more complex.
- Gaps in service delivery and the need for more integration
Small population and thin markets mean that service provision in the NT is challenging. Remote communities rely on investment from all levels of government to access essential services. Place based integrated service delivery should be evidence informed but tailored to the needs of children and families in a community context.
- High levels of child and family vulnerability, and high levels of child developmental delay
Improved access to early intervention specialist supports and strategies for children with developmental delay or additional needs, and support for families which are key to improving lifetime outcomes for individuals and the broader community. The factors that contribute to the increasing numbers of vulnerable children are complex and interconnected, therefore, interventions need to be integrated and place based.

¹ [10-Year-Generational-Strategy-for-Children-and-Families-Web.pdf \(nt.gov.au\)](#)

² [Education NT Strategy 2021-2025](#)

- Workforce shortages
Severe early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce shortages are a significant barrier to achieving sector reform with the inequity of pay and conditions within the sector inhibiting the ability to attract and retain staff. The misalignment of government policies such as increasing demand through the cheaper child care initiative while reducing supply through increasing the Temporary Skilled Migration Income threshold are compounding current issues.

The NT Government welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into ECEC. The following content elaborates on these systemic and structural barriers, seeks to highlight the unique context of the NT and respond to the scope of the inquiry as it relates to the current NT ECEC system.

Northern Territory Context

In the NT, ECEC services are provided to young children and families dispersed across 1.35 million square kilometres containing many small community populations ranging from fewer than 100 to over 2,000 people. The NT accounts for approximately one per cent of the Australian population, with an Aboriginal population of 30%³. The main centres are Darwin, Katherine, Alice Springs and Nhulunbuy.

During the wet season, extreme weather conditions can affect access to remote and very remote communities. The supply and delivery of essential services, such as health care and education, not only rely on the availability of skilled workers, but also on travel and access to communities that have limited infrastructure, including housing.

In many Aboriginal communities, children are supported through a complex network of family and kinship to access rich community learning through ceremony, storytelling and play. Many children are learning English as a second or third language and live according to the principles and practices of an Aboriginal culture.

The conditions under which NT families are raising young children, and in which young children are growing up, are more challenging than ever before. Many families live in poverty and have few employment opportunities. Services delivered in silos often disengage vulnerable families because of the difficulties in navigating each service's administrative requirements.

The intersectionality between the relatively high proportion of Aboriginal children, children living in regional, remote and very remote areas and children experiencing disadvantage, exacerbates challenges for these children and further complicates service delivery.

Many NT children experience learning difficulties due to lifelong conditions such as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder⁴ and hearing loss⁵. The rates of acute rheumatic fever⁶ and rheumatic heart disease for Aboriginal people in the NT are among the highest in the world. The provision of wrap around and specialist supports for children with more complex learning and health needs is challenging within very remote contexts. This can be further compounded when children speak a language or dialect other than English and significantly contributes to disengagement in learning from a young age.

The cost of service delivery in the NT is higher than any other jurisdictions in Australia due to the complex environment including remoteness and disproportional levels of disadvantage as outlined above. The NT

³ [Population - Northern Territory Economy](#)

⁴ [DOH FASD Strategy Web.pdf \(nt.gov.au\)](#)

⁵ [Hearing health outreach services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory: July 2012 to December 2021, Summary - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

⁶ [Hyperendemic rheumatic heart disease in a remote Australian town identified by echocardiographic screening | The Medical Journal of Australia \(mja.com.au\)](#)

Governments recurrent expenditure on ECEC services per child continues to significantly exceed all jurisdictions⁷.

Delivery of ECEC services within the NT is a complex system consisting of a mix of services and programs delivered by government, non-government, private sector and philanthropic organisations. Funding for services is provided through a combination of NT Government, Australian Government, philanthropic organisations and fees from parents.

For the most part, services and programs are designed around the funding models and budget cycles rather than the needs of individual communities, families and children.

Developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school

By the time many NT children commence school, they are more developmentally vulnerable than other Australian children. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data shows that Aboriginal children in remote areas of the NT have high levels of developmental vulnerability across each of the 5 domains: physical health and wellbeing; emotional maturity; social competence; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge.

The 2021 AEDC⁸ results demonstrate that:

- one in 2 NT children who start school, particularly in very remote areas, are not ready
- the rate of NT children 'On Track' on all 5 domains decreased from 42% in 2018 to 39% in 2021
- the rate of NT Aboriginal children 'On Track' on all 5 domains decreased from 18% in 2018 to 16% in 2021.

Given the current rate of Aboriginal children in the NT on track in all 5 domains (16%), the NT has an enormous challenge to meet the National Agreement on Closing the Gap target of 55% for this cohort by 2031.

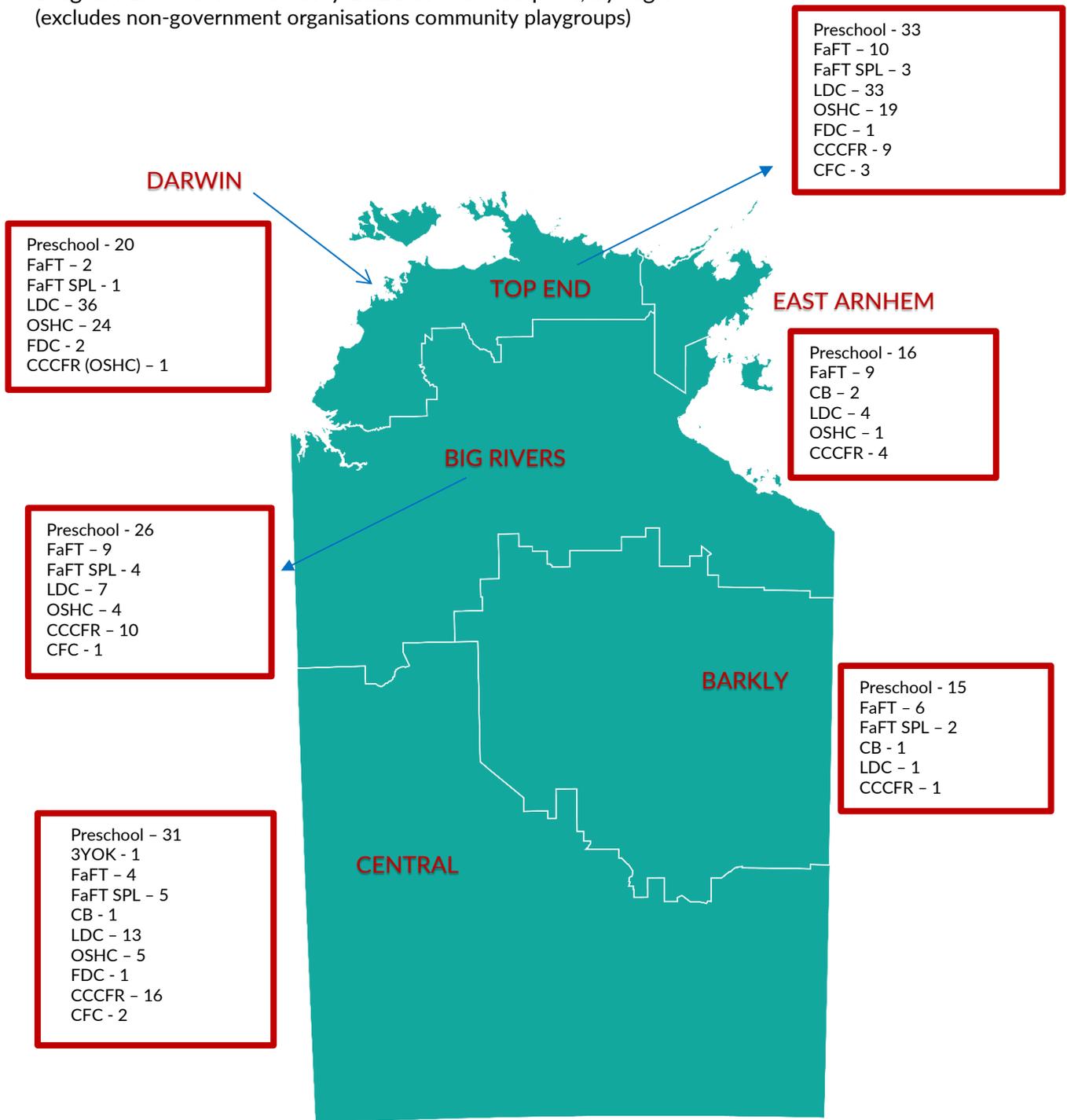
The AEDC data also provides a window into the proportion of children with special needs, children needing further assessment, parental engagement in school and reading at home, and the age children start the first year of school. The 2021 collection saw an increase in both the proportion of children known to have special needs (from 4.3% in 2018 to 6.6% in 2021) and the proportion of children needing further assessment (from 17.3% in 2018 to 24.2% in 2021).

Providing adequate wrap around support to vulnerable children, and children with a disability living in remote communities is particularly challenging given there is no economy of scale to facilitate permanent specialist service provision in small communities. Workforce availability and remote travel and accommodation costs are additional compounding factors in delivering services from a centralised delivery model.

⁷ [Report on Government Services 2023](#)

⁸ [2021 AEDC National Report](#)

Diagram 1: Northern Territory ECEC service footprint, by region (excludes non-government organisations community playgroups)



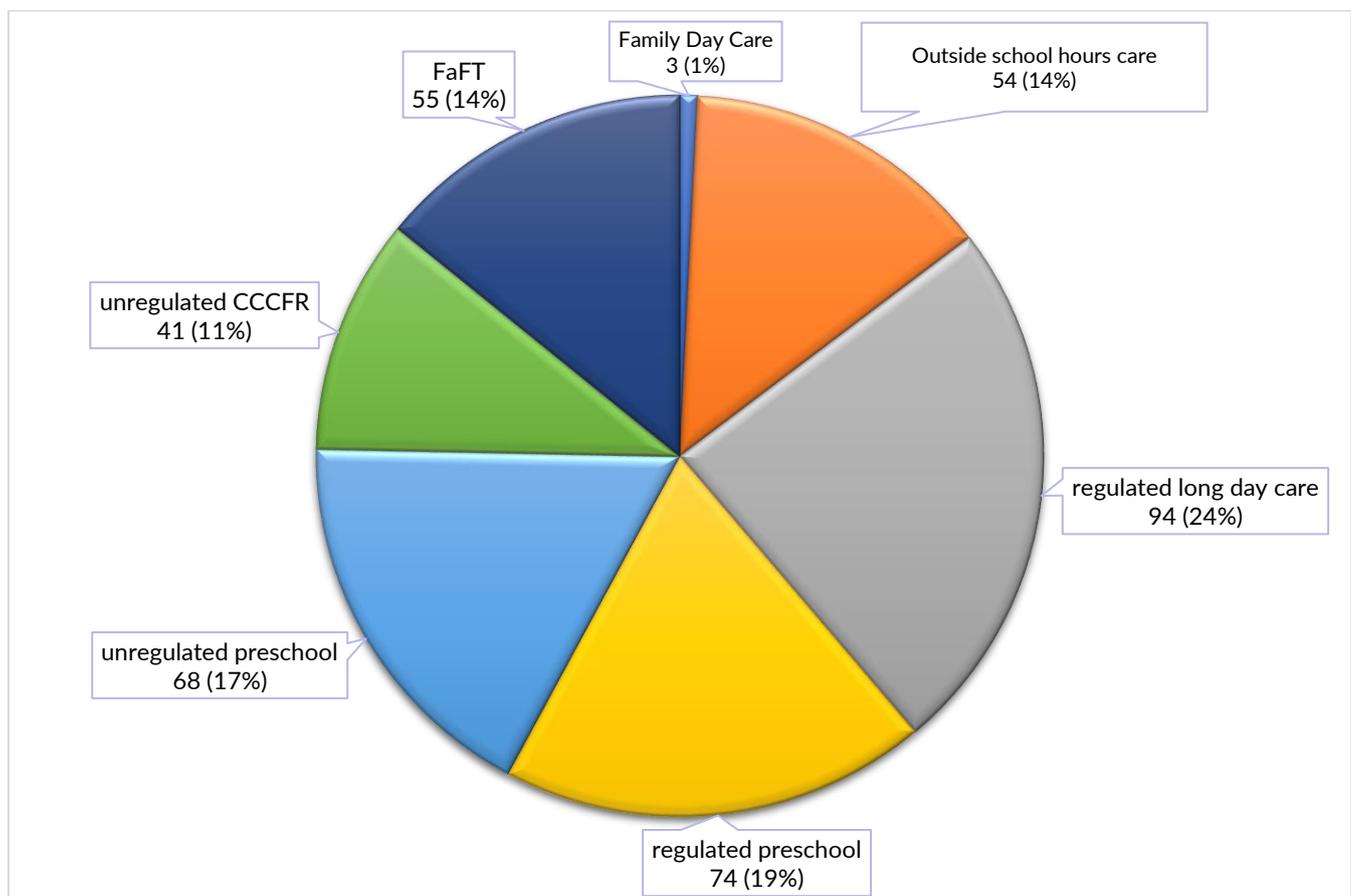
- Key**
- 3YOK..... 3-year-old kindergarten
 - CB..... Connected Beginnings
 - CCCFR..... Community Child Care Fund Restricted
 - CFC..... Children and Family Centre
 - FaFT..... Families as First Teachers
 - FaFT SPL..... Families as First Teachers Stay Play Learn
 - FDC..... Family day care
 - LDC..... Long day care
 - OSHC..... Outside school hours care

Affordability and access to quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children

There are 227 regulated ECEC services operating in the NT providing long day care (LDC), preschool, 3-year-old kindergarten family day care and outside school hours care (OSHC)⁹. There are also 68 very small preschools and 41 Community Child Care Fund Restricted (CCCFR) services in very remote locations that are out of the scope of the National Quality Framework (NQF). Additionally, programs that have a focus on Aboriginal parents and children aged from birth to 5 years old include 55 Families as First Teachers (FaFT) sites, 6 Child and Family Centres (CFC) and 4 Connected Beginnings (CB) sites across the NT (Diagram 1 refers).

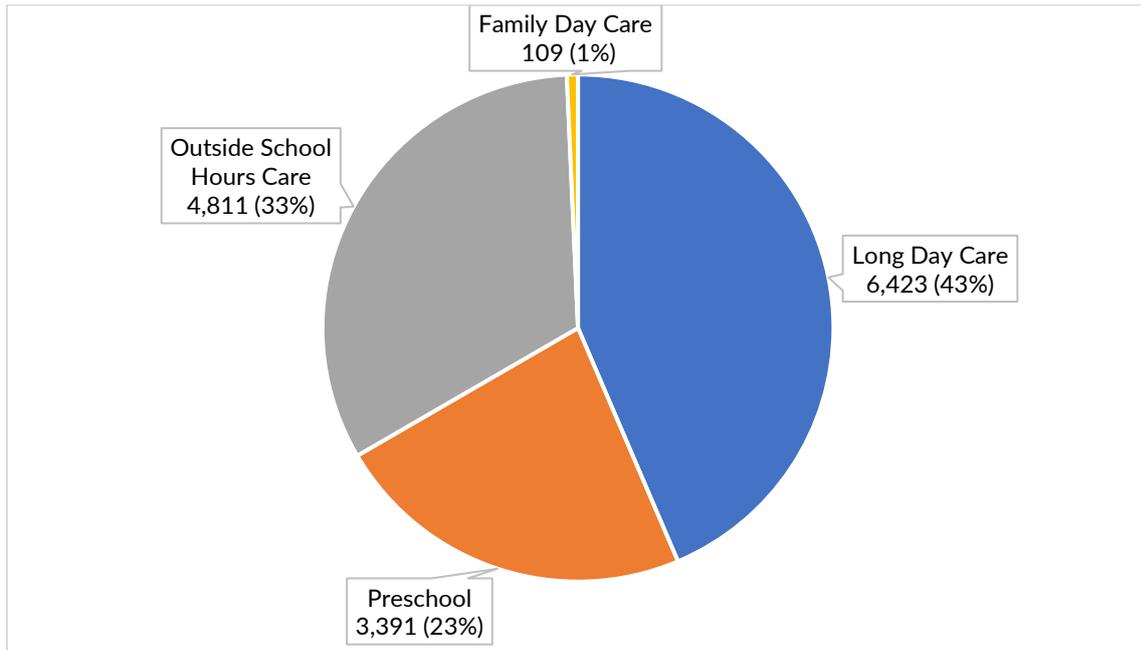
The mix of service types across the NT is relatively even as demonstrated in Graph 1 below. However, the actual capacity of each service type varies, with the long day care sectors capacity almost double that of preschool (Graph 2 refers).

Graph 1. NT ECEC services mix



⁹ [National registers | ACECOA](#)

Graph 2. Approved places in regulated ECEC services



In accordance with the Preschool Reform Agreement¹⁰, children are provided with access to 600 hours of preschool per year (15 hours per week) in the year before they commence full-time schooling, with 235 services delivering preschool and preschool programs across the NT¹¹. Preschool is primarily delivered for free by NT Government school-based services. Preschool provision is also provided in LDC services and other settings such as independent schools.

In the 2022-23 financial year, the NT Governments preschool budget is \$44.7m (\$39.9m NT Government funding and \$4.7m from the Australian Government under the conditions of the Preschool Reform Agreement).

80% of 4-year olds in the NT are enrolled in preschool at a government school, however, of these, 30% are also enrolled in an LDC service and receive up to 30 hours of early childhood education and care a week where a fee for service applies.

The average preschool attendance rate¹² for Aboriginal children is 57.2%, which is substantially lower than that of non-Aboriginal children at 87.6%, and is reflective of the significant challenges in closing the gap and engaging Aboriginal children in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education and strengthening transitions to school.

OSHC services are predominately available in urban settings for 5- to 12-year-olds. While there is increasing demand on these services to support parents' workforce participation, OSHC is typically not offered to preschool aged children in the NT due to educator to child ratio requirements and other risk considerations regarding mixed aged group care.

The Child Care Subsidy (CCS) model can further attribute to exclude the most vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts, albeit fees are dramatically reduced, due to the administrative and activity test requirements to determine a family's eligibility.

¹⁰ [Preschool Reform Agreement](#)

¹¹ [Preschool Education, 2022 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#)

¹² [Enrolment and attendance data | Department of Education](#)

Furthermore, workforce shortages and access to quality service provision also impacts other families and children living in very remote locations. The Isolated Children's Parents' Association continues to advocate access for all rural and remote children.

The NT considers CCS to be a mainstream model that has not proven successful in remote communities that have limited choice and access to services.

The NT has several targeted programs for children and families in remote and very remote communities where there is no mainstream ECEC market due to a lack of economy of scale inhibiting private investment in ECEC. These include:

- FaFT
 - An NT Government program in 55 sites, delivering place-based early learning and family support programs to build capacity of families and community members to support the healthy development of young children. This includes supporting children and families to prepare for preschool and lifelong learning
 - FaFT is delivered using a Team Teaching Model with a senior early childhood teacher working alongside an Aboriginal Family Liaison Officer from the community whose knowledge of language and culture informs the most appropriate ways to engage with the community to deliver the program. Approximately 46% of the FaFT workforce is Aboriginal
 - The program adopts an abecedarian approach to teach parents conversational reading with their children which also assists with literacy for parents and helps to establish employment pathways for young mothers. It also incorporates developmental screening of children using ASQ-TRAK¹³ and a referral process to allied health services where required. FaFT is jointly funded by the Australian Government under the NT Remote Aboriginal Investment Strategy¹⁴. FaFT is an unregulated service delivery model
- the Community Child Care Fund Restricted¹⁵ (CCCFR) services which operate primarily in remote and very remote areas, with the goal of increasing ECEC participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in a culturally safe and appropriate setting. It is part of the Closing the Gap measure funded by the Australian Government. 46 CCCFR services operate in the NT of which 41 are unregulated and not in scope of the NQF. Of the 41 services, 39 provide LDC for children aged from birth to 5 years
- supported playgroups which are provided to support children's learning and development, strengthen parenting capacity and build strong family and community relationships. These are funded by the Australian Government, are not regulated and are operated by non-government organisations
- remote mobile playgroups which provide guided and play-based learning to children that would otherwise not be able to access an ECEC service. There are 2 mobile services that cover part of the Top End. There are no mobile services for other parts of the NT. These are funded by the Australian Government, are not regulated and are operated by non-government organisations.

¹³ [Ages and Stages Questionnaire – Talking about raising Aboriginal kids](#)

¹⁴ [Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment | National Indigenous Australians Agency \(niaa.gov.au\)](#)

¹⁵ [Community Child Care Fund - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

Consideration on how to improve the provision of targeted initiatives that focus on supporting communities and parents to engage in the journey of their children's learning and development is a priority in remote contexts. Initiatives currently in place in the NT to support this include:

- CB¹⁶ which is a place based program, funded by the Australian Government and is a Closing the Gap measure. It provides funding for place-based initiatives that allow sites to develop their own approaches to learning and provides opportunity for learning models to be co-designed for the specific needs of the communities. There are currently 4 sites implementing CB in the NT, including Alice Springs, Galiwin'ku, Tennant Creek and Angurugu, with additional sites being established by the Australian Government
- Integrated CFCs¹⁷ which are designed to support holistic family and community care and education. The NT's 6 CFCs operated by the department were established to connect Aboriginal families to services that address community priorities and needs. These CFCs provide a single point of access to health, education and wellbeing services for the local community. They are primarily funded through states and territories, and grants from the Australian Government Indigenous Advancement Strategy and Stronger Communities for Children Program (for services such as cooking classes) and private stakeholders (such as Playgroup and Anglicare). The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities is responsible for the establishment of 11 additional CFCs which also target older children and families and focus on early prevention and keeping children out of child protection and youth justice systems
- Stronger Communities for Children¹⁸ (SCfC), which is funded by the Australian Government under 5-year funding agreements, is a program to implement place-based, community-led initiatives to support children and families, including supporting children to be school-ready through the provision of grants. SCfC is currently being delivered in over 10 communities in the NT.

Children and families in remote communities currently rely on NT Government provided preschool and FaFT programs, heavily subsidised CCCFR services and Australian Government funded playgroups for ECEC service delivery. Due to their size and program structure, most of these services fall out of scope of the NQF and with quality unable to be assessed against the National Quality Standard.

In a remote NT context, the need for quality ECEC has wider social implications than parental workforce participation, which drives market provision in urban and metropolitan populations. Efforts to address the disadvantage is paramount to support the foundations for children's development and learning. Evidence demonstrates that lower quality programs can have a negative effect on children's cognitive and language outcomes, levels of school readiness and increased behavioural problems.

Additionally, a siloed approach to funding is evident across the NT and presents ongoing challenges in the administration and management of services, particularly in remote and very remote communities. This includes the inequitable distribution of services and funding across communities. In most cases, communities have insufficient access to quality early childhood programs and services. However, the case studies below demonstrate 2 siloed funding arrangements resulting in competing servicing within some communities that are excessive to its needs.

¹⁶ [Connected Beginnings Program \(DOE\) | National Indigenous Australians Agency \(niaa.gov.au\)](https://www.niaa.gov.au/connected-beginnings-program)

¹⁷ [Early childhood support for remote children and families | NT.GOV.AU](https://www.nt.gov.au/early-childhood-support-remote-children-families)

¹⁸ [Stronger Communities for Children | National Indigenous Australians Agency \(niaa.gov.au\)](https://www.niaa.gov.au/stronger-communities-children)

Borroloola case study

Borroloola is a small, isolated township near the Gulf of Carpentaria area. It is about as isolated as any township in the NT can be. It has an approximate population of 755 residents and includes 3 camps within town and 3 outstations. The 2021 census data shows there are approximately 80 children aged from birth to 5 years living within town.

The following ECEC services/programs are operating for children aged from birth to 5 years of age:

- one Community Child Care Fund Restricted child care service (Australian Government [AG] funded)
- one preschool (NT Government funded) which has just been supported to come into scope for the 3-year-old preschool trials for this year
- one FaFT (AG funded)
- 2 playgroups (one AG funded delivered by local Aboriginal Organisation, one philanthropically funded).

Borroloola has been identified as a likely candidate for a CFC through the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities which targets older children and families.

Ngukurr case study

Ngukurr is a small community located in the Big Rivers Region, east of Katherine. Ngukurr has a very transient population throughout the year, when there are significant cultural events taking place, including ceremonies and funerals. There can be large influxes of people into community when events/ceremonies are held in Ngukurr or outflow of community if held in nearby communities.

Data from the 2021 census indicates that there were 1,003 people in Ngukurr. The median age was 23 and there were 238 families with an average of 3.6 children per family. The 2021 census data shows there are 100 children aged from birth to 5 years living within town.

The following early learning services/programs/initiatives are operating for children aged from birth to 5 years of age:

- one Community Child Care Fund Restricted childcare service (Australian Government [AG] funded)
- 2 playgroups (combine operations) (one AG and one NT Government funded)
- one preschool (NT Government funded)
- one Stronger Communities for Children initiative (AG funded)
- one Child and Family Centre (NT Government funded)

Additionally, establishment of a Connected Beginnings program is currently underway (AG funded).

The NT's Local Decision Making¹⁹ framework is facilitating a stronger working relationship between Aboriginal communities and government agencies to support self-determination. In an ECEC context, this framework can support working with communities to determine the scope of services they require, as opposed to this scope being determined by government funding initiatives.

Funding models require sufficient flexibility to support service integration and place-based approaches that will deliver quality outcomes. Current Child Care Subsidy arrangements cease to be effective outside Darwin and Alice Springs. In remote and very remote communities, the cost-of-service delivery is high due to factors including remoteness, housing availability, high levels of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and the complex needs of children and families. The terms and conditions of funding should not create a barrier to developing place-based solutions to achieving outcomes, particularly those that are community led. There is a need to build adaptable and flexible governance models that, while maintaining accountability for resourcing, enable services across all organisations to collaborate and share resources, including staff, to work most effectively to service their community. Competition and market-based approaches inhibit this approach in small communities.

While funding and service delivery models need some reform to improve access and equity in ECEC service provision across all communities, programs such as FaFT, CFCs, CB and SCfC are engaging many children and families in place-based learning environments. Additionally, strong educational and community leadership in preschools is developing beneficial learning habits for children, and many services are integrating local health and family services into their programs to support a range of child and family needs; and, high quality, structured and semi-structured, play-based preschool programs.

Within the national ECEC system, the NT has the highest proportion of unregulated ECEC services. The Australian Government has contracted the department to undertake desktop and face to face site visits to the 41 unregulated CCCFR services across the NT throughout 2023. This comprehensive audit will assess and determine each service's current mode of service delivery and capacity to transition into a regulatory framework should the opportunity arise.

Some identified barriers to meeting the following quality areas of the National Quality Standard:

- **Quality Area 4 – Staffing arrangements**
Services are experiencing challenges in employing staff with ECEC qualifications, additionally, access to registered training organisations is very limited and requires staff, who may have parenting and cultural responsibilities along with limited financial means to travel out of community. Training and qualifications do not often recognise or acknowledge the context, the cultural and linguistic knowledge of Aboriginal educators and the roles they play in upholding quality ECEC in community.
- **Quality Area 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities**
Where they exist, there is room for services to improve connections and integration with other ECEC services within community, to improve transitions for children and families and to better support their own quality practice. This included supporting children's transition between services and into school.
- **Quality Area 7 – Governance and leadership**
In the area of policies and procedures that support the health, safety and wellbeing of children, while services may have procedures in place, they are not at times developed or implemented in a way that enable local staff to understand and follow them.

¹⁹ [Local Decision Making \(nt.gov.au\)](https://www.nt.gov.au/education/local-decision-making/)

Economic growth, including through enabling workforce participation, particularly for women and contributing to productivity

The NT Government is working towards growing a \$40 billion economy by 2030²⁰. Workforce capacity and capability is critical to the success of any strategy, as the workforce is key to achieving improved outcomes. This includes efforts to address industrial matters such as pay, recruitment, training and conditions of employment.

While the Shaping Our Future National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy and Implementation Plan have been accelerated, it is a long-term strategy that, in itself, will not relieve current workforce pressures in the short term. These workforce pressures are even more prevalent across the NT and, in particular, remote and very remote contexts.

In the 2021 ECEC National Workforce Census, 57% of centre-based educators reported that they are paid at award rates, with 26% reporting wages of up to 10% above award, 6% reporting 10-25% above award and 2% reporting over 25% above award wages.²¹ With the Annual Market Salary Rate set by the Children's Services Award 2010 at between \$43,294 and \$55,245 per annum, pay and conditions continue to be a significant barrier to efforts to increase and retain a capable and effective ECEC workforce.

ECEC workforce turnover has been estimated at between 20% and 40% per year, with the lower figure more representative of metropolitan services, and the higher more representative of rural and remote services²² which incorporates all services operating in the NT. Workforce implications has an ongoing effect on educator to child ratios, resulting in long wait lists and services not operating at full capacity.

The Temporary Skilled Migration Income Threshold (TSMIT) will increase from \$53,900 to \$70,000 from 1 July 2023 which will have a significant effect on ECEC workforce shortages as the cost of employing migrants under the terms of TSMIT will be unsustainable, particularly in regional and remote locations where skilled migration is heavily relied upon to meet workforce needs.

The NT's Designated Area Migration Agreement (DAMA) is currently under negotiation. The NT DAMA allows for concessional arrangements to some standard criteria like English language and age requirements, and includes a 10% concession to the TSMIT. With the increase to TSMIT, the new concessional threshold will be \$63,000. This is likely to exclude a number of critical occupations, such as ECEC workers for which the market salary in the NT falls well below \$63,000.

Significant barriers to achieving pay and conditions commensurate with the work and qualification requirements of the regulated ECEC sector include low levels of unionisation and difficulty in leveraging the industrial relations pathways to increase pay and conditions across the multi-faceted ECEC sector. These pathways include work value and equal remuneration, which are both the jurisdiction of the Fair Work Commission and supported bargaining. There is also the overarching issue of who would pay for a sector wide wage increase and through what funding mechanism it could be facilitated. If a pay increase was supplemented through CCS, there would be the risk that services would still pass the cost onto parents given there is no current cost regulation mechanisms in the sector.

²⁰ [Driving a \\$40 Billion Economy by 2030 | NT Rebound](#)

²¹ Social Research Centre (2022). *2021 ECEC National Workforce Census*. Department of Education, Skills and Employment. <https://www.education.gov.au/child-care-package/early-childhood-data-and-reports/national-workforce-census>

²² Fenech, et al, (2022). Attracting, retaining and sustaining early childhood teachers: an ecological conceptualisation of workforce issues and future research directions. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 49(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00424-6>

The limited ECEC workforce is also reducing the capacity of services, ie number of child places based on ratio requirements, and is particularly problematic in the NT townships of Alice Springs and Katherine. This in turn is inhibiting workforce participation in these communities, including the ability for professionals who provide other essential services such as policing, health, social services and education to return to work after having children.

Significant investment is occurring through the operational structures of both FaFT and CFCs which work to build local workforce capacity. FaFT is co-delivered by an early childhood qualified teacher and a local community and cultural expert in first language, with 46% of Aboriginal staff currently engaged in delivering FaFT programs.

In 2022, the NT Government invested approximately \$3.6m in ECEC training. This funding subsidised 826 students to study the nationally accredited certificate and diploma level ECEC qualifications. Of those enrolled in 2022, 13% were enrolled in remote locations and 29% were Aboriginal students. The number of students enrolled in ECEC qualifications increased from 699 in 2020 to 826 in 2022 (an increase of 18%). The increase in enrolments reflects the increased demand for child care workers in the NT.

Also in 2022, the NT Early Childhood Education and Care Apprenticeship Support Program commenced in Tennant Creek to help increase the number of qualified Aboriginal child care workers. The program attracted 19 enrolments in Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care, who will complete their qualification at the end of July 2023.

In January 2023, the jointly funded Fee Free TAFE was launched by the Australian Government and state and territory governments and includes ECEC qualifications. Fee Free TAFE is available through Charles Darwin University, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and private registered training organisations.

There can be significant barriers to accessing training and gaining mandatory ECEC qualifications from outside of Darwin and Alice Springs. Currently, many ECEC educators living and working in remote and very remote locations can only access and participate in formal training and professional development that support the acquisition of qualifications by travelling to Darwin or Alice Springs for extended periods, multiple times over the period of the completion of the course. This can require small services to close during this time as they cannot maintain adequate staffing and educators required to travel can be affected by family and cultural commitments and health implications which can in turn affect educators' availability and engagement in completing the qualification.

Additionally, training may not appropriately recognise the unique context and cultural and language considerations in which educators are providing education and care to vulnerable and disadvantaged children. The difficulty in attracting and maintaining qualified educators to these services and supporting local educators to gain qualifications beyond a Certificate III level continues to affect the quality and quantity of ECEC services in remote NT. Additionally, this is also a barrier for unregulated services to build their capacity to successfully transition into a regulatory framework should the opportunity arise in the future.

Currently CCCFR providers and schools must rely on the recruitment and retention of a qualified educator to manage the day-to-day operations of their education and care provision, however issues such as housing and staff retention are identified system level barriers to achieving this consistently.

Outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families and children and families experiencing disability

In NT Aboriginal communities, teachers and assistant teachers learn, plan, teach and assess together as a teaching team. This approach is required because English is not spoken at home for these children. Therefore, the approach must be culturally responsive and pedagogically strong to ensure that relevant local knowledge is linked with the curriculum and informs pedagogy. Classroom teachers in these contexts are required to gain an understanding of Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing and to incorporate these into their teaching practices. The willingness of teachers recruited to remote services to learn about the culture of the local community and develop productive working relationships underpins their capacity to both live and teach effectively in a remote context.

Teachers also require the capability to work with a broader team of professionals to meet the needs of each child, for example, allied health, and incorporate specialised expertise into practice to support children's learning.

Language and literacy are key domains in early childhood development. The NT has a high proportion of Aboriginal children who speak a language or dialect other than English, and who live in communities where English may not be commonly used by community members.

For these children, access to education and educational resources in their own language supports the development of skills that are transferrable to English literacy and is critical for their early development. The provision of high quality, ECEC in Aboriginal languages and in English is critical. This includes access to:

- professional development for local Aboriginal staff who speak the languages of children and understand the local culture
- the development of resources to support early oral and written literacy development in Aboriginal languages
- the professional development of early childhood educators and teachers to teach English as an additional language or dialect in ECEC settings.

Access to education in Aboriginal languages and in creoles (such as Kriol) may also improve the engagement of children and families in ECEC and school as it reduces language and barriers and acknowledges and values the contribution that local language and culture make to children's learning and development.

Development of resources in First Languages requires funding, time, staff and linguistic expertise. Organisations such as the Indigenous Literacy Foundation and NT Government funded school models such as the Literature Production Centres based at a few schools have produced resources for literacy and language development in First Languages – namely Warlpiri, Djambarrpuyngu and Dhuwaya. Government funded language centres (such as Meigim Kriol Stongbala – Ngukurr) also support this work at times.

The department recognises that the teaching workforce needs to be reflective of the school communities that it serves. For the NT, this means more Aboriginal people in the teaching workforce.

Research shows that Aboriginal students perform better under the guidance of Aboriginal teachers. Further still, local Aboriginal teachers have an ongoing commitment to their communities and are highly valued leaders because of their deep knowledge of local languages and context. The NT is implementing a range of initiatives²³ including the new Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education program that is aimed at providing tailored and supported pathways to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers and sustainable models to teaching within identified local communities.

The department offers a suite of online professional learning resources that are built into the induction process to help equip teachers in providing safe and supportive environments that foster student learning and wellbeing. This includes a focus on: Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder; Autism Spectrum Disorder; Supporting Student Wellbeing and Mental Health; Understanding and Supporting Behaviour; Understanding Hearing Loss; and Attachment and Trauma.

The NT Government's *Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong: 10-Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory 2023-2033* includes reviewing systems and enabling organisations to embed culturally- and child-safe and inclusive practices and policies.

Services delivered in silos often disengage vulnerable families because of the difficulties in navigating each service's administrative requirements. In response, models of integrated early childhood services have been emerging and growing across the NT. Particularly the NT Government Child and Family Centre Integrated Service Model; the Australian Government Connected Beginnings model; and a variety of community driven place based initiatives.

The factors that contribute to the increasing numbers of vulnerable children are complex and interconnected, therefore, interventions need to be integrated and place based. Place based integrated service delivery should be evidence informed but tailored to the needs of children and families in a community context and in a state of continual improvement.

The key unit of efficacy is the community. Children and families exist within communities. An early childhood integrated service will only be successful if it places a high-level focus on children, families and communities in any planning undertaken for improvement.

Service delivery for Aboriginal children and families in some remote communities has been relatively uncoordinated. Many hard-to-reach families have had limited access to the complete suite of child and family services. An integrated approach to delivery service models will improve access not only to ECEC services and programs but also complementary health and family support for children and their families and improve their capacity to engage, learn and succeed at school.

The efficiency and effectiveness of government investment in the sector

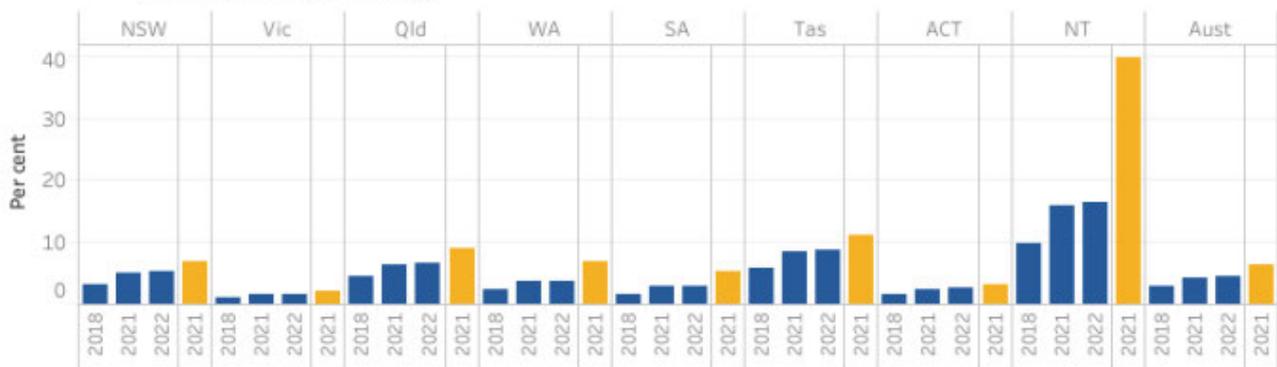
As demonstrated below, more than half of the NT's Aboriginal children aged from birth to 5 years old do not attend a CCS approved ECEC service²⁴.

²³ [Aboriginal Educator Workforce Initiatives | Department of Education](#)

²⁴ [Report on Government services 2023](#)

■ In child care services ■ In the community; at 30 June

Figure 3.2a Measure 1: Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-5 years old attending CCS approved child care services compared with their representation in the community by jurisdiction, by year (a), (b)



Source: table 3A.11

The NT Government’s commitment to provide quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children is reinforced through its Everyone Together: Aboriginal Affairs Strategy 2019-2029²⁵, Education NT Strategy 2021-2025²⁶ and 10-Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the NT²⁷.

The *Education NT Strategy 2021-2025* seeks to build partnerships with students, educators, leaders and communities across the NT and place a high-level focus on children and students in a vision to become the most improving education system in Australia. *Building the Foundations for Learning* is a priority under this plan that aims to ensure that children will have a strong sense of identify and wellbeing and start school as confident and involved learners by providing them with access to 2 years of quality early learning services.

To help inform the development of a reformed early childhood system in the NT, the department:

- has partnered with Nous and Victoria University to review preschool²⁸ as part of the broader early childhood system in the NT. The review is intended to shape the future of preschool delivery in the NT. A final report is scheduled to be delivered mid-2023
- is trialing 3-year-old preschool across 6 government schools in urban and regional areas of the NT. Noting, children in very remote areas are already eligible for 3-year-old preschool under existing policy. The trial is continuing in 2023 to inform future policy considerations
- has engaged Nous to undertake a review of the FaFT program to help ensure it continues to be fit for purpose. This review is expected to be completed by September 2023
- has been contracted by the Australian Government Department of Education to undertake desktop and face to face site visits to the 41 unregulated CCCFR services across the NT to assess and determine their current mode of service delivery and their capacity to transition into a regulatory framework. Currently, the quality requirements of these unregulated services are articulated through the 2017 Ministers Rules.

²⁵ [Everyone Together - Aboriginal Affairs Strategy - 2019-2029 \(nt.gov.au\)](#)

²⁶ [Education NT Strategy 2021-2025](#)

²⁷ [10 Year Generational Strategy for Children and Young People - Reform Management Office](#)

²⁸ [NT Preschool Review discussion paper](#)

The NT has scholarships to the value of \$15,000 per year for Aboriginal people in urban, regional and remote NT locations who are currently studying or are eligible to enrol in initial teacher education courses at an NT higher education institution.

The NT's Children and Families Tripartite Forum was established in mid-2018 to address an identified need for structured and sustained high-level engagement between the NT Government, the Australian Government and community sector regarding children experiencing vulnerability, young people and families and child protection and youth justice issues.

The Tripartite Forum has developed the 10-Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the NT in response to a recommendation by the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children.

Although governments and related departments have invested considerable effort in attaining improved outcomes, the challenges on the ground are substantial. The NT's unique contexts, universal and flat rate national funding models are insufficient to achieve comparable outcomes in remote and very remote communities.

The vast and proportional levels of vulnerability and disadvantage, geographic remoteness, small population and thin market means that service provision in the NT is particularly costly in comparison to other jurisdictions. Remote communities rely heavily on investment from all levels of government to access essential services, economic development opportunities, local employment and social benefits.

Current funding arrangements are a barrier to promoting more efficient integrated and place-based service provision. This is particularly relevant in remote and very remote communities where the cost-of-service delivery is high due to factors including remoteness, high levels of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and the complex needs of children and families.

Funding models require sufficient flexibility to support service integration and place-based approaches that will deliver outcomes. That is, the terms and conditions of funding should not create a barrier to developing place-based solutions to achieving outcomes, particularly those that are community led. There is a need to build adaptable and flexible governance models that, while maintaining accountability for resourcing, enable services across all organisations to collaborate and share resources, including staff, to work most effectively to service their community.

Furthermore, while needs based funding is a standard model for supporting children with additional needs within the schooling context, the ECEC funding system does not accommodate the differentiated needs of individuals or the additional costs associated with providing equitable education and care. Limitations in the National Disability Insurance Scheme include its inability to integrate funding or support with ECEC service provision.