

14 February 2024

Early Childhood Education and Care  
Productivity Commission  
Locked Bag 2, Collins St East  
MELBOURNE VIC 8003

**Submission on the Early Childhood Education and Care Inquiry draft report: 'A path to universal early childhood education and care'**

Dear Treasurer and Commission members,

On behalf of Community Hubs Australia, thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the recently released draft report of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Inquiry, 'A path to universal early childhood education and care'.

As stated in your draft report, ECEC is critical to the wellbeing of families, with many relying on ECEC services, or on a combination of formal and informal care, to participate in the labour force, access study and training opportunities, or volunteer. We commend the work of the Commission and have taken the opportunity to provide our input with respect to addressing the barriers to ECEC uptake. The information below details how the National Community Hubs Program supports positive outcomes in several of the areas highlighted in the report.

**National Community Hubs Program**

The National Community Hubs Program was established in 2011 to give children and families a safe place to connect with each other, essential services and their schools. At its core, the program is designed to build community, reduce isolation and create bonds of friendship, empathy, and understanding. This is the fabric that nurtures a positive, functioning society and helps form a more socially cohesive Australia.

Each hub is managed by the primary school in which it is based. Decisions about the way the hub operates and the programs and activities it offers are made at the local level, providing the flexibility for hub leaders, who are employed by their schools, to develop the space and program offerings that best address the needs of their host school and local community.

Within each local government area (LGA), specialist support agencies are employed to play an important role in ensuring hubs meet the needs of their local communities. By sharing local knowledge, and access to services and partnership opportunities, support agencies help shape the impact of hubs across Australia. In each local region, support coordinators encourage connection, bringing together local hub schools to share knowledge and to learn from each other. In turn, this strengthens our networks' impact, ensuring good practice is shared across the country.



In 2023, our network of 100 hubs across New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, and Victoria:

- worked with 14,061 families
- ran 7,062 children's literacy and language, and playgroup and early years activities
- offered English classes and activities to 1,540 participants
- partnered with 151 organisations to deliver early childhood activities and programs
- supported hub participants to secure 422 jobs, and
- made 8,952 referrals to external support services including 1,997 referrals to early childhood services, including maternal child health, early intervention, and preschool services.

To learn more about the people who come to community hubs, in 2023 we conducted a national census, finding a remarkable consistency in responses, regardless of location or the cultural diversity of participants. The primary reasons people come to community hubs is to spend time with other people, improve their English language skills, access playgroup for their children, gain skills, and learn about social services.

More than 90% of our hub participants are women, almost 80% speak a language other than English at home, 88% have at least one dependent child at home, and 40% have pre-school aged children. Of those with pre-school aged children, 85% bring them to the hub, half of which don't take their children to services outside of the community hub. Hubs reach people who are otherwise not accessing services.

We also know that community hubs deliver social benefits to local communities. To quantify the social impact of community hubs, Deloitte Access Economics undertook a comprehensive social return on investment (SROI) evaluation, concluding that in 2023, the program generated approximately \$65.7 million in social benefits to Australian society. This represents an SROI of 3.5, or a return of \$3.50 for every \$1 invested. The SROI also found that hub activities contributed to improved early childhood development outcomes for children participating in hubs, valued at \$7.3 million. This is further evidence that the benefits delivered by community hubs go well beyond those that participate in our programs.

### **Addressing the barriers to ECEC uptake**

The goal of a community hub is to improve the social and economic outcomes of local families and individuals, particularly those from culturally diverse backgrounds. Hubs are based on a proven place-based and people-centred model that builds connections and provides a safe environment, especially for women and children, that is uniquely tailored to the needs of local communities. By embedding hubs in local primary schools – and using existing school infrastructure – hubs help bridge the gap between families and the wider community, connecting families with each other, their schools, local services and support, and provide a gateway to health, wellbeing and education services.

Hubs deliver classes, programs and activities that adapt as circumstances and local community needs change over time, from activities encouraging English conversation and connection to more formal training designed to build work-ready skills. This flexible approach ensures hubs remain relevant, delivering positive outcomes for participants.

### *English language skills*

Hubs provide people with the opportunity to learn English, regardless of how long they've been in Australia or how they arrived here. Developing English language competency is an important area of focus for many hub participants. Time and again, we see the confidence, feeling of empowerment, and social connectedness of participants completely transform once language barriers are overcome. English language skills enable parents to better support their child's education, engage in social activities, gain new qualifications and skills, and access opportunities for volunteering and employment.

For culturally diverse families, a major barrier to accessing ECEC is language. With many hub participants – especially those new to Australia – unable to access formal English language classes due to competing priorities when starting life in a new country, community hubs offer a safe place to learn and practise English when participants are ready. Depending on community need, hub participants can access conversational English programs that build confidence and competency, or more formal learning opportunities, such as the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), which some hubs offer onsite. In 2023, hubs worked with 100 partners across our network to deliver conversational English classes and more formal English programs to 1,540 participants.

Some hubs also provide access to childminding ensuring parents can focus on their own learning while their children are cared for in a safe, nurturing environment. Other community hubs offer mother and child English programs, encouraging parents and children to learn together.

### *Access to early childhood services*

Embedding community hubs in primary schools supports school readiness and connects families to their local school communities. When children start school ready to learn, the impact is positive for the children, their families, the school, and local community. As previously mentioned, our hub census told us, of those families with pre-school aged children, 85% are bringing them to the hub and half of these don't take their children anywhere else.

Many families who come to hubs have yet to access any other early childhood services. Sometimes, this can be due to a lack of knowledge about what services are available and how to access them. Hubs offer engaging early childhood programs including playgroup, a cornerstone program that provides instant connection for children and parents. Playgroup provides an opportunity for hub leaders to share information and refer families to services they need, including maternal child health, speech and occupational therapy, and pre-school services. In 2023, hubs made 1,997 referrals to early childhood services like these. In addition, community hubs worked with 151 partner organisations in to deliver early childhood activities and programs within the familiar, safe environment of the hub.

### *Culturally responsive services*

Engagement and connection are at the heart of every community hub. Our hubs seek to engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families, particularly women with young children, and connect them with each other, their host schools, local support services and the wider community.

Although hubs are not service providers, they connect people to existing services in the local community. With the support and contributions of close to 500 organisations last year - organisations who facilitate programs, offer counselling and clinical support, as well as donating

funding or resources - hubs are places of connection and support. Without these local partnerships, hubs would not exist.

This approach can be seen at Wyndam Park Primary School hub in Victoria, where the School Paediatric Outreach Clinic, delivered in partnership with Mercy Health, is providing a much-needed service to the school community and delivering better health and educational outcomes for students. The clinic has introduced many school families to the hub and connected them with additional hub activities including English, craft and access to the food pantry.

By bringing health services like these to the hub, children are less likely to miss school and families are supported in a familiar environment. This ease of access to clinicians in the hub within the school means children requiring further review and follow-up are more likely to attend appointments. One of the hub participants originating from Myanmar shared "This program is excellent. When children are sick, it is difficult to explain the situation due to the language barrier, making it hard to follow up with a specialist. We also need to figure out how to seek specialist doctors".

#### *Workforce considerations*

The hub census shows that 40% of participants with pre-school aged children would like to be working more than they are now. The inability to increase their hours of paid work, impacts earning potential and creates a barrier for many families trying to access ECEC, especially single parents or those on a single income.

In 2023, hubs generated an estimated \$17 million in social benefits associated with supporting people to find employment. Hubs host practical accredited and pre-accredited programs and offer a variety of culturally responsive life skills such as preparing for citizenship tests, resume writing and interview skills, completing vocational certification, and participating in TAFE accredited courses. In 2023, 2,663 formal and informal vocational training sessions were delivered with 1,154 referrals made to education and training services. Hubs also worked with 134 partner organisations to deliver work-ready skills.

In New South Wales, a teacher's aide course offered through Bankstown Public School in Canterbury Bankstown and delivered by Sutherland Community College has enhanced educational opportunities for hub participants by providing training as a School Learning Support Officer (SLSO). As a participant noted, "In work placement we learned, [got] practical experience, [and] many tips from experienced SLSOs which helps us in future work. While doing this course, I got interested in making my career in the Education Department. I want to see myself working as an SLSO in one of the schools."

For many women, there are challenges in returning to the workforce, especially after spending time at home caring for young children. However, for women from culturally diverse backgrounds, additional barriers can prevent them from obtaining work, including language and culture, a lack of recognition for qualifications and experience obtained in their country of birth, and no professional or social networks on which to call.

Hubs empower women by helping to build their confidence and overcome barriers as they pursue further study or look for work or volunteering opportunities. In 2023 43,000 hours of volunteering took place in hubs, generating social benefits valued at \$0.5 million. An example of the impact volunteering can have is the story of a young mother from Ethiopia who brought her son to

playgroup at her local community hub. After her son started school, she volunteered at the hub, helping with playgroup and homework club. The mother then gained a diploma in early education and care and is now employed at the kindergarten, located next to the hub.

I welcome the opportunity to further discuss the National Community Hubs Program and our role in securing universal early childhood education and care for all, especially those in our community who face barriers as outlined in our response. I also extend a warm invitation to the Treasurer and Commission members to visit a community hub, talking first-hand with hub leaders, school leadership, and participants about how community hubs are helping build a strong pathway to universal early childhood education and care.

I commend the work of the Commission and look forward to reviewing the final report.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Dr Sonja Hood".

**Dr Sonja Hood**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**Community Hubs Australia**