

Review the access pathways across the Early Years system, to understand how effective and efficient they are in providing timely and quality supports for all children in Australia, especially in areas of extreme need and geographic scarcity.

What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable/or disadvantaged circumstances?

The Early Years system is highly complex, with many overlapping points between policy settings and across jurisdictions. A key part of this system is the ECEC, which serves as a critical foundation for determining a child's trajectory in life and for supporting families to work, study and participate in their community.

However, more needs to be done to ensure the benefits of ECEC reach more children across the country. Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data from 2021 shows that 42.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and 25.3% of children from a language background other than English are considered developmentally vulnerable in one or more children's development domains by the time they start school (AEDC, 2021). Furthermore, when compared to children living in areas of high levels of advantage, children in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities are three times more likely to be vulnerable on two or more domains (AEDC, 2021).

The Commonwealth should ensure that there is equity in access. Across Australia, many children and families, particularly those in regional and remote areas, and families experiencing disadvantage, are unable to access quality ECEC due to a myriad of other financial and non-financial barriers. This unequal access to and participation in quality ECEC alongside unequal geographic and demographic provision means that the system can perpetuate disadvantage.

Funding models and levers play an important role in supporting systems to achieve their objectives. In addition to supporting policy objectives around affordability, accessibility-efficiency and accountability of the system by influencing the way in which funders, service providers, and system participants interact with each other. Importantly, funding models cannot achieve these objectives in isolation but must work with all components of the broader system architecture (including policy, regulation, sharing of evidence, monitoring and evaluation, and governance structures) to produce an environment that enables and ideally drives the desired outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

We recommend that the Government reviews current funding models to ensure the right funding mix is in place, so all children and families can access services they need from the Early Years system. The Front Project's (2022) analysis of potential funding models and levers for change in ECEC is a useful resource to support this work.

What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

There are many areas where the Strategy could encourage improved coordination and collaboration in policymaking. A key facet is the need to work with families and children to ensure their voices are heard and their needs properly understood. We encourage a greater focus on consultation processes at the 'street-level', including models of participative governance and community building. This approach will encourage and legitimize micro-level feedback loop systems into existing policymaking infrastructures. This approach will also empower public sector workforces whose jobs involve regular contact with the beneficiaries of the Early Years system.

Building from this, there are some specific areas of focus involving the need to identify and improve infrastructure to provide services at the point of demand, expanding funding for connected services feeding into the delivery of the system, such as transport and development services, and driving these processes with comprehensive change management plans identifying critical needs of key stakeholders, including service providers, families and children.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

In collaboration with key stakeholders, develop and fund comprehensive implementation and change management plans identifying critical needs of key stakeholders, including service providers, families, and children so that information and resources are provided at time-sensitive points and all stakeholders have the information and resources they need to make informed decisions.

What principles should be included in the Strategy?

This strategy must focus clearly on children in its scope and intent. A successful and thriving Early Years system is one that centres on the timeless needs of children. An emphasis on children is a core, non-negotiable feature of what the Early Years system is, what it must be, and how it functions.

This strategy also presents a compelling opportunity for the government to deepen its understanding and application of systems stewardship to embrace the unique opportunity facing the Early Years system. This is a chance to rethink governance with a whole system approach, emphasising the importance of a wellbeing economy. This central principle would reflect a meaningful commitment to seeing more children and families thriving, where their basic material needs are met through equitable access and inclusive communities.

System stewardship reflects an important model and approach to the sustainable governance of the system. Our research indicates that system stewardship provides an opportunity to improve the health, performance, and efficiency of the ECEC system by uniting the sector towards common goals because "system stewardship presents a more fundamental shift and requires a reimagining and redefining of the roles, relationships, and rules across all elements of the system" (The Front Project, 2022).

An important concept in system stewardship is the idea of multiple stewards, where no single actor has complete and total control over the direction of all facets of a system. While there are key stewardship positions in the Early Years system, including fundamental roles for ensuring quality standards, regulatory compliance, and child protection and safety standards, establishing a national approach to system stewardship would allow for a shared vision and mutually agreed-upon responsibilities for meeting the system's objectives (The Front Project, 2022).

The Front Project believes that a commitment to system stewardship will see visible transformation of the Early Years system, making it more equitable, operating with a more aligned vision, and reducing siloing across system actors. Furthermore, we will see increased transparency and collaboration – fundamental attributes to encouraging higher levels of system and service-level innovations. Taking this approach would also encourage accountability structures that are distributed more evenly and equitably across the system, delivering on children's and families' needs.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

The Front Project recommends the Government incorporate a system stewardship approach into the Strategy, to ensure better coordination and collaboration for the Early Years system.

Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

While there are several areas where research and evidence could enhance the Early Years Strategy, we encourage a focus on data transparency and accountability, as well as developing clear evidence-based decision-making pathways to support place-based initiatives.

Regarding the first area, navigating the complexity of the Early Years system requires a clear and actionable commitment to enhancing data linkage between system actors. This would help protect and deliver on entitlements that follow children through their interactions with the Early Years system. This would also enhance the quality of the system itself, providing reliable and secure accountability structures to underpin an effective Early Years system.

The second area of focus is to develop processes to support the rollout of new policy initiatives that learn from local, community-based experiences. While stewardship encourages a more distributed view of accountability across the system, it is important to recognize that place-based approaches can thrive.

However, we lack the necessary long-term, rigorous evidence to demonstrate how and why place-based approaches work. This gap is critical – while seeking reforms in the Early Years is important, they need to be informed by evidence-informed practices. Establishing such a framework would support the Early Years system, embracing local voices as a key part of thriving communities and developing new services

RECOMMENDATION 7:

The Government should develop a strategic approach to data transparency across the Early Years system. This would help all system actors to implement better service delivery with timely, accurate data, while providing safeguards and accountability on data across the system.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we welcome the opportunity to submit our recommendations to the Early Years Strategy. We see this consultation as a pivotal moment in shaping how the Early Years system will deliver and support the needs of children in Australia. This system is highly complex, and while it exists to serve the needs of children and families, we must ensure this Strategy sets up all system actors and beneficiaries for success. By focusing on key ideas, such as universality, data linkage, and funding models, we believe the strategy will be well-set to do this. We also encourage a system stewardship approach to governance, which can open up better pathways for collaboration and accountability structures. We encourage the Commonwealth Government to consider our recommendations in full.

References

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