



the
Front
Project

**IMPACT SUMMARY
REPORT**

2020 – 2021

Clear Horizon

Introduction

The Front Project is an independent national enterprise working to create positive change in Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. We believe that improving the quality of our nation's early childhood education system will give all children the opportunity to thrive, regardless of the challenges they face. Beyond this, it will help build a smarter and more successful Australia. We work with government, business and the early learning sector to improve outcomes for children and, in turn, increase the short and long-term gains for Australia.

This report highlights our progress and impact in the last financial year (2020-21). It summarises the findings from the more detailed evaluation report produced by Clear Horizon Consulting.

FINDINGS



The review of this year's work demonstrated that the Front Project had **impressive reach and influence** through its **unique position** as an independent body with **strong relationships across the sector**. Throughout 2020-21, we **pivoted to strategically respond to the COVID-19** pandemic by leveraging our existing reputation as a trustworthy, sensible and pragmatic organisation.



The organisation was able to make a **significant contribution to changes in the ECEC system** through its work with teachers and educators through the Upskill Program and Online Community, working with sector leaders through the Apiary, and through organisation-wide efforts to engage government, businesses and amplify families' and children's voices.

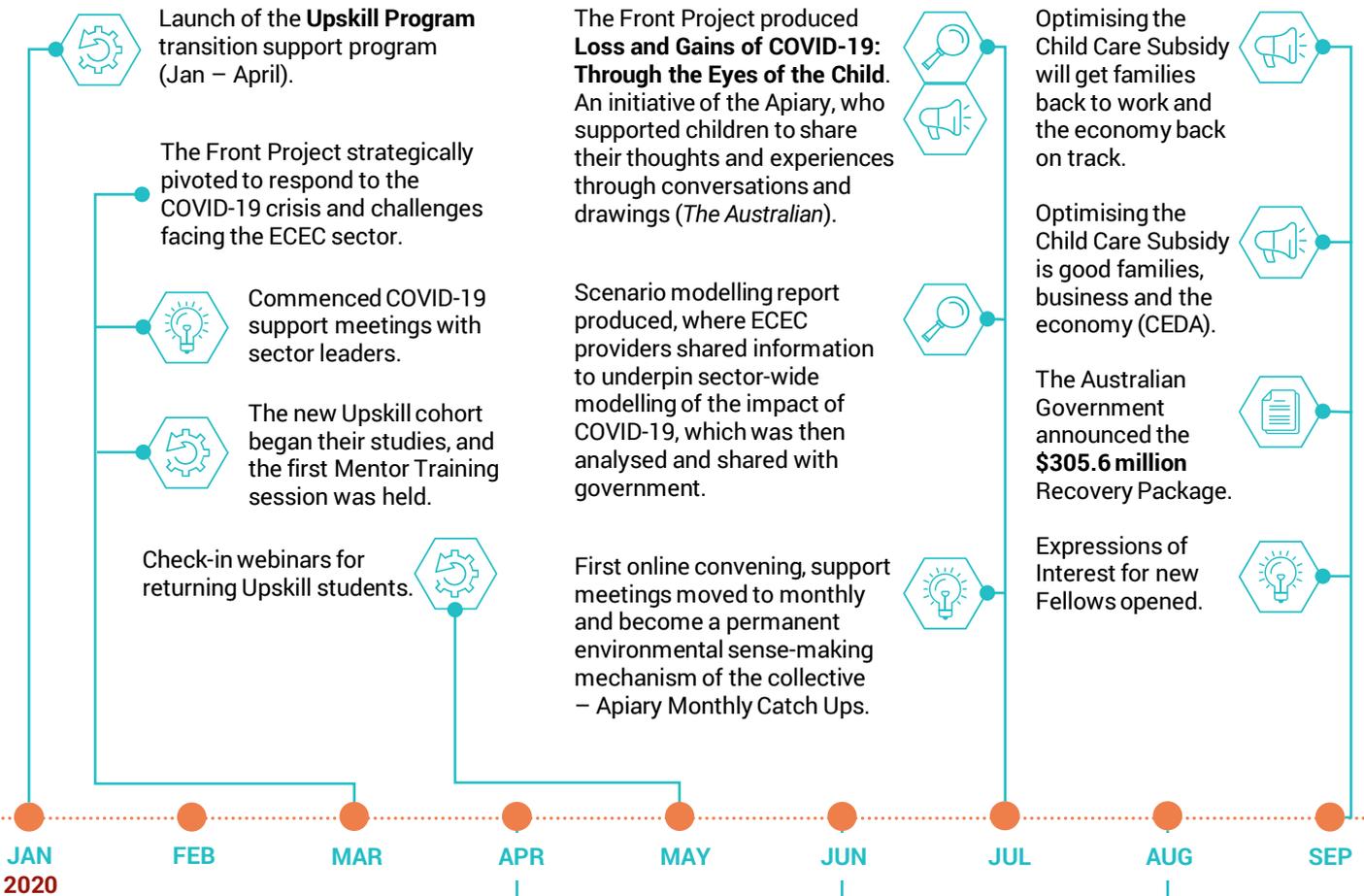


Highlights include our work to influence changes to the Child Care Subsidy in the Federal Government's budget and the recent securing of funding for a collaboration to undertake a multi-year evaluation of the rollout of 3-year-old kindergarten programs in Victoria. Over the past year, the Apiary has also been an important support for Fellows feeling the effects of COVID-19, providing a place to share experiences during a time of unprecedented challenge for the sector, as well as collaborating on initiatives such as gathering children's perspectives and experiences. The Upskill Program successfully launched its transition support program for students in collaboration with G8.



The review of the past year provided the Front Project with the opportunity to reflect on the success of our relational approach, and the value of our systems change strategy that works with diverse stakeholders across the sector to effect change. For us, a key learning has been that it is **important to continue on our systems change track**, with a focus on targeted activities that cut across multiple strategic imperatives to ultimately improve outcomes for children in Australia. These insights will inform our future strategy as we continue to leverage opportunities to ensure the ECEC system better supports children and families, especially following the effects of COVID-19.

Highlights of 2020 – 2021



JAN 2021

- The policy and public discourse changed around ECEC through the pandemic, with the narrative and mindsets around ECEC shifting from viewing ECEC as babysitting to an essential service facilitating both workforce participation and education.

FEB

- Second Mentor Training session.

MAR

- The workforce survey idea was seeded in The Apiary and picked up by the Research and Policy team.

APR

- The Front Project surveyed over **1000 parents and carers** of young children about their experiences with ECEC and what had changed during COVID-19.
- A West Australian article referred to in Parliament, **The Front Project survey reveals parents and carers' concerns as childcare relief nears end**, detailed the results of the Front Project's survey.

MAY

- The Front Project released **Early learning and COVID-19: Experiences of teachers and educators at the start of the pandemic**, sharing the results from almost 1500 teachers and educators.

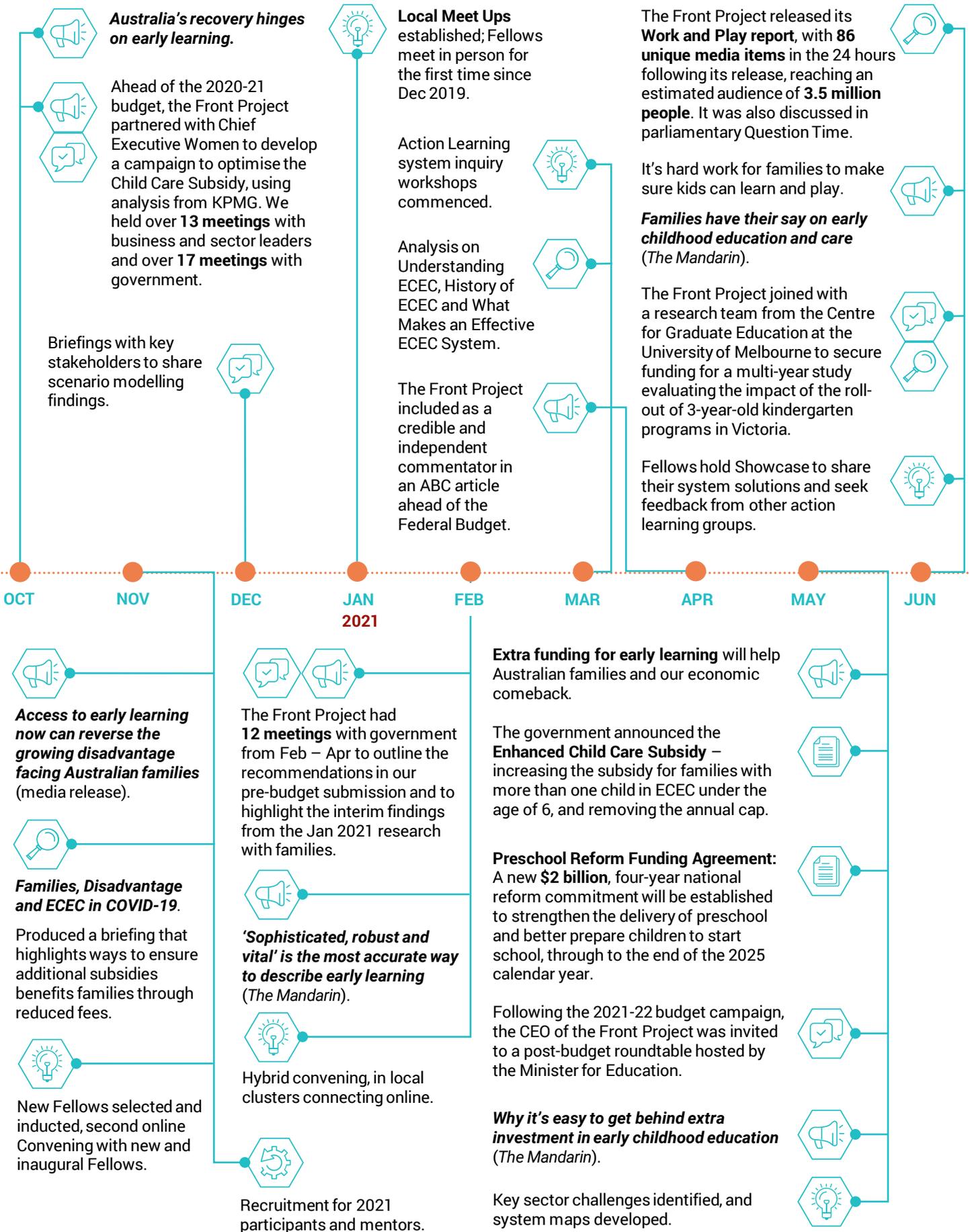
JUN

- Early learning is not just good for children, it is good for our country** (*The Mandarin*).

 UPSKILL PROGRAM & ONLINE COMMUNITY	 THE APIARY	 MEDIA CAMPAIGN
 RESEARCH	 POLICY ENGAGEMENT	 POLICY CHANGE

AUG

- Check-in webinars for all cohorts.



Key Insights

THE FRONT PROJECT'S SYSTEMS CHANGE APPROACH

The Front Project draws on the development and practice of systems thinking for social change. Systems thinking for social change is about addressing the root causes of social problems, which are often intractable and embedded in networks of cause and effect. It is an intentional process designed to fundamentally alter the components and structures that cause the system to behave in a certain way.

The Front Project creates impact by being both an actor and stakeholder in the ECEC system, as well as an intermediary. This allows us to fill two distinct, and at times overlapping, roles – to directly fill 'gaps' in the sector (for example, upskilling the workforce) and to build and develop the sector as a whole. System intermediaries are individual people or organisations that amplify the efforts of others. This can be done in a number of ways (as shown below).



Validation of the Front Project's targeted and relational systems change approach

The success of our approach outlined below demonstrates that programmatic responses to system-level issues are not as effective as working with diverse stakeholders – both people inside the ECEC sector and those who intersect with it – in different ways to effect change at all levels of the system. Our ability to leverage relationships and systems insights across the different workstreams is proving to be an effective way of working to create systems change.

The Front Project as an intermediary and actor: contribution to the Child Care Subsidy (CCS)

CONTRIBUTION

SMALL

MODERATE

SIGNIFICANT

The evaluation found that the Front Project likely had a significant contribution to the CCS

In some cases, we work both as an intermediary and an actor for maximum impact. An example of this is the campaign to change the childcare subsidy (CCS). In early May 2021, the Australian government pledged **\$1.7 billion** to optimise the CCS – in particular, to lift the CCS to a maximum of 95 per cent for second and subsequent children and to remove the cap for households with an income of more than \$189k.

This significant policy announcement followed a year of targeted and coordinated advocacy by organisations including the Front Project and national business bodies like Chief Executive Women and the Business Council of Australia.

The Front Project worked as an actor by working directly with government to share research and potential policy options. We also worked as an intermediary by convening the sector to tackle the issue – particularly by mobilising business groups and industry bodies. Sector stakeholders reflected that without the work of the Front Project on this policy area, the 2021 budget may not have included the policy changes.

THE FRONT PROJECT AS AN INTERMEDIARY AND FIELD CATALYST

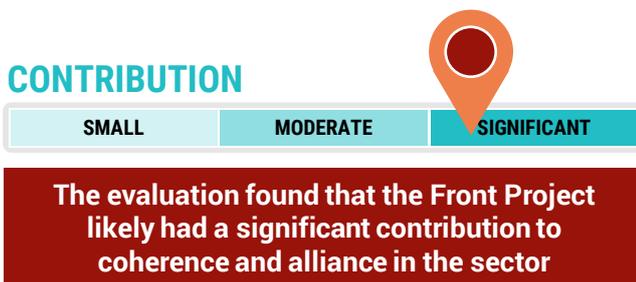
The Front Project's ability to build relationships across the sector

Through using a targeted approach to engaging stakeholders, we were able to build, strengthen and leverage trusting relationships that yielded mutual benefits and impacts across the sector in 2020/21. Our ability to build relationships across diverse stakeholders (ECEC bodies, service providers, universities, government and business) is unique in the sector and stakeholder interviewees identified it as a key strength of TFP. It enables us, as an intermediary, to support and influence sector efforts and enhance capacity of sector stakeholders, as highlighted below.

Leveraging relationships to provide support in the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to the ECEC sector. The Front Project responded quickly to pivot to activities that would support the sector, providing a place for the sector to support one another through the COVID-19 pandemic.

There has clearly been an early shift in the cohesion of the sector, which was accelerated through the challenges of COVID-19. The evidence from the evaluation suggests that the cohesiveness of the sector moved **from nascent to developing**.



The Apiary

The Front Project founded the Apiary in early 2019 to foster collaboration and collective leadership in the sector. The Apiary Fellows represent a diverse stakeholder group with an impressive breadth of experience from across the system, including from for-profit and not-for-profit ECEC services, peak bodies, research institutes and government.

The Apiary provides a space for sector leaders to come together to build relationships and aims to strengthen the ability of sector leaders to work together to advocate, design and shape a system that delivers better outcomes for children.

Apiary stakeholders reflected that the Apiary had been an important place for leaders to support each other through the COVID-19 pandemic. Apiary members participated in the 'scenario modelling' exercise, where ECEC providers shared financial information that was then analysed and shared with government.



6

Collaborative initiatives that TFP leads



32

Apiary Fellows



56

Collaborative events in the past year



The Front Project has acted as a **real central point** to a whole range of different arms of the sector [which has been] critical, particularly last year, where we, you know, **really helped each other through** the journey.
– interviewed sector stakeholder

The Front Project's unique and valuable role in the sector through offering a neutral and constructive voice

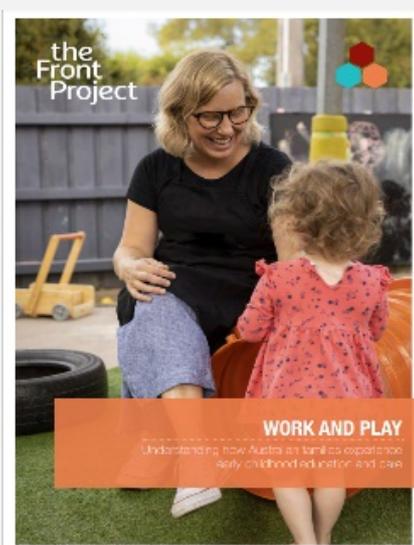
While some others in the sector have a more vocal approach to advocacy, it is clear that the Front Project is **uniquely positioned in the sector as a trustworthy, independent and constructive voice**. Sector stakeholders noted this as a key strength of the organisation in the evaluation interviews.

This has been helped by taking a pragmatic approach with stakeholders and offering value propositions that are realistic and achievable. Our research outputs have particularly strengthened the perception of the Front Project as **credible and reliable** and have been effective in generating engagement around key issues. Other organisations have also used the Front Project products in their advocacy, enabling us to act as a field catalyst.

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a shift in wider ECEC policy and media narratives from 'nascent' (still portrayed as babysitting) to 'developing', including viewing ECEC as an essential service that is important for workforce participation and the economy as well as children's learning and development.

It is likely that the Front Project's contribution to the evidence base, **including elevating voices in the public debate**, has contributed to a shift in the dominant narratives around ECEC in Australia. We were able to elevate the voices of ECEC teachers and educators, families and children through various research reports, policy briefs and targeted communications.

Our Work and play report



The **Work and play** report details the findings of research conducted from February to March 2021 of parents of children aged 0-5. The report discusses how Australian families experience early childhood education and care. It was commissioned following recognition that families' voices were missing from the debate.

Since its release, it has been showcased in the media (with 86 unique media items in the 24 hours following its release, reaching an estimated audience of 3.5 million people) and attracted high volume commentary from across the sector and other social sector advocates. Sector stakeholders shared feedback that the report is a valuable source of evidence for advocacy efforts.

It has also garnered strong interest from government and was discussed in parliamentary Question Time.

ALIGNMENT

NASCENT

DEVELOPING

ALIGNED

IN SYNERGY

The evidence from the evaluation suggests that positioning regarding dominant narratives has moved from nascent to aligned

CONTRIBUTION

SMALL

MODERATE

SIGNIFICANT

The evaluation found that the Front Project likely had a moderate contribution to the shift in the dominant narratives

“ As an independent body who is not representing providers, not representing employers, not representing a particular cohort there, but rather [is] objectively identifying what improvements can be made to a system, I think that has a significant weight in [their] direct lobbying and advocacy work.
– interviewed sector stakeholder

THE FRONT PROJECT AS AN ACTOR

Upskill Program and Online Community

We also work as an actor in the ECEC system to fill a gap in the sector by upskilling the workforce through the Upskill Program and Online Community.

In 2020/21, the Front Project provided the Upskill Program and Online Community as its core program to deliver its intended impact. The Upskill Program attracted **222 participants**. Through the Upskill Program, the Front Project provided support to the program participants, including information on study options, support with the transition to university, mentoring support in which participants are matched with mentors from the sector, and a space for peer-to-peer support.

The Front Project's support for the Upskill Program (delivered by G8) has been valuable to students. The Upskill Program has maintained a **retention rate of 67 per cent**, far greater than the 12 per cent average university program retention rate.

The evaluation also found that Upskill Program and Online Community has been able to **facilitate collaboration in the sector and increased awareness of the need to increase the qualifications of the workforce**.



222
Participants



75
Mentors trained



36
Webinars and training sessions delivered



27
Professional development resources produced



Progress against strategic imperatives

In 2020-21, the Front Project was guided by seven strategic imperatives. Upon review of the year, it was evident that the organisation's work often cuts across multiple imperatives and workstreams to influence systems change.

Change the dominant narrative from childcare to early childhood education



PROGRESS



The Front Project has achieved impressive reach and engagement from key stakeholders through its targeted campaign communications. The evidence suggests that we contributed to a shift in the dominant narrative, particularly through its credible, trusted and timely research products.

Increase the quality and number of teachers and status of the profession



PROGRESS



We have provided a space for peer support and delivered relevant and accessible professional learning opportunities. The Front Project has provided valuable networking and mentoring support for students and has supported a greater sector focus on supporting students.

Change the policy framing



PROGRESS



We have undertaken a highly targeted and relationship-based approach to policy influence. The Front Project played a pivotal role in the federal government's 2021-22 budget announcements.

Increase the collaboration and influence of the sector



PROGRESS



The Front Project has provided a safe space for diverse sector stakeholders to come together. The Apiary has built a strong foundation for sector relationships and collaboration, which were leveraged during COVID-19.

A note on methodology

The Front Project has a Measurement, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) strategy that allows us to conduct purposeful and aligned monitoring and evaluation activities across all their workstreams. Our MEL strategy is designed to guide measurements about the effectiveness of our influencing work; the extent to which our work is influencing systems change outcomes; and our progress towards mission outcomes.

The Front Project's full 2020/21 impact report was written by an external evaluation partner, Clear Horizon Consulting, and is underpinned by collation and cross-checking of project data, eight external interviews, survey responses from the Apiary and the Upskill Program participants, and document analysis.

The report also uses a methodology called Significant Instances of Policy and Systems Improvements (SIPSI). This methodology seeks to capture case studies about significant instances of changes in both policy and broader systems. This is done by collecting multiple case studies detailing 'instances' of systems improvement, which are verified through contribution analysis and cross-referencing evidence to support claims. As part of the cross-referencing of evidence, Clear Horizon drew on the key informant interviews and document analysis.

Know the impact of early education on children's outcomes



PROGRESS

LIMITED

MODERATE

SIGNIFICANT



The Front Project research outputs engaged stakeholders on the impact of early education for families. The **Work and play** report has generated considerable interest. The evaluation of 3-year-old kinder in Victoria represents a significant opportunity to contribute to the evidence base.

Ensure that children experiencing disadvantage have access to high-quality early education



PROGRESS

LIMITED

MODERATE

SIGNIFICANT



The **Families, Disadvantage & Early Childhood Education and Care in COVID-19** highlighted opportunities for policy change. We played a pivotal role in the federal government's childcare subsidy budget announcements, which increased the rate for households with multiple children.

Raise the quality of early education across different delivery settings



PROGRESS

LIMITED

MODERATE

SIGNIFICANT



The Front Project has had less of a focus on this strategic imperative so far, although there is an Action Learning Group through the Apiary dedicated to quality. The evaluation of 3-year-old kinder programs in Victoria represents a significant opportunity to provide insights on the quality of ECEC.

Looking forward

This evaluation shows that in taking a systems-change approach and working on multiple fronts with diverse allies, we have contributed to a range of incremental changes to our ECEC system, and ultimately, towards improved outcomes for all Australian children.

Given the success of our approach to systems change, we will further leverage this in the Front Project's next strategy. We intend to build on this momentum over the coming years by doubling down on our role as an intermediary to build capacity and create real change in the ECEC sector. We will also continue to work as an actor where there are opportunities to have a direct impact.

All Australians have felt the effects of COVID-19, and our youngest children and their parents are no exception. The task for the Front Project and our collaborators over the next year is to ensure Australia's ECEC system is as robust, accessible and affordable as it can be, and that we continue to lift the quality of the early education provided across the country. COVID-19 has exacerbated inequality in many ways, and ensuring the system better addresses the needs of children experiencing disadvantage will be a high priority in the coming year.

We have learnt much from this process of reflection and evaluation, and these insights will be built into our forward strategy, 2021-22 action plan and beyond. There is much to be proud of, but much work still to do.

thefrontproject.org.au

the
Front
Project



Clear Horizon

Values based, outcomes focussed

We pride ourselves on walking the talk, embedding learning and innovation into our work. From leading in methodologies like Most Significant Change, creating strategic learning for systems change initiatives, to developing digital solutions, we drive sector-wide transformative change.

We partner with leading agencies, service providers, philanthropies and social innovators to co-design and evaluate solutions for people, place and planet.

clearhorizon.com.au

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which Clear Horizon is located and where we conduct our business. We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging. Clear Horizon is deeply committed to honouring Indigenous peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas; and to transforming evaluation practice to uphold and reflect Indigenous values..