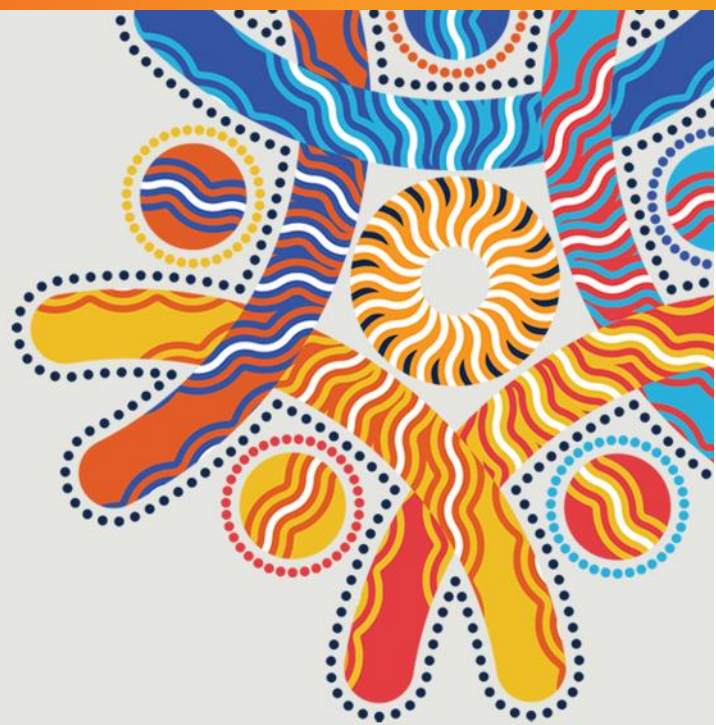


NT Preschool Review – Final Report

Northern Territory Department of Education

17 November 2023





Nous Group acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, who maintain their culture, country and spiritual connection to the land, sea and community.

This artwork was developed by Marcus Lee Design to reflect Nous Group's Reconciliation Action Plan and our aspirations for respectful and productive engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

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Executive Summary

The Northern Territory (NT) Government (NTG) Department of Education (the Department) engaged Nous Group (Nous) to conduct a review of preschool funding and delivery across the Northern Territory (the Review). Through extensive stakeholder engagement, the Review has identified a **vision for preschool** and **14 recommendations** to implement the vision.

The Review heard from families, service providers, staff, experts and community organisations from across the NT through site visits to preschools, public submissions, workshops, interviews and a survey. The Review draws on the available literature and data about preschool in the NT and evidence, experience and lessons from across Australia and internationally.

The objectives of the Review are to:

- **Identify how preschool is currently delivered in the NT** including what is working well in what settings, challenges faced and opportunities for improvement.
- **Understand how preschool could better meet the needs of all children and families** across the NT including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal), children with English as an Additional Language (EAL), children with additional needs and those living in areas that are remote and/or socio-economically disadvantaged.
- **Develop future directions for preschool delivery and funding** that will support the Department's delivery of system priorities and strategic actions and the national requirements under the Preschool Reform Agreement (PRA).

Preschool in the NT has clear strengths, as well as challenges to overcome

The benefits of the early childhood system in boosting a child's development in the crucial first five years of life are well known and recognised. Preschool is a discrete form of early childhood service provision with a specific, nationally agreed definition:

What is preschool?

Preschool is a "structured, play-based learning program, delivered by a degree qualified teacher, aimed primarily at children in the year or two before they commence full-time schooling."¹

The evidence shows that high quality preschool has many benefits to a child's developmental outcomes, including developing physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language skills.² Preschool can also help children and families develop habits around education and gain access to other services including health and family support. Preschool enables families to participate in the workforce and support their child's transition to school.

In the NT, preschool is predominantly delivered in 137 government schools. Twenty per cent of children are not enrolled in a government schools, but rather in non-government schools and long day care (including Catholic and Independent Early Learning Centres). Many children are enrolled in more than one setting.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education Methodology' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

² Developmental outcomes are defined by the Australia Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 'Developmental Milestones and the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standards' (2018). Available at [\[link\]](#).

The Review has identified strengths of preschool in the NT. Preschool is generally **highly regarded by parents and families** and entrenched as a key part of a child's development in many parts of the NT community. There is a **passionate, dedicated and skilled preschool workforce** across the NT, including Aboriginal educators and strong leadership from principals and other staff. These staff and providers have developed a **range of innovations in locally adapted preschool delivery models** to overcome geographic, financial, cultural and other barriers to accessing preschool. Some of these **reflect Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing**, in both remote communities and urban schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students. Other strengths are that most preschools are meeting **quality standards under the National Quality Framework (NQF)** and that many have place-based integration with other services, such as health and family support or Families as First Teachers (FaFT).

The Review identified several challenges, including:

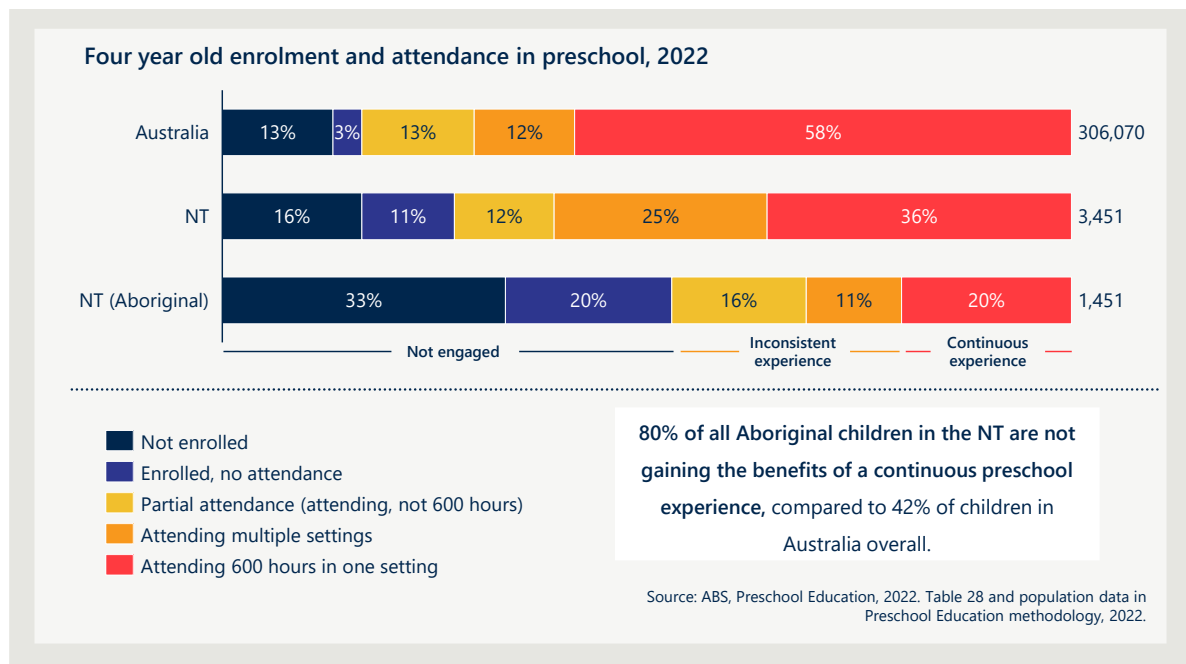
- **There are barriers to accessing preschool for priority cohorts**, who are participating in preschools at significantly lower levels than other children in the NT. The preschool attendance rate is 75 per cent overall, compared to just 48 per cent for Aboriginal children, 40 per cent for children in very remote areas and 38 per cent for children in the most disadvantaged socio-economic quintile.³
- **Child development outcomes are behind national averages**, meaning that more needs to be done across early years services to support families. Two in five children in the NT are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain, which is almost twice the national average.⁴
- **The sessional model of fixed hours** create challenges for families and providers with many children attending multiple settings. Almost two thirds of respondents to the Have Your Say survey conducted for this Review noted that inconvenient session times and a lack of wraparound support (such as child care in the hours preschool is not running) made accessing preschool hard for families.
- **Demand outstrips supply in some remote areas**. Families and children are on waitlists or must travel long distances to access preschool.
- **The current preschool funding model is flawed**, creating a two-track system, incentivising parents to split early childhood enrolments across settings, and is unnecessarily complex, fragmented and opaque.
- **The NT Government bears more of the funding burden**. The NT Government's share of spending on early childhood services is double that of other states and territories.

The cumulative impact of these issues creates a strong case for change. As shown in Figure 1 below, only 36 per cent of NT four-year-olds are attending 600 hours of preschool in a single setting (with continuity of experience), compared to 58 per cent nationally. For Aboriginal four-year-olds in the NT, the proportion is only 20 per cent.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#). The attendance 'rate' is the number of children attending 600 hours as a proportion of the number of children enrolled 600 hours. It is noted that the reference period during which attendance is recorded occurs during the dry season in the NT. In remote communities, this is the time of the lowest attendance due to cultural and other commitments.

⁴ Early Childhood Development in Australia, 'Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

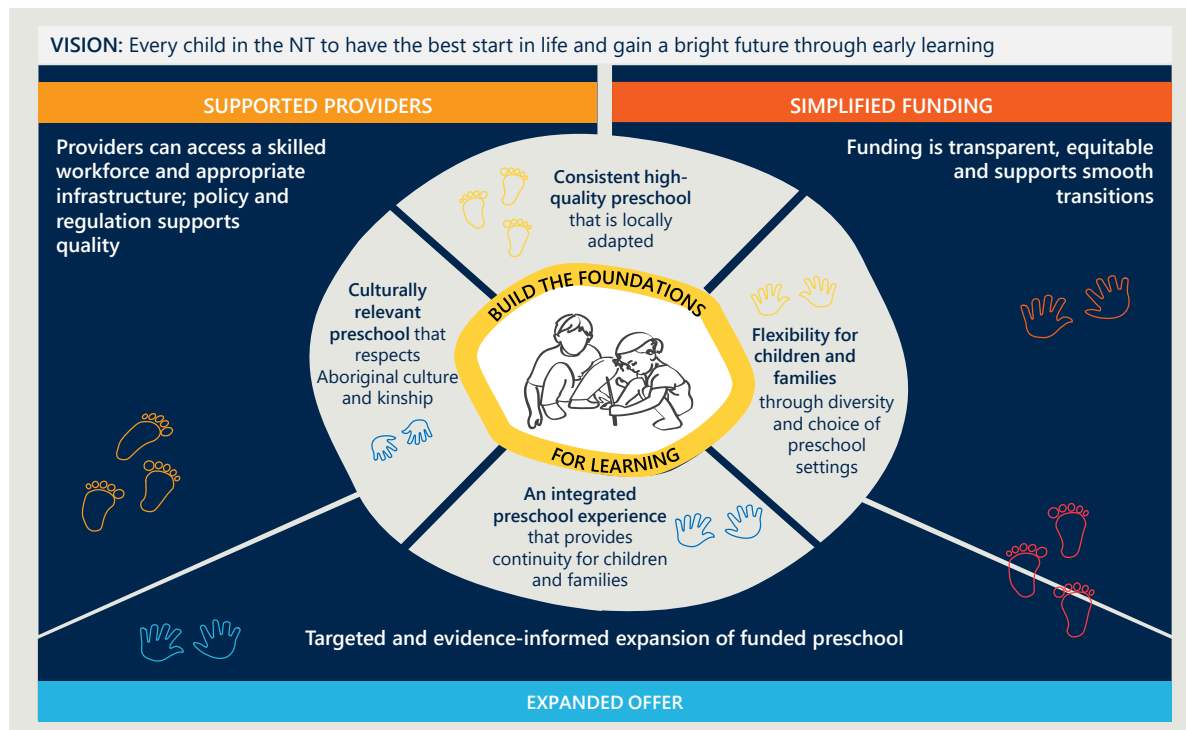
Figure 1 | Participation in preschool



The Review developed a vision for the future of preschool in the NT

The overall vision for preschool is: “every child in the NT to have the best start in life and gain a bright future through early learning”, with preschool operating as the core of a diverse but integrated early childhood system.

Figure 2 | Vision for preschool in the NT



The Review reinforces the importance of preschool as a core and universal component of an effective early childhood system. The Review does not recommend a single preschool service provider type or delivery

model and is agnostic about which evidence-based and NQF-consistent pedagogy each service provider should adopt. However, the Review does illustrate options for preschool delivery models.

The Review identifies four essential features that service delivery models should demonstrate, across provider types:

1. **Consistent high-quality preschool that is locally adapted** – Preschool delivery that meets or exceeds National Quality Standards and is adapted to local context and needs.
2. **Culturally relevant preschool that respects Aboriginal cultures and kinship** – Preschool that embraces and reflects Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing so that Aboriginal families and children feel safe and included. In the NT context, this applies to all preschool settings. Preschool that works for Aboriginal children can work for all children.
3. **Flexibility for children and families through diversity and choice of preschool settings** – Families are able to choose the service delivery model that works for them with a range of preschool settings and provider types available.
4. **An integrated preschool experience that provides continuity for children and families** – Children experience continuity in their learning and care, building nurturing relationships and avoiding excessive disruption or fragmentation between settings. Parents experience convenience in their child’s early learning and care settings, avoiding undesired disruption or unnecessary transportation between settings. Preschool services are well integrated with other early years services, including health and family support services.

Fourteen recommendations create system-level changes that bring the vision and four essential features to life.

The Review recommends fourteen changes to funding, policy and other settings to realise the vision.

Figure 3 | Fourteen recommendations

OVERARCHING	1	Define and position high-quality preschool as a core element of the early childhood system, regardless of provider.
	2	Prioritise action to increase participation among priority cohorts , through targeted local solutions to barriers to access.
	3	Define and embed a system stewardship approach to achieving preschool outcomes.
FOUNDATIONS FOR LEARNING	4	Promote diversity in preschool delivery settings to create flexibility for families .
	5	Enhance continuity of experience in all settings, particularly in government schools.
	6	Improve service integration , particularly in priority locations where co-location through hubs or precincts may be appropriate.
EXPANDED OFFER	7	Progressively increase the funded hours of four-year old preschool , starting with priority cohorts .
	8	Take an evidence-based approach to further expansion of fully subsidised access to three-year-old preschool .
SIMPLIFIED FUNDING	9	Simplify funding for preschool by consolidating all Northern Territory Government funding into a single funding pool.
	10	Design and implement a bespoke preschool funding mechanism that promotes choice and quality preschools with continuity of experience for children and family.
	11	In remote communities and other priority locations, pursue pooling of all Australian and Northern Territory Government funding for early childhood services, to fund service integration and place-based approaches with local community governance .
SUPPORTED PROVIDERS	12	Invest in the capacity and capability of the early childhood workforce , particularly remote and Aboriginal staff.
	13	Design and progressively roll out fit for purpose infrastructure , starting with locations with the greatest need .
	14	Develop an evidence base for what works for preschool in the NT .

The overarching recommendations require the Department to think differently about preschool and its role in the system. Achieving the vision demands a change in how the community, schools and the Department think about what preschool is, how it can be delivered and funded and the outcomes it can deliver (recommendation 1). The vision identified in this Review and many of the recommendations start to drive the Department toward the role of being a system steward to improve outcomes for children (recommendation 3).

The priority for any increased investment must be making preschool accessible and relevant to priority groups (and lifting participation rates as a consequence) before expanding universal access. Increasing the number of funded hours will not benefit the many children in the NT that do not benefit from the high-quality preschool that is already available. To lift participation, the Department should provide the funding and flexibility for communities to design, deliver and govern initiatives aimed at increasing participation (recommendation 2). Increasing to 30 funded hours (recommendation 7), and funding for three-year-olds (recommendation 8), should be considered as the evidence emerges and with a focus on priority cohorts.

Delivering preschool predominantly on a sessional basis in government schools is not adequately meeting the needs of children and families in the NT. The Review proposes a step change in increasing diversity of service models that matches the diversity of children and families' needs (recommendation 5) and improving the integration of preschool with other services (recommendation 7). There is an opportunity to improve continuity of experience in preschool delivered in government schools (recommendation 6) so parents can make informed decisions about their working lives and children experience minimal disruption in their day and learning. The Department, as the system steward, must work with government schools to support this change in their delivery model.

Recommendations 9 through 11 make funding sources simpler and easier to access for providers. The goal is to design and implement a fit-for-purpose preschool funding model that promotes choice, equity and

continuity of experience (recommendations 9 and 10) and to pool funding in remote areas to enable greater integration and community control (recommendation 11).

To implement the vision, NT will require stronger preschool workforce, infrastructure and evidence. Overcoming workforce (recommendation 12) and preschool infrastructure (recommendation 13) limitations is a critical enabler to supporting quality. Investment in the preschool workforce requires both attracting additional staff and retaining and developing the existing passionate and skilled workforce. The Department can develop the NT-specific evidence base by investing in research, communicating evidence-based findings and tools and drawing on the latest evidence in all policy and funding decisions (recommendation 14).

2 Introduction



This section introduces the Review and outlines:

- The context and purpose of the Review.
- The overview of preschool in the NT.
- The methodology of the Review.
- The purpose and structure of this Final Report.

2.1 Context and purpose

Preschool matters and is a fundamental part of the broader early childhood system

The benefits of the early childhood system in boosting a child's development in the crucial first five years of life are well known and recognised.⁵ During this time, children build the foundations for learning by finding new ways to play and interact with others. Research shows that children who participate in quality early learning programs are more likely to arrive at school equipped with the social, cognitive and emotional skills that they need to help them continue learning. These benefits have life-long impacts.⁶

Preschool is a discrete form of early childhood service provision with a specific, nationally agreed definition:

What is preschool?

*Preschool is a "structured, play-based learning program, delivered by a degree qualified teacher, aimed primarily at children in the year or two before they commence full-time schooling."*⁷

Preschool is subject to the National Quality Framework which provides the legal obligation for approved providers and sets a national benchmark for early childhood education and care through the National Quality Standards (NQS).

The evidence shows that high-quality preschool can:

- Contribute to a child's developmental outcomes, including communication and language⁸, cognitive⁹, physical¹⁰ and social and emotional.¹¹
- Enrich child identity and belonging.¹²
- Develop important habits around school and education and support a smooth transition to school.¹³

⁵ Early Education, 'Child Development', *Birth to 5 Matters* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁶ New South Wales Department of Education, 'Benefits of Early Childhood Education' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education Methodology' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁸ Loren Marulis and Susan Neuman, 'The Effects of Vocabulary Intervention on Young Children's Work Learning: A Meta-Analysis' (2010), *Review of Educational Research*. Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁹ Steve Graham, Xinghua and Joy Talukdar, 'Reading for Writing: A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Reading Interventions on Writing' (2017), *Review of Educational Research*. Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁰ Myrto-Foteini Mavilidi et al., 'Immediate and delayed effects of integration physical activity into preschool children's learning of numeracy skills' (2017), *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*. Available at [\[link\]](#). However, there is limited evidence for physical development. Evidence for Learning, 'Physical development approaches'. Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹¹ There is limited evidence for social and emotional learning but the existing evidence shows a moderate impact. Evidence for Learning, 'Social and emotional learning strategies'. Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹² Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 'Belonging, Being & Becoming - The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia' (2009). Available at [\[link\]](#).

- Provide an access point for other services including health and family support.¹⁴
- Enhance family capacity to support child development in the home environment.¹⁵
- Enable families to realise their preferences around work and raising children, creating greater opportunities to work, especially for women.¹⁶

Education and care for children are not separate things. Early childhood care services such as long day care (LDC) and out of school hours care provide important educational input by enabling children to learn through play and interaction. Preschool services are grounded in safe and caring environments and can enable parents, especially women, to participate in the workforce.

What is long day care?

“Long day care services, also known as child care centres or centre-based care, provide care and education programs for children from birth to school age.”¹⁷

The early childhood system is in the spotlight nationally

National Cabinet has asked education and early years ministers to develop a national vision for the early childhood system.¹⁸ This will outline how Australian governments and the sector will work together to deliver better outcomes for young children, parents and the economy. This builds on:

- The national Preschool Reform Agreement (PRA), under which all states and territories provide 600 hours per year of preschool services to all children in their year before school, and commit to improving preschool enrolment, attendance and outcomes.
- The Australian Government’s development of a national Early Years Strategy.¹⁹
- The Productivity Commission’s current inquiry into the early childhood services sector.²⁰
- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy, developed in partnership between the National Indigenous Australians Agency and SNAICC – National Voice for our Children.²¹

Most states and territories are expanding access to preschool, to 30 hours for children in their year before fulltime school (New South Wales and Victoria) and to three-year-olds (to all children in New South Wales and Victoria, and targeted groups of children in Queensland, Australia Capital Territory, South Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia). South Australia has also established a Royal Commission into early childhood services to investigate how to better support families and children, and potential three-year-old preschool offer.²²

Internationally, countries such as Norway, Ireland, New Zealand, United States of America, and France provide, or have pledged, universal access to preschool from the age of three.

¹³ Centre for Policy Development, ‘Starting Better: A Guarantee for Young Children and Families’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁴ Sarah Pilcher, Kate Noble & Peter Hurley, ‘Stepping Up: Securing the future of quality preschool in Australia’ *Mitchell Institute* (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁵ Centre for Policy Development, ‘Starting Better: A Guarantee for Young Children and Families’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁶ Centre for Policy Development, ‘Starting Better: A Guarantee for Young Children and Families’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁷ Northern Territory Government, ‘About child care services’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁸ Australian Government Department of Education, ‘National vision for early childhood education and care’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁹ Australian Government Productivity Commission, ‘Current Enquiries Early Childhood Education and Care’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²⁰ Australian Government Productivity Commission, ‘Current Enquiries Early Childhood Education and Care’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²¹ National Indigenous Australians Agency, ‘National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²² South Australia Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education, ‘Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education & Care’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

The timing is right to reimagine preschool in the NT

Through *Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong: 10-Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory*,²³ 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 2021-25, commits the Department of Education to building the foundations for learning through three 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 two 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 Northern Territory Government agencies, to provide timely wrap-around support.

The purpose of the Review of preschool delivery and funding

The Northern Territory Government Department of Education (the Department) has engaged Nous Group (Nous) to undertake a Review of preschool funding and delivery across the Northern Territory (the Review). The Review has been undertaken between October 2022 to August 2023 and captured findings on current preschool delivery and funding across the Northern Territory (NT) and made recommendations on future directions.

The objectives of the Review are to:

- **Identify how preschool is currently delivered in the NT** including what is working well in what settings, challenges faced and opportunities for improvement.
- **Understand how preschool could better meet the needs of all children and families across the NT** including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal), children with English as an Additional Language (EAL), children with additional needs and those living in areas that are remote and/or socio-economically disadvantaged.
- **Develop future directions for preschool delivery and funding** that will support the department's delivery of system priorities and strategic actions and the national requirements under the PRA.

2.2 Overview of preschool in the NT

Preschool in the NT is predominantly delivered through government schools

In the NT, preschool provides education and care for children in their year or two before school and has done so since the 1950s. In the NT, preschool is prior to schooling and followed by a non-compulsory year of schooling in primary school called 'Transition'.²⁴

All children can attend preschool at the age of four, and children in very remote areas such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can attend at the age of three.²⁵ There is also a trial of three-year-old

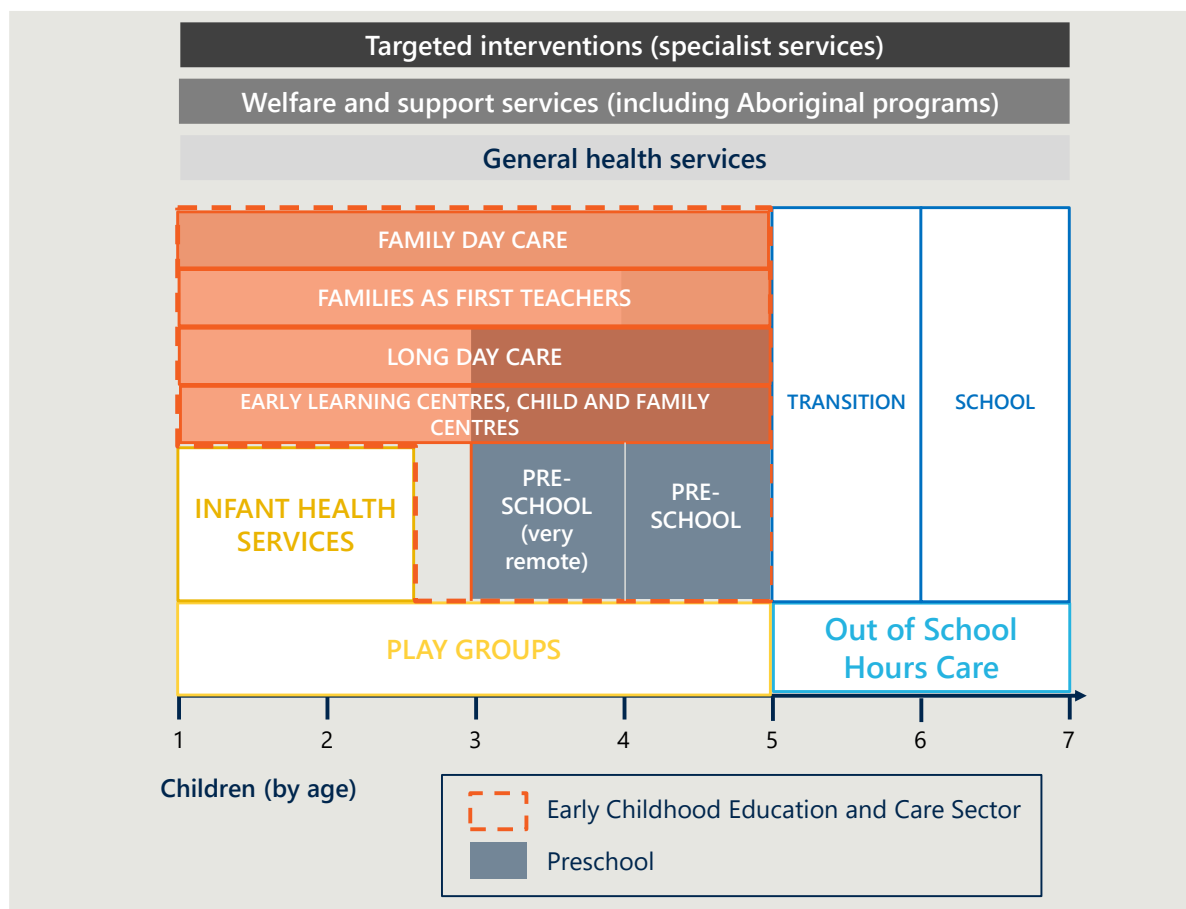
²³ Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services and National Indigenous Australians Agency), Northern Territory Government (Reform Management Office and Department of Chief Minister and Cabinet), Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory, North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency and Northern Territory Council of Social Service, 'Kids Safe, Family Together, Community Strong: 10-Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory' (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²⁴ Northern Territory Government, 'Age your child attends school' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²⁵ Northern Territory Government, 'Age your child goes to child care and preschool' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

preschool underway in targeted locations.²⁶ Figure 4 shows how preschool fits into the early childhood and schooling systems in the NT.

Figure 4 | Early childhood education and care system in the NT



There are 192 services delivering preschool in the NT. Most services are school-based programs run by government schools. There are a range of other providers described in Figure 6. Of the 3,228 children enrolled in preschool in 2022:

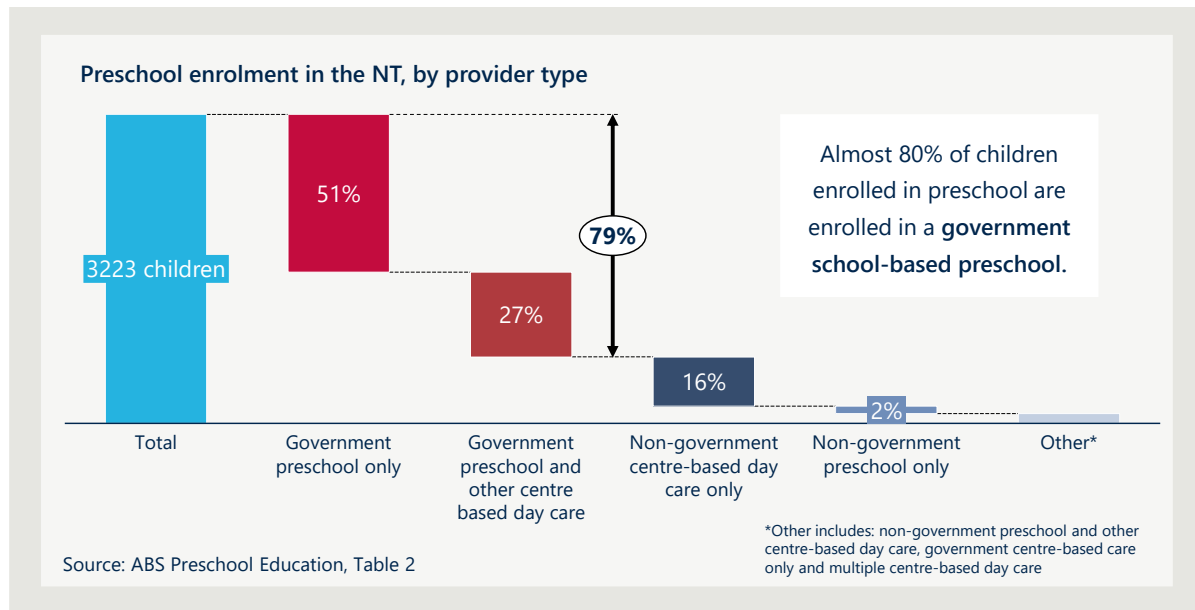
- **Almost 80 per cent are enrolled at one of 137 preschools at a government school.**²⁷ Of these, about 35 per cent are also enrolled in a preschool program in 'centre-based day care'²⁸.
- **20 per cent are not enrolled in a government preschool.** Majority of these children are enrolled solely at a preschool program within a long day care setting. Others are enrolled in a preschool at a non-government school only, or a preschool at a non-government school and a long day care setting. This includes Catholic and Independent Early Learning Centres.

²⁶ Freya Lucas, 'Three-year-old preschool trial kicking goals in the Northern Territory' *The Sector* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²⁷ Four of these services are funded by the Department of Education but provided through non-government schools in remote areas.

²⁸ The Australian Bureau of Statistics distinguishes between 'preschool' and 'preschool program within a centre based day care'. This Report refers to preschool programs in Long Day Care (LDC) instead of centre-based day care'. 'Preschool education methodology' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

Figure 5 | Preschool enrolment in 2022, by provider type²⁹



Many settings outside formal preschool and early childhood services across the Territory also provide important learning for children, such as cultural ceremonies, exploring and playing on Country and through learning with families and kinship systems.

Figure 6 | Overview of preschool providers



²⁹ This analysis distributed the 28.9% of children enrolled across more than one provider type (preschool program or preschool program in a centre-based day care). It assumed that 95% of children enrolled across more than one provider type are enrolled in a government preschool, because 95.3% of those only enrolled in a preschool program were at a government school.

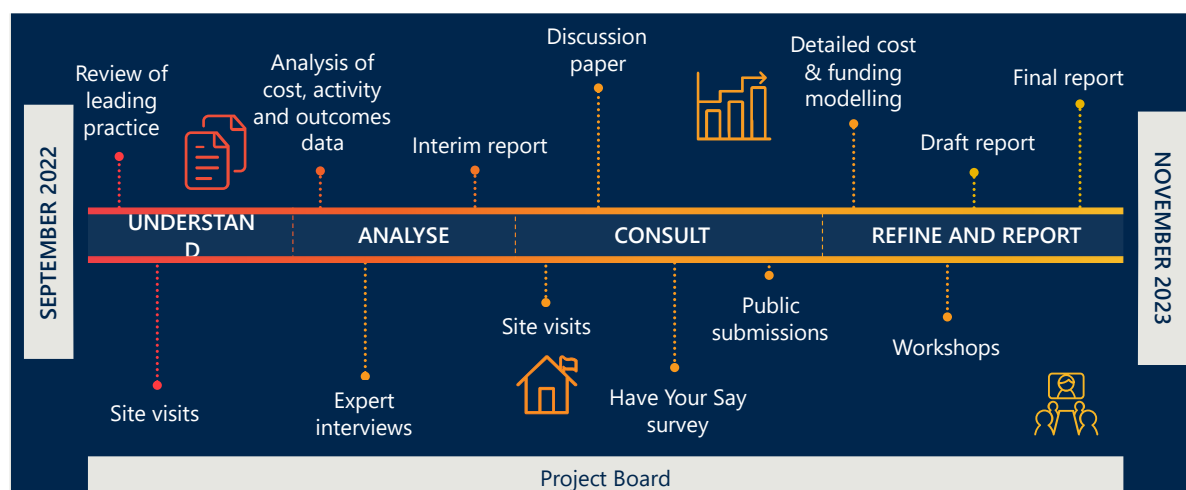
2.3 Methodology

Nous conducted the Review in partnership with Victoria University (VU) across four iterative stages, as illustrated in Figure 7:

1. **Understand:** initial desktop and literature research of leading practice and consultation with principals, staff, and parents through site visits to preschool providers across the NT's regions to understand the current state of preschool in the NT.
2. **Analyse:** analysis of funding and outcomes data, alongside insights from interviews with experts across Australia, informed an 'Interim Report' that highlighted emerging insights.
3. **Consult:** emerging insights were tested in several additional site visits and formed the basis of the future vision for preschool in the NT. The Discussion Paper consolidated the vision and key findings and went out for stakeholder engagement with a community Have Your Say survey and public submissions from key stakeholder groups.
4. **Refine and report:** stakeholder feedback was gathered through workshops to further refine the emerging future directions.

More detailed information on the Review's engagement is provided at Appendix A.

Figure 7 | The four stages of the Review



The Review gathers evidence from a range of NT, national and international sources and in line with the evidence hierarchy developed by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). New evidence was collected for the Review, including provider, community and parent sentiments in a Have Your Say survey; interviews and workshops with expert, Government and provider stakeholders; and site visits across the NT.

The Review identified there are significant gaps in NT-specific gold standard evidence³⁰, such as randomised controlled trials, in the early childhood sector. Silver standard evidence is generally limited to specific initiatives and pedagogical methods, rather than to the system level reform that the Review considers. At system level, much of the evidence in the early childhood system is in the form of pre-post comparisons, expert opinions, and anecdotal evidence. All sources of evidence have footnoted in this Report and insights tested across multiple sources.

³⁰ For detail about 'gold' and 'silver' standards in the hierarchy of evidence, see the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) model, 'Evidence hierarchy' *New South Wales Department of Education* (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

2.4 About this Report

This Final Report of the Review presents the case for change and a vision for the future of preschool in the Northern Territory, with recommendations for change, as follows:

- **The case for change (section 3)** describes the case for reform to improve participation and child outcomes, based on the strengths and challenges of the existing preschool system in the NT.
- **Vision and future directions (section 4)** set out the Review's vision for the future of preschool and 14 recommendations for change to deliver on this vision.

3 Case for change



This section explores the rationale for the Review and makes the case for reform, including that:

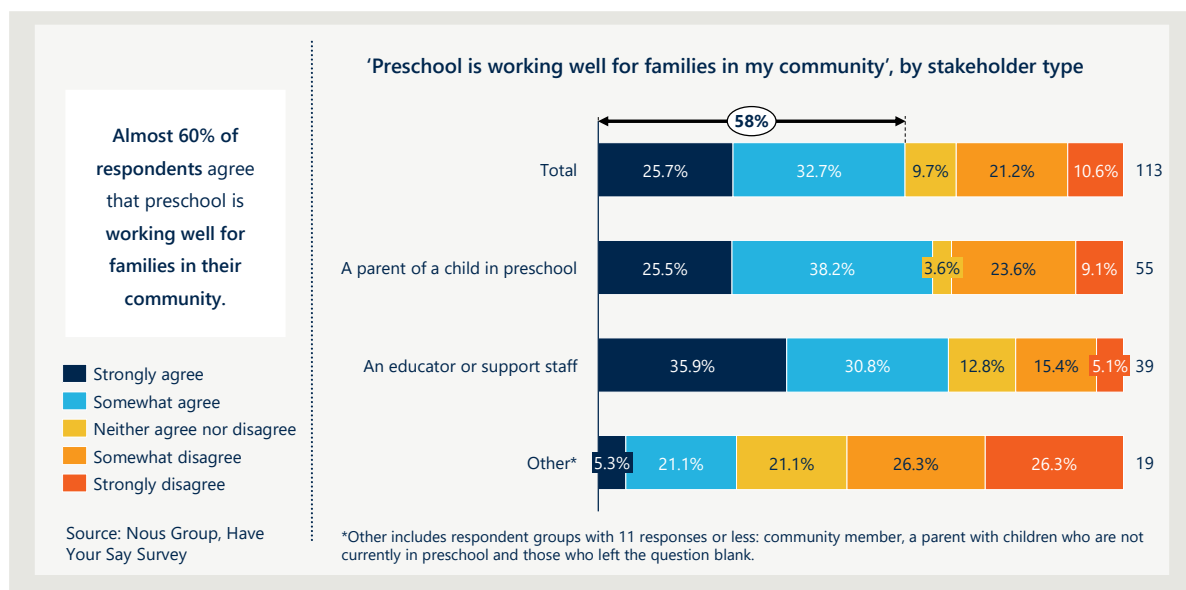
- Preschool in the NT is well regarded and has many strengths to build on.
- There is a strong case for reform to improve participation and outcomes for children and families.

3.1 Preschool in the NT is well regarded

Many Territorians hold the preschool available in their community in high regard. Figure 8 shows that many respondents to the survey agree that preschool is working well for their community. Preschool is well established in many communities across the NT as central to a child’s development. The Review has identified many other strengths of preschool in the NT, including:

- A passionate, dedicated and skilled preschool workforce across the NT.
- A range of innovations in locally adapted preschool delivery models.
- Quality delivery supported by the National Quality Framework (NQF).
- How it fits into the strengths of the broader NT early childhood system.

Figure 8 | Survey responses to whether preschool is working well for their community



The workforce is highly skilled and dedicated

Many survey respondents noted that the staff were the biggest strength of preschool in the NT. They noted that the preschool workforce across the NT were **passionate, dedicated and skilled**. Some respondents identified both the preschool teachers and other support staff as strengths of preschool in the NT. Parents or carers with a child in preschool specifically identified teachers who engage with

“The teachers are so committed to their learning and social experience. There is open communication with the parents and open invitation for the parents to help out in the preschool.”

A parent or carer with a child in preschool

parents, understand their child's needs and create a safe and inclusive environment for learning and play.³¹

Preschool teachers in the NT need to be highly skilled at interpersonal and intercultural communication. One stakeholder described the role of preschool teachers as requiring "multi-faceted intercultural capabilities to navigate local histories, languages and cultures."³² Preschool teachers may need to identify opportunities for early intervention, especially as they develop strong relationships with children and members of the community.³³ Many stakeholders identified the significant workload of preschool teachers both inside and outside the room, especially in remote or smaller preschool settings.

Aboriginal educators or staff are an essential part of the preschool workforce in the NT. Some survey respondents noted that Aboriginal staff were a key strength of the workforce and were key to ensuring Aboriginal families felt safe leaving their children at the preschool. A study has shown that teachers play a vital role in improving attendance rates among Aboriginal communities.³⁴ Settings that have limited or no Aboriginal staff are not seen as culturally safe, and families may not feel comfortable attending.³⁵

Site visits highlighted that some preschool staff show strong leadership abilities. Strong leaders can drive community engagement, collaboration, integration and innovation, and overcome barriers.³⁶ In some settings, staff are devoting resources and their own time on top of teaching to engage health, education, and Aboriginal service providers and apply for grants.³⁷ Early learning leaders in remote settings are especially responsive to challenging operating environments.

"I can't emphasise enough how [the preschool teacher] was loved by the children and taught them to love learning and coming to school."

A parent or carer with a child in preschool

Providers have developed innovative local and culturally relevant solutions

The Review identified a range of innovations in preschool delivery models to respond to local barriers to engagement. Families in the NT can face geographic, financial, cultural and other barriers to attending preschool, which are explored in further detail in section 4.2.2.

Children living in remote areas can access the School of the Air in the NT if they meet one of the Geographical Isolation Criteria³⁸ or on the grounds of medical, support or travel needs. For example, the Katherine School of the Air also offers flexible learning arrangements that may include hybrid learning for students with additional needs on an ad hoc basis.³⁹

"We are so fortunate that preschool has dedicated staff that can solve issues. There are creative solutions being made."

Principal in a government preschool, site visit

Mobile playgroups, such as those run by the Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS), bring play-based learning to remote children to support child development where formal preschool is not available. Although KICKS works closely with preschools,⁴⁰ it is not a preschool service regulated under the NQF.

³¹ Preschool Review, Darwin Preschool Parent Session, site visit; Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

³² Preschool Review, Charles Darwin University Early Childhood Special Interest Group, written submission.

³³ Preschool Review, Charles Darwin University Early Childhood Special Interest Group, written submission.

³⁴ Jacyntha Krakouer, 'Aboriginal Early Childhood Education: Why attendance and true engagement are equally important' *Australian Council for Educational Research* (2016). Available at [\[link\]](#).

³⁵ Preschool Review, Office of the Children's Commissioner Submission, written submission; Preschool Review, Connected Beginnings, site visit.

³⁶ There are examples of strong leadership across all site visits. Notable examples include Namarluk School, Gillen Primary School, Ludmilla Primary School, Malak Primary School, Goodstart Early Learning Moulden, Larapinta Primary School.

³⁷ Preschool Review, Ludmilla Primary School, site visit.

³⁸ Katherine School of the Air, 'Enrolments' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

³⁹ Katherine School of the Air, 'Enrolments' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁴⁰ Preschool Review, Katherine Isolated Children's Service, written submission.

Some preschools offer flexible hours to children in priority cohorts so that their children can attend preschool at any time during the school hours.⁴¹ This takes the pressure off families for drop-off and pick-up and enhances the parents' economic opportunities. Other preschools put in place transport arrangements between preschool and long day care providers.⁴² The Review heard from Aboriginal stakeholders in the survey and site visits that transport is one of the biggest enablers for children to attend preschool.⁴³

Some preschools have reflected Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing, in both remote communities and urban schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students. Some preschools reflect language, mobility and cultural obligations, including by recognising the educational and developmental value of cultural learning. In some cases, this includes bi-lingual teaching⁴⁴ and learning on Country.⁴⁵ Self-determining local communities and people with cultural authority in the governance and delivery of services can improve cultural safety and responsiveness, boost engagement, and provide genuine two-way learning.⁴⁶

Some preschool included outreach services that engaged with families and children where they live to increase understanding of preschool and its value.⁴⁷ Staff at Nemarluk School conducted outreach activities to students' home and long day cares to understand their needs.⁴⁸

Other providers are addressing workforce challenges in innovative ways, such as employing family liaison officers where possible and increasing local Aboriginal employment by creating hybrid roles.

Most preschool providers are meeting quality standards

High-quality delivery of early childhood services is supported by the National Quality Framework (NQF). The NQF provides demanding but achievable standards that underpin quality and community confidence. In the NT, there are 225 early childhood services (including preschool providers), of which 213 have a quality rating and 178 are meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard.⁴⁹ The NQF data includes early childhood providers that do not offer a preschool program.

Most preschool providers in the NT consistently meet quality standards. Figure 9 shows that the proportion of NT providers meeting NQF standards is only 5.4 per cent lower than the national average despite different operating environments. NT services are most comparable in quality to WA even with rates of remote enrolments six times greater than WA, noting that WA preschools are not regulated under the NQFA.⁵⁰ However, the NT does have the lowest proportion of providers exceeding National Quality Standards, at less than half the rate (12.7 per cent) of the national average of 25.5 per cent.

⁴¹ Preschool Review, Ludmilla Primary School and Gunbalanya School, site visits.

⁴² Preschool Review, Nemarluk School, site visit.

⁴³ Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data, site visits and submissions.

⁴⁴ Preschool Review, Gunbalanya School, site visit.

⁴⁵ Preschool Review, Shepherdson College, site visit.

⁴⁶ Preschool Review, Kids First Australia, written submission.

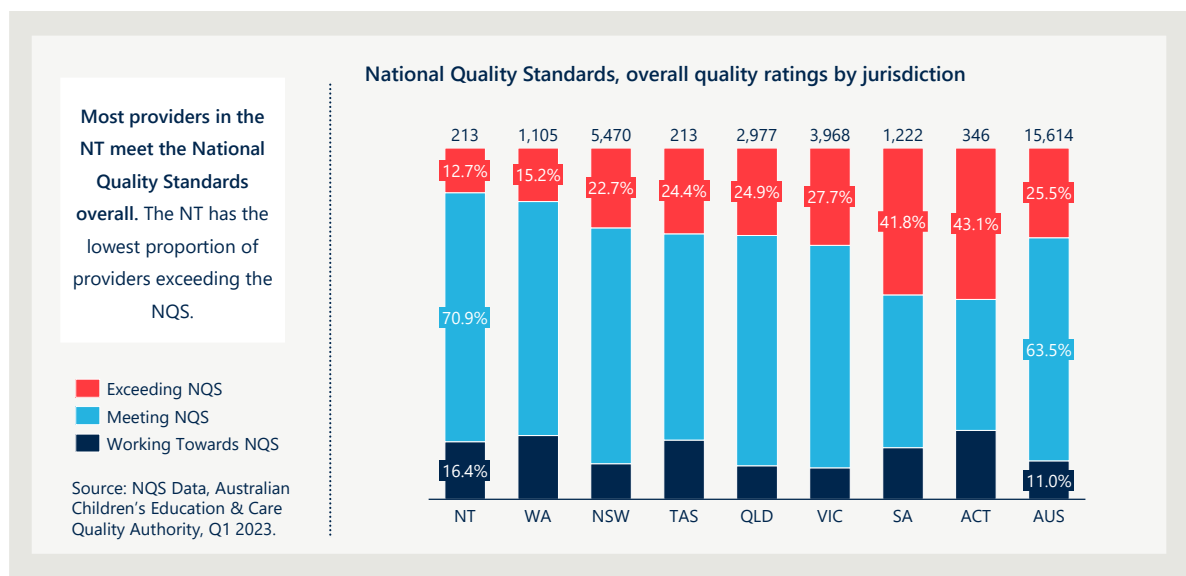
⁴⁷ Preschool Review, Gillen Primary School, and Ludmilla Primary School, site visit. These initiatives were conducted at the time of engagement.

⁴⁸ Preschool Review, Nemarluk School, site visit.

⁴⁹ Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 'NQF Data Quarter 1 2023' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁵⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education, 2022: Table 9' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

Figure 9 | Overall National Quality Standards for early childhood services



These figures exclude the 65 schools in the NT that are not regulated under the NQF.⁵¹ This represents 77 per cent of all preschool programs not delivered by a qualified teacher in Australia.⁵² Most are small remote schools that are not able to employ a qualified teacher. This means schools stay outside the regulatory system and the Department has limited oversight over the quality of preschool programs.

The Review has identified strengths of the broader NT early childhood system

The Review identified complementary programs that support preschool outcomes by providing accessible and culturally safe introduction to formal learning or other services. For example, FaFT, Indy Kindy, and playgroups. Some of these involve access to allied health services that support early identification and intervention of additional supports that may be required.

"The onsite family centre benefits my preschool in so many ways. They are culturally responsive and support us with transitions connections to health and food services."

An educator or support staff member in a government school/preschool

FaFT was mentioned often and favourably by those parents and educators that participated in it. Families using FaFT programs value the combination of play and place-based preschool programs. Many respondents appreciated the hybrid on Country and in school or centre learning experience offered by many FaFT programs. A separate evaluation of FaFT is currently underway.

"I want learning to be at school. Include excursions and learning on country Bininj Way."

FaFT user

The Review identified examples of place-based integration of early childhood services. In a range of communities, specific programs are funded to integrate early years services (e.g. health, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and family support services) around local community needs. These include Connected Beginnings and Child and Family Centres. These programs make it easier for families to access and navigate the services. In some cases, educational leaders and the local community achieve this without additional program funding.

⁵¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education, 2022: Table A2' (2023). The ABS assumes long day care providers that meet the NQF have a qualified teacher delivering the preschool programs. This assumption has not been tested in the Review.

⁵² Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education, 2022: Table A2' (2023). There are 84 service providers with a preschool program not delivered by a qualified teacher in Australia. 13 are in NSW, 2 in Victoria, 3 in Queensland and 65 in the NT.

3.2 There is a strong case for reform to improve participation and child outcomes

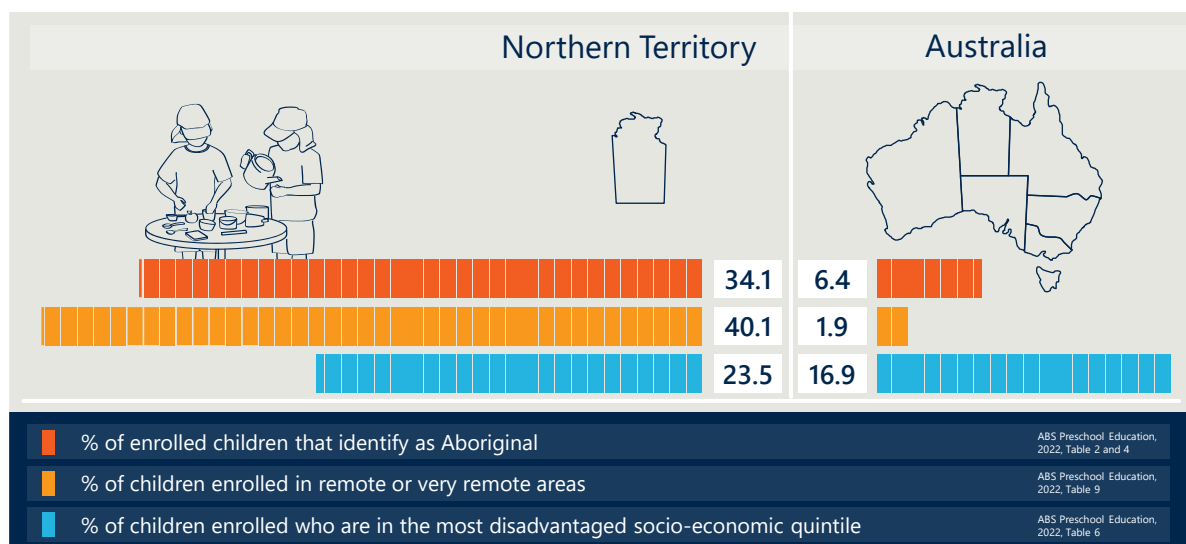
As well as clear strengths of existing preschool in the NT, the Review identified several challenges, including:

- There are barriers to participation in preschool for priority cohorts.
- Developmental outcomes for NT children are behind national averages.
- The 'sessional' model and limited supply can create challenges for families.
- The fragmented funding model requires significant investment from the NT Government.

Many children in priority cohorts face barriers to participation in preschool

The NT has a richly diverse population with high proportions of Aboriginal children, children with English as an additional language, children living in remote locations and families that are transient across different locations. As shown below, this is reflected in preschool enrolments.⁵³

Figure 10 | Diversity of children enrolled in preschool in the Northern Territory



Participation in preschool for children in these priority cohorts is lower than overall in the NT. 'Priority cohorts' are defined in this Review as:

- Aboriginal children.
- Children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.
- Children in remote or very remote locations.
- Children with English as an additional language (EAL).
- Children experiencing or at risk of vulnerability (i.e due to family violence or other risk factors).
- Children with additional needs (i.e. disability and neurodiversity).

There is significant overlap between these groups and children are likely to have intersectional needs.

⁵³ "Enrolment", "600 hour enrolment", "attendance" and "attendance 600 hours per year" are based on the definitions used by the ABS in its Preschool Education Statistics. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education methodology' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

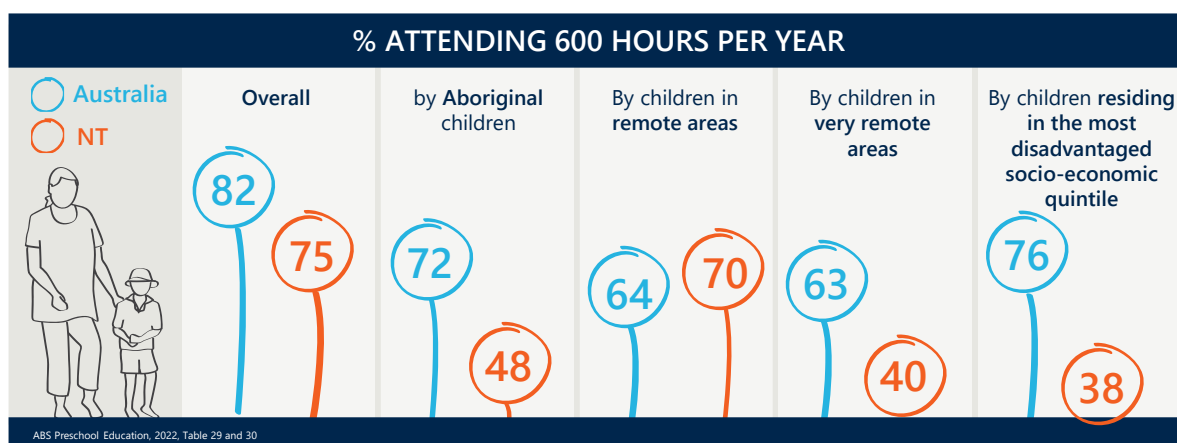
It is estimated that more than a third of Aboriginal children are not enrolled in a preschool program. The Northern Territory is the only state not on track to meet the national Closing the Gap target of 95 per cent⁵⁴ enrolment of the Year Before Full-time Schooling (YBFS) cohort.⁵⁵ 68.7 per cent of Aboriginal children in the YBFS cohort were enrolled in a preschool program compared to 94.4 per cent of non-Indigenous children.

Being present (attendance) is essential for children to get the social, emotional and cognitive benefits of being enrolled in preschool. Attendance rates for priority cohorts in the NT are relatively low. The ABS uses two definitions of attendance:

- “Attendance” means that a child attended preschool at least one hour during the four-week reference period.
- “600 hours attendance” means that a child attended preschool for at least the pro rata equivalent of 600 hours per year in the four-week reference period (i.e. is attending consistent with the 600 hours commitment in the PRA).

In both versions of attendance, the data highlights lower attendance in the NT than the national average especially for Aboriginal children and children residing in the most disadvantaged socio-economic quintile. Figure 11 highlights the disparity in 600 hours attendance rates⁵⁶ for different cohorts in the NT and Australia.

Figure 11 | Attendance data for children in Australia and the NT, by cohort



Preschool attendance rates have improved for priority cohorts over time. Since 2018, the overall attendance rate in the NT has improved more rapidly for priority cohorts than overall attendance rates. Attendance rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) children have improved five percentage points (43 per cent to 48 per cent) and the attendance rates for children living in very remote locations has increased by 11 percentage points (29 per cent to 40 per cent) in the last four years. This may reflect less barriers to accessing preschool for children for priority cohorts. Preschool attendance rates⁵⁷ are illustrated in Figure 12.

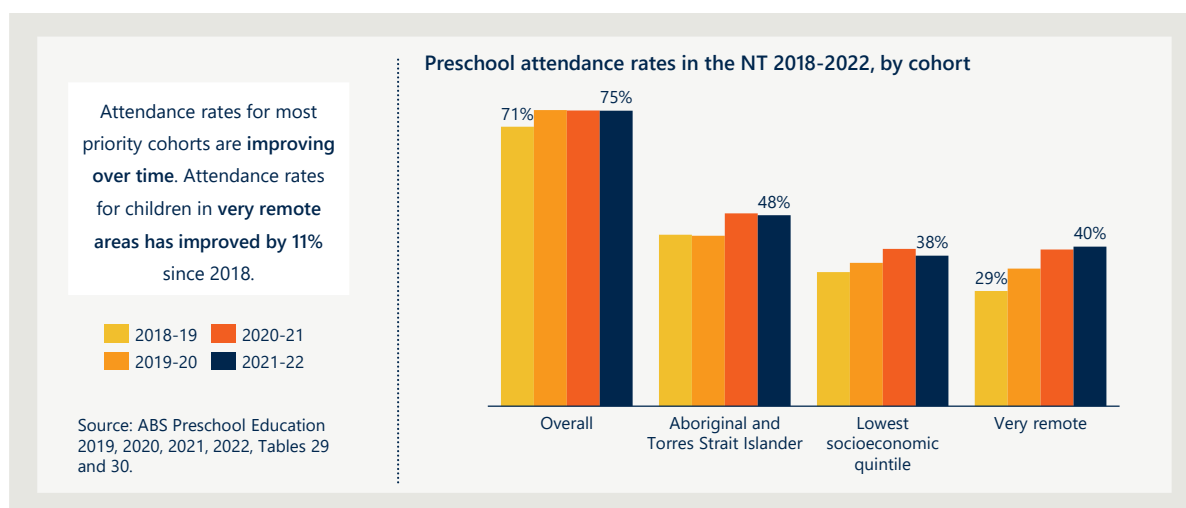
⁵⁴ Productivity Commission, ‘Closing the Gap Information Repository’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁵⁵ ABS population estimates for the YBFS cohort is for children born 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018. Population estimates in the Northern Territory are 3,431 children total, 2037 non-Indigenous children and 1,394 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Preschool Education methodology’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁵⁶ The attendance ‘rate’ is the number of children attending 600 hours as a proportion of the number of children enrolled 600 hours. It is noted that the reference period during which attendance is recorded occurs during the dry season in the NT. In remote communities, this is the time of the lowest attendance due to cultural and other commitments.

⁵⁷ Attendance rate calculated for the YBFS cohort using Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Preschool Education, 2022: Table 29 and 30’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

Figure 12 | Preschool attendance rates over time



Evidence gathered for the Review highlighted that children with additional needs face barriers to accessing the early childhood system, including preschool. Although all services should provide universal access to children, stakeholders noted that many teachers find it challenging to cater to the needs of students with additional needs.⁵⁸ Some stakeholder noted that families must 'shop-around' for services that cater to a child's needs, contributing to longer waitlists.

Once enrolled in a preschool, children with additional needs may not receive the support required due to a lack of funding for specialised staff. The need for more funding to support children with additional needs came out strongly in the survey and one respondent noted to that it can take months to receive additional funding to support children with additional needs once requested.⁵⁹

The barriers to enrolment and attendance for priority cohorts are explored in detail in section 4.2.

"Support for children with additional needs in preschool is woefully inadequate and this is the single biggest impact on our ability to provide an equitable, high quality Preschool education for all our children."

Educator in a government preschool

Child development outcomes for NT children are behind national averages

Evidence shows participation in quality preschool is an important determinant of child development outcomes⁶⁰, especially for children experiencing disadvantage.⁶¹

It is well documented that many children in the NT are developmentally vulnerable. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a national survey held every three years for children in their first year of school across five domains: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge. Key results from the 2021 AEDC for the NT are shown below.⁶²

⁵⁸ Preschool Review, interviews with staff at Namarluk school, site visits.

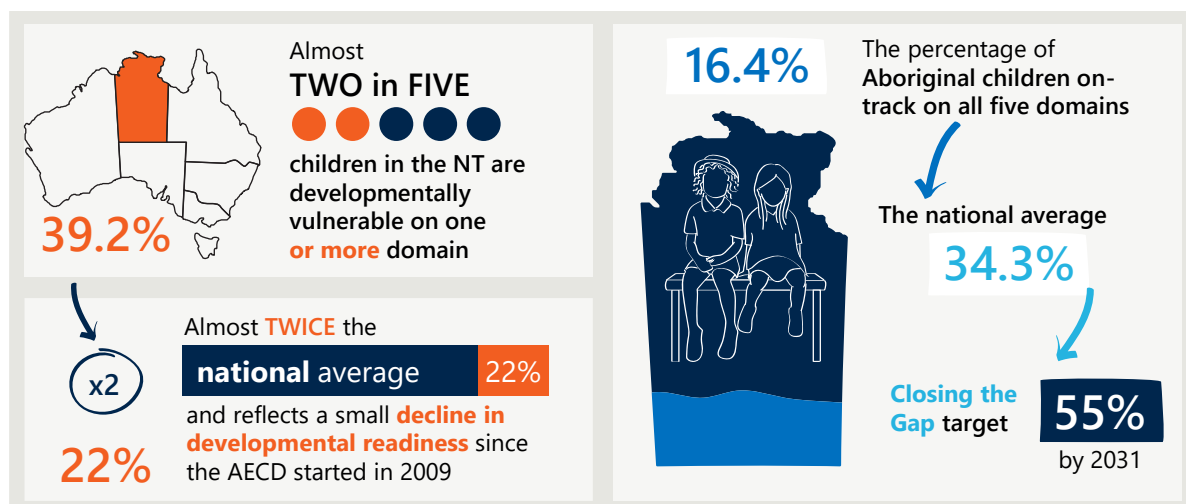
⁵⁹ Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

⁶⁰ Sharon Goldfield et al., 'The role of preschool in promoting children's healthy development: Evidence from an Australian population cohort' *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* (2016). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁶¹ Brenda Taggart et al., 'Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project: How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and development outcomes over time' *United Kingdom Government Department of Education* (2015). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁶² Early Childhood Development in Australia, 'Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

Figure 13 | Insights from the Australian Early Development Census 2021



This means that more needs to be done across early years services to support these children and their families. Preschool in the NT must be designed to respond to the developmental vulnerabilities experienced by many NT children.

The 'sessional' model and limited supply of preschool in remote areas can create challenges for families

Current legislative and policy settings provide for 15 hours per week (600 hours per year) of funded preschool, on a non-compulsory basis. Preschool providers structure these hours in many different ways. For preschool delivered in government schools, this is generally limited to school hours and school terms. Many provide fixed hours for a limited number of days per week. Others provide more flexibility, particularly to priority groups.

"Half days for preschool are very hard to do... At times my son didn't get to preschool because the transportation between long day care and school wasn't available."

Parent

In preschool delivered in government schools, these hours are often split across shorter days (known as "sessional" preschool) and do not provide the flexibility to balance work and family commitments. We have heard that this leads to children attending multiple providers and can result in a disjointed learning experience for children, families and providers with children (see section 4.3.2).

Many remote areas in the NT are considered child care 'deserts' where demand outstrips supply for early childhood education and care, including preschools.⁶³ Site visits highlighted challenges common across the sector are exacerbated in remote preschools including workforce and teacher shortages and a lack of appropriate infrastructure to host additional classes.⁶⁴ Many preschools are operating at their full capacity.⁶⁵ This results in waitlists for children with not enough places in existing preschool settings.

The current funding model creates fragmentation and does not foster equity or transparency

Funding for preschool delivery in the NT comes through three main channels:

- **Preschool delivered in government school** is funded through the NT Department of Education's School Resourcing Model;

⁶³ Peter Hurley, Hannah Matthews, Sue Pennicuk, 'Deserts and oases: How Accessible is child care?' *Mitchel Institute, Victoria University* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁶⁴ Preschool Review, Big Rivers Review Workshop, sector expert consultation; Preschool Review, Tennant Creek Primary School and Shepherdson College, site visits.

⁶⁵ Preschool Review, Site Visits Review Workshop, Stage 1, sector expert consultation.

- **Preschool in long day care services and Early Learning Centres at non-government schools** is funded through a combination of parent fees that are subsidised through the Child Care Subsidy and minor NT Government contributions; and
- **Targeted programs** (e.g. FAFT, Connected Beginnings, Child and Family Centres and Indy Kindy) are funded through the Australian and NT Governments and a number of philanthropic funders.

The NT Government provides funding for the delivery of preschool in government schools through the School Resourcing Model (SRM).⁶⁶ It uses a student needs-based funding formula, which for preschool students includes a base rate adjusted by 0.6 Full Time Equivalent (FTE), reflecting the required 600 hours of preschool per year. Australian Government funding through the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement is a minor contributor to preschool funding, accounting for less than 20 per cent of total funding.

Funding arrangements for early childhood services are complex, making them hard for providers and parents to navigate and creating incentives for a fragmented system. Providing early childhood services that integrate education and care is difficult because funding is split for early childhood care (largely funded by the Australian Government) and early childhood education (largely preschool funded by states and territories). Short-term grant funding creates uncertainty for providers and makes workforces challenges harder to manage. Many sources of related programs and funding from a range of philanthropic and Territory and Australian Government funding are not well coordinated. For example, the Review heard that programs such as Indy Kindy and Children’s Ground do not fall neatly into government funding allocations and rely heavily on philanthropic funding.⁶⁷

Funding arrangements do not provide transparency or equity across settings. Different funding channels for government school-based preschool and in non-government preschool make it hard to create and monitor equity. Tracking the use of preschool funding is not currently possible in both preschool delivered in government schools and other services. This is because government schools are not required to report on the proportion of their funding that is allocated to preschool children, compared to other primary years. Non-government providers are not explicitly funded for preschool services, making it impossible to acquit the NT Government’s obligations to Funding Follows the Child principles in the PRA.

The NT Government bears more of the funding burden for early childhood services⁶⁸ than other states and territories

The overall funding model for early childhood services creates a disproportionate burden on the NT Government, which provides 35.5 per cent of total government funding for early childhood services, compared to an average of 16.4 per cent for other states and territories, as shown in Figure 14 below.⁶⁹

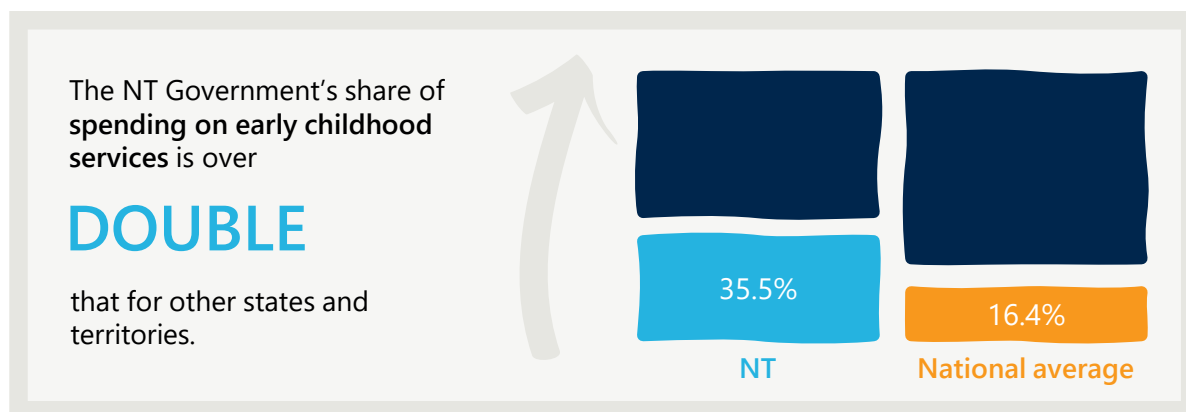
⁶⁶ The SRM is the mechanism used to allocate annual funding to government schools to deliver an educational program to all students.

⁶⁷ Preschool Review, Indy Kindy, site visit.

⁶⁸ The Report uses ‘early childhood services’ to refer to all early childhood education and care services (including preschool).

⁶⁹ Nous and VU analysis of Productivity Commission, ‘Report on Government Services: Tables 3A.4, 3A.5, 3A.6 and 3A.7’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

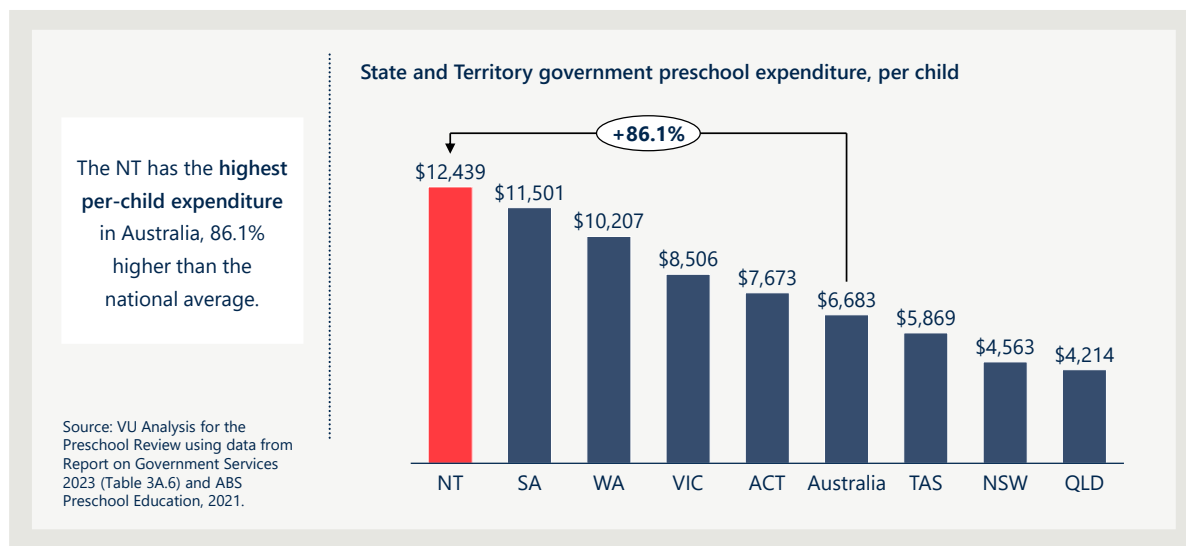
Figure 14 | Share of spending on early childhood services



Some of this higher share of spending by the NT Government is explained the relatively low share of spending by the Australian Government, driven by the ineffectiveness of demand-based Australian Government universal access schemes in the NT context such the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) and Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS). Demand-based funding mechanisms are not effective in remote areas because there is often a thin, or no, market for providers.⁷⁰ Additionally, the Review heard that there are barriers to uptake of the CCS⁷¹ such a complicated process to apply, unclear eligibility, cost barriers to the required parental co-payment and an inequitable 'CCS Activity Test'.⁷² This results in a low uptake of the CCS in the NT relative to population size and need. The Australia Government provides funding for remote and very remote areas through Community Child Care Fund restricted non-competitive grants (CCCFR). CCCFR is a transition arrangement for previous Budget Based Funding (BBF) child care services that has been in place since 1 July 2018, to ensure their viability under new child care arrangements. CCCFR arrangements are currently under review.

Most of the higher share of spending by the NT Government is explained by high levels of expenditure. The NT Government spent \$39 million on preschool in 2021-22, representing the highest per-child expenditure in Australia, as shown in Figure 15 below.⁷³

Figure 15 | State and Territory government preschool expenditure per child in the year before school



⁷⁰ Stephanie Convery, 'Over a third of all Australians live in child care 'deserts', research says' *The Guardian* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁷¹ Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

⁷² Preschool Review, Early Childhood Australia, written submission.

⁷³ VU analysis based on Productivity Commission, 'Report on Government Services: Tables 3A.6' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#) and Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education, Australia' (2021) (TableBuilder query).

This higher preschool expenditure per child is the result of:

- **A focus on preschool delivered in government schools**, in common with WA and SA. This form of preschool tends to have higher staffing costs and involve lower or zero offsetting contributions from parent and the Australian Government through the child care subsidy;
- **The smaller scale of NT preschool services (particularly in remote locations)**, resulting in a lack of economies of scale. The average number of enrolments in an NT preschool service is 24 children, compared to 40-50 children in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. Smaller preschool enrolments are concentrated in remote and very remote regions.
- **Additional investment due to the socio-demographic factors of children attending preschools in the Northern Territory**. This includes the higher needs of priority cohorts.

Analysis of the costs of government school delivery by the Commonwealth Grants Commission (CGC) provides an indication of the relative scale of these factors. Based on the CGC's cost weights for service delivery scale and socio-demographic composition, the cost of preschool in the NT is expected to be 53.2 per cent above the Australian average.⁷⁴ This suggests that most or all of the remaining 29.9 per cent difference may be explained by the focus on preschool delivered in government schools.

⁷⁴ Despite this, contributions to preschool delivery by the Australian Government under the PRA are at a fixed per child level nationwide.

4 Vision and future directions



This section presents the Review’s findings and recommendations for the Department. It articulates the Review’s vision for the future of preschool in the NT and presents fourteen recommendations that can deliver on this vision through:

- **Overarching recommendations** that underpin reform, including the definition and position of preschool, increasing participation rates among priority cohorts and embedding a system stewardship approach.
- **Setting the foundations for learning**, by strengthening the diversity and flexibility of delivery models, enhancing continuity of child and parent experience and improving integration of preschool with other early years services.
- Progressively **providing additional hours** of funded preschool, taking a targeted and evidence-informed approach.
- **Simplifying funding** by pooling resources and designing a bespoke funding mechanism.
- **Supporting providers** by investing in workforce capacity and capability, fit-for-purpose infrastructure and an NT-specific evidence base.

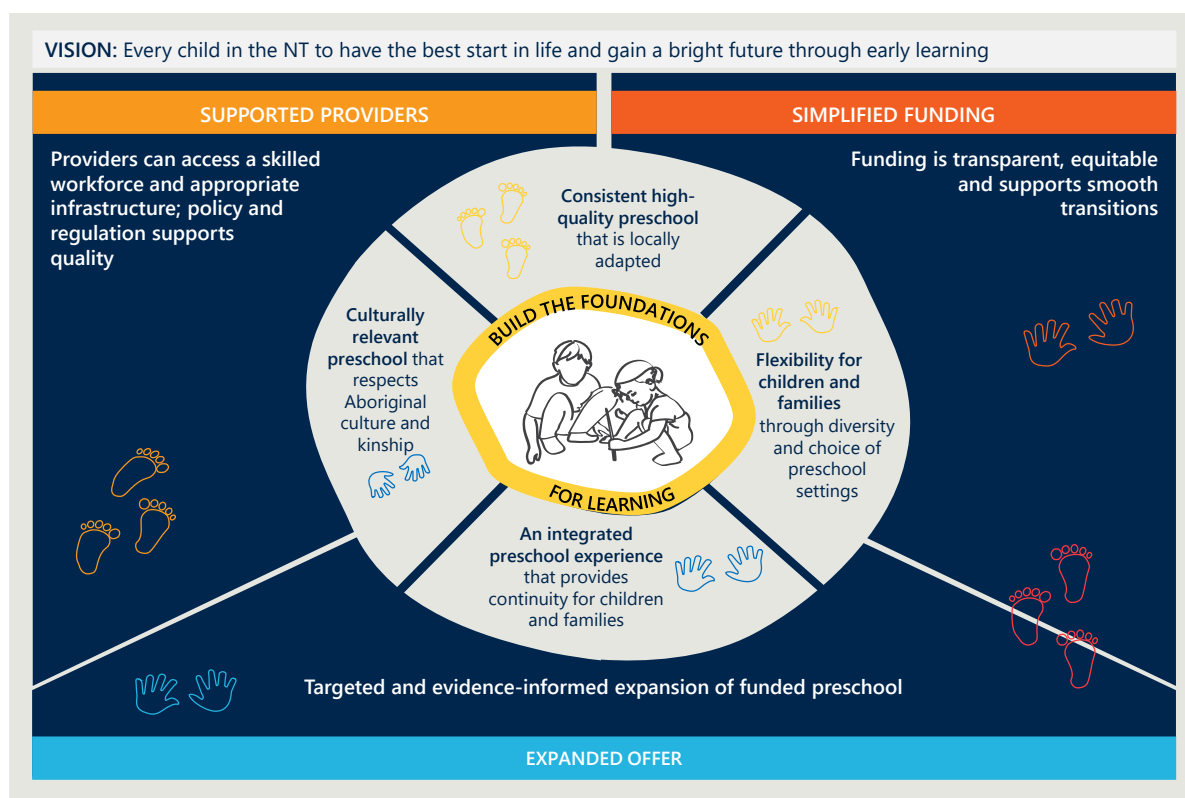
4.1 The Review has developed a vision for the future of preschool in the NT

The Review considered how to build on existing strengths of preschool in the NT and address the challenges identified in section 2.2. The overall vision is: **“every child in the NT to have the best start in life and gain a bright future through early learning”**, with preschool operating as the core of a diverse but integrated early childhood system.

Figure 16 describes the vision for preschool in ten years:

- **Attendance and participation in preschool is consistently high across all cohorts**, including Aboriginal children, children with additional needs, children in remote areas, children with English as an additional language and children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.
- **Parents have access to a form of preschool that meets their needs**, including those working full time.
- **Preschool quality is consistently high across all settings and delivered by a range of provider types**, including schools, early childhood services, and integrated early childhood services.
- **Preschool is well-integrated into the wider early years and family service system and provides for continuity of learning across the education system.**

Figure 16 | Vision for preschool



The Review reinforces the importance of preschool as a core and universal component of an effective early childhood system. However, the Review does not recommend a single preschool service provider type or delivery model and is agnostic about which evidence-based and NQF-consistent pedagogy each service provider should adopt.

The Review **does** identify four **essential features** that service delivery models should demonstrate, across provider types:

- **Consistent high-quality preschool that is locally adapted** – Preschool delivery that meets or exceeds National Quality Standards and is adapted to local context and needs.
- **Culturally relevant preschool that respects Aboriginal culture and kinship** – Preschool that embraces and reflects Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing so that Aboriginal families and children feel safe and included. In the NT context, this applies to **all** preschool settings. Preschool that works for Aboriginal children can work for all children.
- **Flexibility for children and families through diversity and choice of preschool settings** – Families can choose the service delivery model that works for them with a range of preschool settings and provider types available.
- **An integrated preschool experience that provides continuity for children and families** – Children experience continuity in their learning and care, building nurturing relationships and avoiding excessive disruption or fragmentation between settings.⁷⁵ Parents experience convenience in their child’s early learning and care settings, avoiding undesired disruption or unnecessary transportation between settings. Preschool services are well integrated with other early years services, including health and family support services.

⁷⁵ For additional information about the impact of fragmentation on a child’s early years, see Carla Rinaldi ‘Re-imagining Childhood: The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia’ (2013). Available at [\[link\]](#).

The Review encountered strong evidence and consistent stakeholder sentiment in favour of integration and continuity. However, there are several dimensions of integration and continuity that are often conflated. Sector documents, such as the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, use continuity, transitions and integration interchangeably to refer different concepts.⁷⁶ For this reason, the Review has adopted a clear typology, as illustrated in Figure 17.

Figure 17 | Dimensions of ‘integration’

'INTEGRATION'			
Conceptual difference	INTEGRATION	CONTINUITY	
	The service is integrated.	The experience of the child and family is simple and continuous.	
Terminology for report	SERVICE INTEGRATION	CONTINUITY OF EXPERIENCE	CONTINUITY OF LEARNING/ STRONG TRANSITIONS
Definition	How the early childhood system (including preschool) fits with other programs and services (such as health, child protection, family services).	Over the day/week, the child and family minimise the costs and risks of fragmentation (engaging with multiple services). [*] Within a preschool setting, there is a continuity between educators and pedagogical approaches .	Preschool fits into the child's consistent early learning journey from birth until the early years of schooling (i.e. the child's education pathway).
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased access to multiple services Opportunities for early intervention Priority cohorts are likely to benefit the most from a range of supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced fragmentation for children Reduced need for transport between services Increased opportunity for deep and ongoing relationships Increased convenience for working parents and carers Reduces unhelpful distinction between education and care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developmental benefits of preschool continue into formal primary and secondary schooling Children are better prepared for the transition to school
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Precincts and hubs (co-location) Child and Family Centres Services with pro-active referrals, common operating models etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long day care (with preschool integrated^{**}) Early Learning Centre Preschool co-located with out of school hours care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A smooth transition from FAF to preschool A smooth transition from preschool to Transition and year 1 of schooling

^{*} See Carla Rinaldi, 'Re-imagining Childhood: the inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia' (2013).
^{**} preschool within a long day care setting is sometimes referred to as an 'integrated' model (compared to a sessional model).

The Review uses 'continuity' to describe the experience of the child and family of consistency between settings or easy transitions in early childhood. In this Report, 'integration' is used exclusively to refer to the integration of services, such as preschool with other health or other childhood services. There is overlap between the terminology as preschool integrated with other early childhood or other services can create continuity of experience and learning for children and families. However, continuity of experience can also be facilitated by effective hand over between settings, co-location or other solutions to local challenges (e.g. transport between services). The distinction broadly aligns with submissions from stakeholders and other documents used in the sector.⁷⁷

The Review's recommendations, summarised in Figure 18 overleaf, are aimed at creating the system level changes that can bring the vision and the four essential features to life.

⁷⁶ Australian Government Department of Education 'Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework of Australian (V2.0)' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#). Understood as 'continuity of learning and transitions'. Continuity is understood as 'where children experience familiar or similar ways of being, doing and learning from one setting to another'. Transitions is understood as 'everyday occurrences between routines, play spaces or settings, as well as bigger transitions including from home to starting at school or an early childhood setting, or from one early childhood setting to another'.

⁷⁷ Preschool Review, Charles Darwin University Early Childhood Special Interest Group, written submission; Preschool Review, Goodstart, written submission; South Australia Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education, 'Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education & Care' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#); Anthea Jo Taylor, 'Coming, ready or not: Aboriginal children's transition to school in urban Australia and the policy push, International Journal of Early Years Education' (2011). Available at: [\[link\]](#); Steering Committee on Child Care Workshops, 'Child Care for Low-Income Families: Summary of Two Workshops' *National Academic Press* (1995). Available at [\[link\]](#).

Figure 18 | Fourteen recommendations of the Preschool Review

OVERARCHING	1	Define and position high-quality preschool as a core element of the early childhood system, regardless of provider.
	2	Prioritise action to increase participation among priority cohorts, through targeted local solutions to barriers to access.
	3	Define and embed a system stewardship approach to achieving preschool outcomes.
FOUNDATIONS FOR LEARNING	4	Promote diversity in preschool delivery settings to create flexibility for families .
	5	Enhance continuity of experience in all settings, particularly in government schools.
	6	Improve service integration, particularly in priority locations where co-location through hubs or precincts may be appropriate.
EXPANDED OFFER	7	Progressively increase the funded hours of 4-year old preschool , starting with priority cohorts .
	8	Take an evidence-based approach to further expansion of fully subsidised access to 3-year-old preschool .
SIMPLIFIED FUNDING	9	Simplify funding for preschool by consolidating all NTG funding into a single funding pool.
	10	Design and implement a bespoke preschool funding mechanism that promotes choice and quality preschools with continuity of experience for children and family.
	11	In remote communities and other priority locations, pursue pooling of all Commonwealth and NT Government funding for early childhood services, to fund service integration and place-based approaches with local community governance .
SUPPORTED PROVIDERS	12	Invest in the capacity and capability of the early childhood workforce , particularly remote and Aboriginal staff.
	13	Design and progressively roll out fit for purpose infrastructure , starting with locations with the greatest need .
	14	Develop an evidence base for what works for preschool in the NT .

4.2 Three overarching recommendations set the future reform direction

This section describes the Review's three overarching recommendations that set the overall reform direction. These recommendations are about changing the way that the Department, schools and the community think about preschool in the NT (recommendation 1), focusing effort on the most important challenge for preschool in the NT (recommendation 2), and what that means for how the Department works to support preschool outcomes (recommendation 3).

4.2.1 A clear articulation of preschool's role in the early childhood system can position preschool for the future

Improving preschool outcomes in the NT starts with changing how the community, schools and the Department think about what preschool is, how it can be delivered and funded, and the outcomes it can deliver. This section describes how:

- Preschool is well defined and evidenced as a discrete program combining education and care.
- Preschool is delivered differently across Australia.
- Preschool in the NT is narrowly understood, limiting its effectiveness.
- Positioning preschool as a core part of the broader early childhood system can bring benefits.
- Clear stakeholder communication can broaden perspectives on preschool.

Preschool is well defined and evidenced as a discrete program combining education and care

Preschool is a "structured, play-based learning program, delivered by a degree qualified teacher, aimed primarily at children in the year or two before they commence full-time schooling."⁷⁸ There is a strong national and international evidence base, outlined in section 2.1 above, that high-quality preschool as a discrete but connected part of the broader early years system can deliver outcomes for children, families and the broader community.

Three features of this nationally consistent definition and evidence base stand out:

- It is **provider-neutral**; for example, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's definition in its Metadata Registry⁷⁹ adopts the ABS definition above, adding that this applies "irrespective of the type of institution that provides it or whether it is government funded or privately provided. Programs may be delivered in a variety of service settings including separate preschools or kindergartens, long day care centres, in association with a school etc."
- It **combines education and care**; preschool is more than a tool for school readiness. It is an enriching experience in the child's early years in that moment of time; it can support child development more broadly (e.g. emotional and social development, rather than just cognitive); it can be a point of identification of developmental delays for early intervention; and it can support parents' and carers' workforce participation.
- The **impact of preschool is contingent on its quality**. The quality of preschool is largely based on structural factors (the ratios of adults to children, qualifications of the adult, group size, infrastructure)

⁷⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education methodology' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

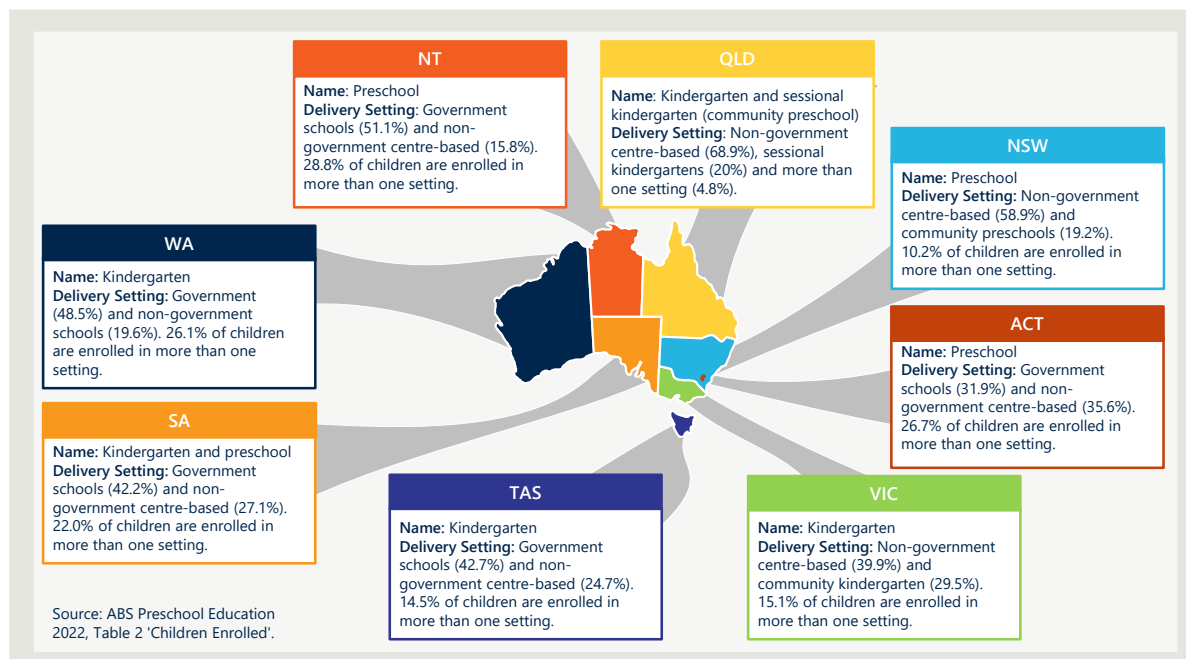
⁷⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Early childhood education program, METEOR Metadata Online Registry' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

and process factors (the pedagogy used, child to adult interactions, child engagement with materials).⁸⁰ The National Quality Framework, which applies to preschool and a broader range of early learning and school aged care services, provides a nationally consistent way of thinking about quality.

Preschool is delivered differently across Australia

Within this nationally consistent definition of preschool, there are a range of names and distribution of delivery settings across Australia. A summary of these is shown in Figure 19 below. In the Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania, government schools are the largest provider of preschool. In New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, non-government long day care and community preschools account for the majority of enrolments.

Figure 19 | Map of preschool naming and delivery setting across jurisdictions⁸¹



Similar differences are present for the first year of schooling (year prior to Year 1), referred to as Transition in the NT, Kindergarten in the Australian Central Territory (ACT) and New South Wales, Reception in South Australia, Preparatory (Prep) or Foundation in Victoria, Preparatory in Queensland and Pre-Primary in Western Australia.

Preschool in the NT is understood narrowly, limiting its effectiveness

The NT's emphasis on sessional preschool delivery through government schools is deeply ingrained. It is embedded in:

- **Enrolment data** – as outlined in section 2.2, almost 80 per cent of children enrolled in preschool in the NT are enrolled in a preschool delivered in government schools.
- **The funding model** – the NT Department of Education's School Resourcing Model (SRM) provides preschool funding to government schools only. Other preschool settings receive minor and indirect funding such as the Early Childhood Services Subsidy, which provide less than 10 per cent of the equivalent average funding per child from the SRM.

⁸⁰ NSW Department of Community Services, 'Determinants of quality in child care: a review of the research evidence: a literature review' (2008). Available at [link](#).

⁸¹ Figure 19 includes most common delivery settings and excludes settings with >10% of enrolments.

- **Community attitudes**, including around quality – the Review encountered a widespread perception that preschool delivered in government school is higher quality than preschool delivered by other providers, despite the NQF quality data not showing a significant quality difference by provider type. The Review observed and some stakeholders reported that these attitudes are reinforced by messaging some from school leaders and staff that only preschool delivered in government school counts as preschool and supports school readiness.

This brings some important strengths. Seventy years of preschool delivery through government schools provides a sense of continuity and safety in tradition. Funding under the SRM and school-based industrial arrangements result in salaries and conditions that are attractive relative to the child care sector. Co-locating preschool services on a school site brings advantages including:

- Continuity of learning is facilitated through transitions to schooling on the same site;
- For some parents having younger children attend preschool at the same location as their elder siblings is convenient; and
- The free and universal platform of a government school can provide an accessible location for preschool and other early years services, particularly in remote and very remote locations where alternative infrastructure can be scarce.

However, the narrow understanding of preschool in the NT also creates unintended consequences that limit its effectiveness. The prevailing model:

- **Undermines continuity of experience** through an artificial distinction between education and care. The current system incentivises parents to combine multiple early childhood settings (and related transitions) each week, combining preschool delivered in government schools with non-government long day care settings (see section 4.3.2 below). As a result, at least 28.8 per cent of children are enrolled in two preschool settings, the highest rate in Australia;
- **Constrains parental choice and flexibility** – community perceptions and the current funding model incentivise many parents to only consider their local government school as a provider of preschool (see section 4.3.1 below). Limited spaces and often inflexible preschool session times further reduce flexibility;
- **Can make cultural relevance harder to achieve** – for many Aboriginal people, schools are not seen as culturally safe places for parents to send their young children (see section 4.2.2 below); and
- **Drives high costs**, particularly for the NT Government (see section 3.2 above).

Positioning preschool as a core part of the broader early childhood system can bring benefits

Preschool can be a core element of a contemporary early childhood system that reflects the needs of families and children. A system in which:

- **Quality standards** are consistently applied and defined by the National Quality Framework, not assumptions about provider types;
- Parents and carers have a **choice** of preschool settings and can select one that provides sufficient **flexibility** to meet their and their child's needs;
- Children have **continuity of experience**, enabling them to build sustained relationships, avoid unnecessary fragmentation and gain the well-evidenced benefits of access to quality preschool that combines learning and care;
- Preschool is well **integrated** with other early years services; and
- Preschool is **culturally relevant and inclusive to all children**, including respecting and reflecting Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Define and position high-quality preschool as a core element of the early childhood system, regardless of provider.

Clear stakeholder communication and incentives can broaden perspectives on preschool

Implementing this recommendation would require a **communication campaign** that clearly articulates the role of preschool as a core element of the early childhood system, defines the essential features and celebrates the diverse range of delivery models and settings that are available. It would also need to articulate the supplementary role of targeted programs and initiatives that support early learning objectives, such as mobile playgroups and brokerage services such as Connected Beginnings. To signal its intent to change perceptions and move a more contemporary system, the Department could consider renaming “preschool” to an alternative and relevant name.

The Department would also need to **revisit the suite of early childhood and transition to school policies**⁸². This could include a consideration of how the Transition year of schooling intersects with preschool to provide continuity of learning.

More broadly, changing perceptions of preschool will require **changed expectations and incentives for preschool**. Many of the Review’s other recommendations are designed to achieve this, including:

- Boosting diversity, flexibility, continuity of experience and integration (recommendations 4 – 6); and
- Updated funding arrangements that incentivise choice, continuity and integration (recommendations 9 – 11).

Stakeholders noted that there are early childhood service models in the NT that have adapted to local circumstances and constraints to support participation among priority cohorts. For example, the Family as First Teachers (FaFT) program delivered across over 50 sites including 40 traditional FaFT programs and several Stay Play Learn FaFT programs at a range of schools, Child and Family Centres or as stand-alone services take a tailored and localised approach to community outreach. They build strong and trusted relationships with the community to increase engagement. Other Aboriginal community-controlled organisations are registered as preschools under the NQF, such as the Ampe Kenhe Apmere Congress Childcare.⁸³

Implementation considerations

The department may want to consider:



- Conducting a communication campaign to realign perceptions of preschool in the NT.
- Rebranding “preschool” to an alternative and relevant name.
- Revisiting its suite of relevant policies to ensure alignment.

4.2.2 Lifting participation rates for priority cohorts requires local action to address barriers to access

Children experiencing disadvantage benefit most from access to quality preschool. Preschool is proven to have a positive effect on school readiness and the emotional, social and cognitive development of

⁸² For example, Northern Territory Government Department of Education, ‘Early childhood transitioning to school – policy’ (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

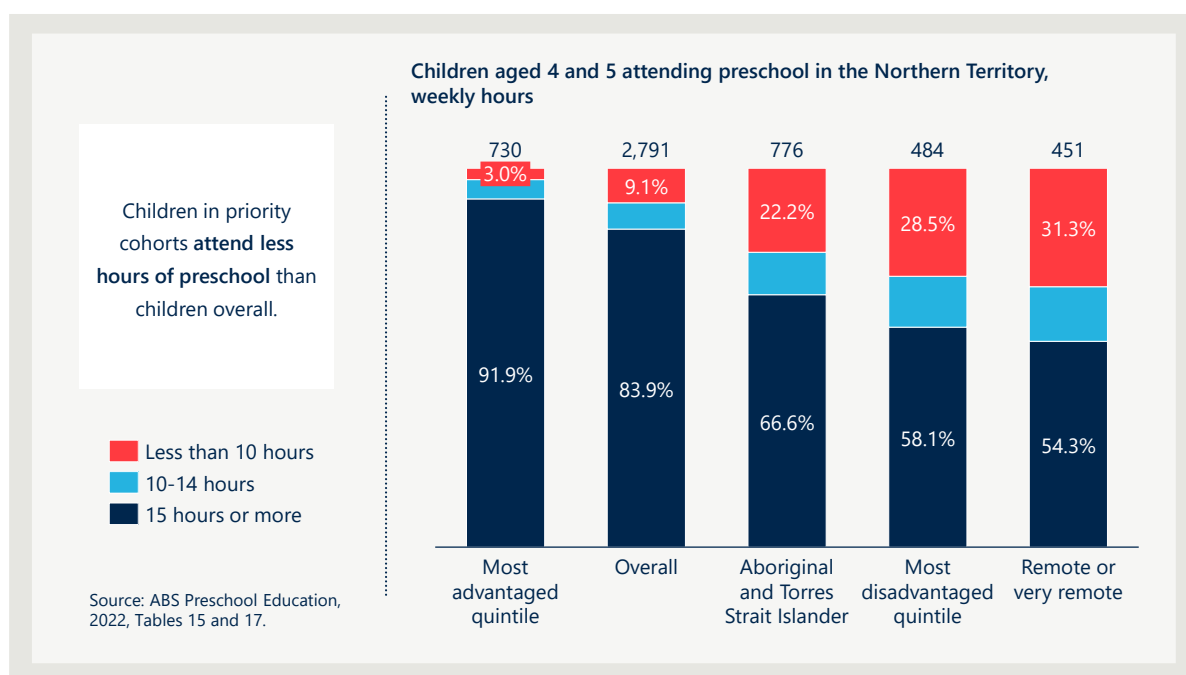
⁸³ Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, ‘Ampe Kenhe Apmere Congress Childcare’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

children.⁸⁴ There is compelling evidence that the positive impact of preschool on primary school outcomes and improved wellbeing is particularly strong for priority cohorts.⁸⁵

As explored in section 3.2, priority cohorts have lower enrolment and attendance than other cohorts in the Northern Territory. Attendance rates for priority cohorts are significantly lower than the rate overall in the NT (75 per cent). Only 40 per cent of children in very remote areas, 48 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and 38 per cent of children in the most disadvantaged socio-economic quintile attend 600 hours of preschool per year (see Figure 11 on page 21).

Priority cohorts in the NT are attending less hours of preschool than their peers. This means they are missing out on valuable time developing emotion, cognitive and social skills with their peers. Almost one third of those children attending in remote or very remote communities attended less than 10 hours in the reference week, compared to just three per cent of children in the most advantaged socio-economic quintile and 9.1 per cent of children overall. Figure 20 shows the distribution of the distribution of the number of hours children attend preschool by cohort.

Figure 20 | Hours of preschool attended per week, by cohort



More needs to be done across early years services to support these children and their families to attend high-quality preschool.

System barriers to participation in preschool are well known

The attendance and enrolment data shows 5.6 per cent of non-Indigenous children and 31.3 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the YBFS cohort are not enrolled in a preschool program.⁸⁶ The Review has found some common barriers to enrolment:

⁸⁴ New South Wales Department of Education, 'Benefits of Early Childhood Education' (2022). Available [\[link\]](#).

⁸⁵ Brenda Taggart, Kathy Sylva, Edward Melhuish, Pam Sammons and Iram Siraj, 'Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project: How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and development outcomes over time', *United Kingdom Government Department of Education* (2015). Available at [\[link\]](#); David Blau, 'The Effects of Universal Preschool on Child and Adult Outcomes: A Review of Recent Evidence from Europe with Implications for the United States', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#); Susan Pascoe and Deborah Brennan, 'Lifting Our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools Through Early Childhood Interventions' (2017). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁸⁶ See Australian Bureau of Statistics, data at section 2.2.2.

- **Service availability** – Remote or very remote areas are more likely to be ‘service deserts’ where there is less than one child care place for every three children.⁸⁷ Children in remote areas may need to travel significant distances to access the nearest preschool. The Productivity Commission found that location and availability are the two most important factors when choosing child care and services in the Northern Territory and (besides Greater Darwin) have very few, if any, potential competitors.⁸⁸ Availability of transport and waiting list for enrolment are also a challenge in thin remote markets.⁸⁹ Almost 20 per cent of survey respondents indicated that a lack of places available at the local preschool was the biggest barrier to accessing preschool.⁹⁰
- **Service awareness and perception** – Parent perceptions and awareness of preschool impact their likelihood to enrol their child in a preschool. Parents may be unaware of the services available, how to access them or have generally disengaged from the early childhood system due to its complexity. Parents may also have limited knowledge of the benefits or relevance of preschool for their child’s development. Some studies have found that stereotypes about maternal roles and child readiness discourage parents from accessing preschool.⁹¹
- **Service cost** – Actual, perceived or unclear costs can be a barrier for enrolment, particularly among families with lower disposable income.⁹²
- **Low trust in service** – Particularly among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) communities, there may be a perception of better care in kinship and family networks and a lack of trust in services run by Government institutions.⁹³ Previous negative experiences with the early childhood system or government institutions are a barrier to participation.

“Transport and not feeling as though the program is culturally appropriate and welcoming is the biggest barrier for Aboriginal children.”

An educator in a government

Once enrolled, there are barriers to children attending the service regularly. Priority cohorts may attend preschool for less hours than their peers due to factors such as:

- **Compounding inequalities** – Structural disadvantage (poverty, unemployment and uncertain housing) means families cannot prioritise attendance over other more urgent needs. Child or family medical or mental health issues are other barriers to participation exacerbated by compounding forms of inequality.⁹⁴
- **A lack of cultural safety** – Quality preschool must prioritise cultural safety through services that are designed, run or taught by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and incorporate Aboriginal

⁸⁷ Peter Hurley, Hannah Matthews, Sue Pennicuik, ‘Deserts and oases: How Accessible is childcare?’ *Mitchel Institute, Victoria University* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁸⁸ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, ‘Childcare inquiry Interim Report’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁸⁹ Northern Territory Government, ‘Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care: Northern Territory Government Submission’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#); Centre for Policy Development, ‘Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁹⁰ 19.7% overall indicated “no places available at the local school” as the biggest barrier. Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

⁹¹ Sarah Howells et al., ‘Rapid review of the literature and results of an academic pulse survey to determine the evidence behind preschool for 3-year-olds’, *Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, South Australia* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#); Ruth Beatson et al., ‘Early Childhood Education Participation: A Mixed-Methods Study of Parent and Provider Perceived Barriers and Facilitators’, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁹² 63% of those surveyed rated affording child care as a difficulty they experienced in 2021. Natasha Cortis, Megan Blaxland and Sara Charlesworth, ‘Challenges of work, family and care’, *Social Policy Research Centre* (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#); Majority of respondents said that high child care costs are rated as a barrier to having children. The Front Project, ‘Work and play: Understanding how Australian families experience early childhood education and care’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁹³ Ruth Beatson et al., ‘Early Childhood Education Participation: A Mixed-Methods Study of Parent and Provider Perceived Barriers and Facilitators’, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁹⁴ Ruth Beatson et al., ‘Early Childhood Education Participation: A Mixed-Methods Study of Parent and Provider Perceived Barriers and Facilitators’, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

ways of being, knowing and doing in teaching.⁹⁵ Those consulted had a strong desire for more on Country programs, such as Children’s Ground, to create a hybrid model of education with ‘brick and mortar’ services.⁹⁶ Stakeholders also identified growing the Aboriginal workforce as a key priority to improve cultural safety.

- **Language barriers** – Services delivered in English without appropriate translation are a challenge for both parents and children with English as an Additional Language (EAL).
- **Inflexibility and inconsistency of service hours** – Inflexible service hours mean families struggle to manage the scheduling logistics of their own work, travel or other caring responsibilities.⁹⁷ Short service hours mean children must be transported between services, requiring parent availability during the day. Inconsistent services, or programs that are run and discontinued, prevent parents from building a routine around preschool. Inconvenience of session times was identified as the biggest barrier to accessing preschool in the survey.⁹⁸
- **Transport** – The cost and time required to transport children to and from the service, as well as between different services during the day. Many survey respondents indicated that care arrangements that were connected or transport to preschool were the biggest help for families accessing preschool.⁹⁹
- **Hygiene and food** – Hygiene factors such as not being able to do laundry, access to appropriate and clean clothing, showers and toilets are barriers for families to send their child to preschool. Hygiene concerns, including having dry clothing available, is exacerbated in the wet season.¹⁰⁰ Providing food, especially healthy food such as fresh fruit, was identified by stakeholders as a way to be more locally responsive in communities where some children may not have access.¹⁰¹ Some Aboriginal respondents to the survey indicated that food and other essential supports were the biggest help for families accessing preschool.¹⁰²

“At times my son didn't get to go to preschool because the transportation between long day care and preschool wasn't available.”

Parent or carer with a child in preschool

“I would love to see all preschool services provide fresh fruit / healthy snacks for students especially in areas where children may not have as much access.”

A parent or carer with a child in preschool currently (or in the last 5 years)

Communities need the tools to design and implement locally relevant solutions

Communities experiencing disadvantage already know what works in their local context to increase enrolment and attendance in preschools. There are many examples of communities and individuals successfully delivering services and changing the way preschool is run so it is accessible and relevant to priority cohorts.

Several submissions to the Review identified culturally relevant organisations and programs in the NT. For

⁹⁵ Early Childhood Australia, 'Issues paper: Expert perspectives on factors that support quality preschool delivery across settings', *South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care* (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁹⁶ Preschool Review, Families as First Teachers Parent Yarns survey data; Preschool Review, interview with Gillen Primary principal.

⁹⁷ Ruth Beatson et al., 'Early Childhood Education Participation: A Mixed-Methods Study of Parent and Provider Perceived Barriers and Facilitators', *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

⁹⁸ Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

⁹⁹ Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

¹⁰⁰ Preschool Review, Shepherdson College, site visit.

¹⁰¹ Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

¹⁰² Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

example, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner submission highlighted the following:

- Children’s Ground¹⁰³
- Tangentyere Early Childhood Education Program¹⁰⁴
- Congress Preschool Readiness Program¹⁰⁵
- Julalikari Council’s Pikka-Pikkakari Playgroup¹⁰⁶
- Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation’s Piliyintinji-Ki Stronger Families program¹⁰⁷
- Bagot Parent and Community Engagement Project¹⁰⁸.

The Review has engaged with the majority of these organisations and programs in developing its findings and recommendations.

To scale up this impact communities need the resources and flexibility to continue and build on existing services that work. SNAICC – National Voice for our Children and Early Childhood Australia have proposed five principles to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children.¹⁰⁹

Principles for improving outcomes for Aboriginal children:

1. Aboriginal community ownership and leadership; and employment of people
2. a comprehensive and holistic approach that focuses on the whole child
3. strengths-based programs that build on existing family, community and cultural expertise
4. sustainability through adequate and secure funding, a qualified workforce and control over land
5. a supportive, coordinated policy framework.

The Review builds on NT Education Engagement Strategy 2022-2031 to provide more specific options for increasing participation in preschool. The NT Education Engagement Strategy identifies four goals:¹¹⁰

1. Education is a partnership: families and education services work together to ensure all children and young people get the best start to learning and they are supported and encouraged to continue their learning journey.
2. The right people: positive, energetic, culturally responsive and skilled educators motivate children and young people to engage in learning and experience success.
3. Meaningful learning: children participate regularly in early years programs, remain engaged through the stages of schooling and achieve success in their education.
4. Wellbeing and inclusion: inclusive education supports the physical and mental wellbeing and diversity of all children and young people.

Consistent with the Strategy and SNAICC – National Voice for our Children and Early Childhood Australia principles, the Review has identified eight critical enablers to overcome barriers to participation for priority cohorts:

“Ensure Aboriginal language is taught (first) in the school system not the other way around ... it impacts a child's belonging, identity and inclusiveness.”

An Aboriginal educator or support staff member in a government school/preschool

¹⁰³ Children’s Ground, ‘Our Approach’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁰⁴ Tangentyere Council, ‘Early Childhood Education Program’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁰⁵ Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, ‘Preschool Readiness Program’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁰⁶ Julalikar Council Aboriginal Corporation, ‘Pikka-Pikkakari Playgroup’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁰⁷ Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation, ‘Piliyintinji-Ki Stronger Families’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁰⁸ Child Australia, ‘Bagot Aboriginal Community Partnership Program’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁰⁹ Early Childhood Australia and Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, ‘Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in the Early Years’ (2019). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹¹⁰ Northern Territory, ‘Education Engagement Strategy 2022-2031’ (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

1. **Embed local decision-making** – Services should be developed locally and collaboratively with community leaders, Elders, Traditional Owners and families. Aboriginal leadership in services, including by appointing First Nations principals or preschool directors, is essential to taking a culturally safe and collective approach to increasing attendance.¹¹¹
2. **Resolve cost and access barriers, including transport** – Ensure the affordability of the service for all families and solve for access barriers such as hygiene. This may include providing clothing or food for children.¹¹² Services can reduce or remove the cost of transport to, from and between services by paying staff to operate busses. Mobile services can fill gaps where very remote or disengaged communities cannot access close, affordable and quality preschool.
3. **Engage parents** – Many stakeholders noted that engaging parents, particularly primary carers, can improve outcomes for Aboriginal children¹¹³ and those with additional needs.¹¹⁴ Engaging parents in learning can help build routine and familiarity and ease parental and child anxiety about preschool.
4. **Integrate learning with other child and family services** – Integrated child and family services can create pathways to preschool for children and parents using other co-located services (e.g. play groups, allied health, health). Increased familiarity and trust in the location can improve preschool attendance.
5. **Deliver culturally safe services** – Services can be culturally safe by making sure they “recognise, respect, and nurture the unique cultural identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people”.¹¹⁵ Preschool service can hire, train and retain Aboriginal staff¹¹⁶, embed bilingual teaching in local languages and affirm and maintain the Aboriginal identity of the child. Incorporating Aboriginal ways of knowing¹¹⁷ and strong connection to Country¹¹⁸ are also essential.
6. **Build trust in services** – Services build trust through clear and proactive communication with parents. Services should also promote shared responsibility for school attendance and educational outcomes rather than punitive measures of policing school attendance.¹¹⁹
7. **Enable flexibility** – Flexible term dates accommodate increased activity on Country in the dry season. Flexible pick up and drop off times allow children to access preschool around their parents’ other commitments.
8. **Connect to community through outreach** – Outreach services have been found to build families’ understanding of the early childhood system, trust in the service and confidence addressing challenges.¹²⁰ Outreach is time and resource intensive which requires intentional funding.

¹¹¹ Martha Sombo Kamara, ‘Indigenous female educational leaders in the Northern Territory remote community schools: issues in negotiating school community partnerships’ *Australian Catholic University* (2009). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹¹² Preschool Review, Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory, written submission; Martha Sombo Kamara, ‘Indigenous female educational leaders in the Northern Territory remote community schools: issues in negotiating school community partnerships’ *Australian Catholic University* (2009). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹¹³ Preschool Review, Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory, written submission.

¹¹⁴ Preschool Review, Namarluk School, site visit.

¹¹⁵ National Indigenous Australians Agency, ‘National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹¹⁶ Jacyntha Krakouer, ‘Aboriginal Early Childhood Education: Why attendance and true engagement are equally important’ *Australian Council for Educational Research* (2016). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹¹⁷ Lyn Fasoli et al. “We’re still being dragged to be white” – Learning from Yolŋu “growing up” their children in two worlds’ *Pedagogies for Diverse Contexts* (2018). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹¹⁸ Moriarty Foundation, ‘Connecting to Country while Walking Learning’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹¹⁹ Martha Sombo Kamara, ‘Indigenous female educational leaders in the Northern Territory remote community schools: issues in negotiating school community partnerships’ *Australian Catholic University* (2009). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹²⁰ Dandolo Partners, ‘Links to Early Learning: Evaluation Report’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

Future steps should provide flexibility for communities to design, deliver and govern service models locally

Local communities, parents and educators are well placed to design, deliver and govern preschools. They can and have been overcoming the specific barriers to enrolment and attendance that they encounter.

To enable preschool providers (whether government schools or other providers) to improve access, two complementary funding streams are required:

- A **bespoke preschool funding mechanism** that is child-based and adjusted to reflect the higher needs of priority cohorts (see recommendation 10)
- A **participation and engagement grant program** that allows preschool providers to access flexible funding for initiatives targeted at increasing the enrolment and attendance of priority cohorts, by addressing the barriers identified above. This is a 4-5-year additional investment direct to schools to determine how to best engage children and families in their respective locations. The Department could manage this as a discrete grant program in the first instance but consider how investment in participation and engagement can be embedded in the funding model after an initial trial period.

To make the biggest difference to participation the grant program should be **opt-in, easy to access, flexible** and **locally decided**. It should be designed in a way to collect data and evidence about the effectiveness of different initiatives in different contexts.

Keeping the grant program separate in the first instance would allow the Department to:

- Undertake baseline research into 'what will work' and under what circumstances
- Test whether, how and why targeted funding makes a difference before embedding this into existing mainstream funding models
- Ensure there is specific attention and priority directed at this objective – over and above delivery of quality preschool.

Implementation considerations

The Department may want to consider:

- How to attract co-investment into the grant program fund from the Australian Government and philanthropic organisations (noting that this may involve arm's-length administration of the fund through a third party).
- How to acquit the grant program in a way that is simple and generates a low administrative burden, while eliciting sufficient evidence for accountability and the development of an evidence base.
- How to promote and communicate the grant program to preschool providers.
- Appointing an evidence partner to assess, synthesise and communicate evidence of what works in increasing participation among priority cohorts.

4.2.3 The Department can draw on a range of levers to steward the preschool and broader early years system

The definition and positioning of the role and nature of preschool as part of the broader early childhood system proposed in section 4.2.1 requires a reset of the Department's role. The current focus is on the department as the dominant provider of preschool through government schools and the regulator of the broader early years system under the NQF.

In recent years, early childhood and broader policy trends have identified a key role for governments as system stewards of complex systems.¹²¹ Education, including early childhood, is a complex and dynamic system with many actors that might behave in independent or collective ways. Complex systems are more difficult to predict and will create different outcomes depending on the actors in the system.¹²²

Early childhood is a complex system because:¹²³

- The system has **interconnected elements and multiple providers and settings**.
- **There are complex challenges that are not completely understood**. For example, the NT has persistent low attendance for priority cohorts and 40 per cent of children are developmentally vulnerable.
- **The problem and the broader context are interconnected**. Early childhood is closely connected to education, social services, family support and there is complex interaction of the state and Australian Government funding systems.
- **The goal is to create broad, sustained change at a large scale**. The goal is to drive outcomes for all children across the NT.

System stewardship can help drive better outcomes for children

System stewardship requires a rethinking of the role of government in driving long-term outcomes. In complex systems, the traditional top-down approach towards managing outcomes is inadequate. Instead of seeing themselves as sitting on top of a delivery chain, policy makers see themselves as stewards of systems with multiple actors and decision makers – whose choices will determine how policy is realised.

In becoming a system steward the Government provides a form of leadership while working to build trust and capacity with other actors in the system towards a long-term vision.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Define and embed a system stewardship approach to achieving preschool outcomes.

The Department can adopt a new role as system steward

In future, the Department will need to play a system stewardship role, shaping a diverse and effective preschool system that operates as a key part of the broader early childhood system. In doing this, the Department will need to work with other stewards (notably the Australian Department of Education) to draw on the full range of policy, information, regulatory, funding, investment and direct provision levers to shape the incentives and behaviours of providers and parents.

"We've never had a system stewardship approach that merges ECEC and preschool."

Sector expert

¹²¹ Australia and New Zealand School of Government, 'Reimagining governments as system stewards' (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#); Australia and New Zealand School of Government, '2030 and beyond: government done', *Australian Public Service Review* (2019). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹²² The Front Project, 'The case for system stewardship in Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care' [\[link\]](#).

¹²³ The Front Project, 'The case for system stewardship in Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care' [\[link\]](#).

To become a system steward the Department can:

1. **Reframe its own role in the system** – Explicitly name its role as a system steward as distinct from a funder, provider or regulator (recommendation three). The role requires leadership and being a point of connection to reduce fragmentation of the system.¹²⁴
2. **Define the system** – State the boundaries of the system as going beyond preschool to include the wider early childhood system. System change should focus on outcomes for children and integrate early childhood care and education.¹²⁵ This will be achieved by recommendation 1 to define and position preschool in the early years system.
3. **Set desired system outcomes** – This Review, and the vision for preschool defined in section 4, is a good starting point for creating a clear statement of desired system outcomes. Desired system outcomes might include equity and participation of priority cohorts, improved outcomes for all children, a skilled and relevant early childhood workforce, reduced complexity for all stakeholders and improved system coherence.¹²⁶
4. **Identify direct and indirect policy levers** – The NT Government should identify a full range of direct and indirect policy levers to steer the preschool system towards the desired outcomes. This includes standard-setting, regulation and/or the provision of financial and non-financial incentives.¹²⁷ Various levers are addressed throughout the recommendations, including funding (recommendations 9, 10 and 11), incentives for investment in workforce (recommendation 12) and others.
5. **Measure and track the system** – System stewardship requires the steward to understand how the system is tracking and put in place mechanisms for understanding and intervening where needed. This requires strong data and information sharing.¹²⁸ Recommendation 14, to develop an NT-specific evidence base, will help the Department design and fund evidence-based interventions.

The Department cannot act in isolation as the NT early childhood system's single steward. Stewardship should be a collaborative approach between the NT and Australian Governments¹²⁹ and will require clear definitions of responsibility and leadership. It will require a joint mindset of change and agreed vision for the desired system outcomes, as well as political and sector support to succeed.

The Department can facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration, including by convening a preschool stakeholder forum to provide advice on the implementation of the changes recommended in this Review and sponsoring a cross-sector community of preschool practice.

¹²⁴ The Front Project, 'The case for system stewardship in Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care System' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹²⁵ John Bennett and Yoshie Kaga, 'The Integration of Early Childhood Systems within Education', *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* (2010). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹²⁶ The Front Project, 'The case for system stewardship in Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care System' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹²⁷ Robert Agranoff and Michael McGuire, 'Big questions in public network management research' *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (2001). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹²⁸ John Bennett and Yoshie Kaga, 'The Integration of Early Childhood Systems within Education', *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* (2010). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹²⁹ John Bennett and Yoshie Kaga, 'The Integration of Early Childhood Systems within Education', *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* (2010). Available at [\[link\]](#).

Implementation considerations

The Department may want to consider:



- The structural separation between the Department's roles in delivery and policy/regulation. Given the recent structural alignment that separated regulation, further separation is not necessarily required but may need to be monitored.
- New or additional data capability required for understanding the system and how it is tracking. Data collection and analysis capability may need to be developed internally.

4.3 Contemporary preschool service models deliver flexibility, continuity of experience and integration

This section outlines the recommendations that will build the foundations for learning through contemporary preschool service models that reflect good practice and respond to the needs of families:

- Promote diversity in delivery settings to provide flexibility for families (recommendation 4).
- Enhance continuity of experience in all settings, particularly in government schools (recommendation 5).
- Improve service integration, particularly in priority locations where co-location through hubs or precincts may be appropriate (recommendation 6).

4.3.1 A diverse range of flexible service models can match the diversity of family needs

As outlined in section 4.2.1, the evidence is clear that accessing quality preschool brings a range of positive benefits. However, evidence and experience in the NT and across Australia demonstrates that quality preschool can be delivered in a range of service models and settings¹³⁰. Moreover, the stakeholder engagement conducted through the Review has demonstrated that different families want different things:

- Some families, particularly with working parents, want flexible preschool hours and wraparound child care (see section 4.3.2 below). Service models such as Early Learning Centres and preschool embedded in long day care settings appeal to these families;
- Some families prefer a sessional approach and value their children attending preschool at the same place as they will start formal schooling;
- Some families build a strong connection with their long day care provider and want their child to continue in that setting for as long as possible, with preschool built in; and

"My husband and I are full time workers and it's just that flexibility of the hours that the centre is open for, means that we can share the drop offs and the collection, but we all just know that she is really enjoying herself and having such a great time here. It all just makes you feel like you are doing the right thing and makes you feel comfortable working full time."

Parent in a LDC setting (quote provided by a service provider)

¹³⁰ For example, the fundamental differences in dominant service models between Australian jurisdictions and the ACECQA data on providers meeting quality standards demonstrates that a range of delivery models can be effective.

- Some families want a one-stop-shop for early years services, so that they don't have to visit multiple locations for different aspects of their child's development and wellbeing.

In discussions with families and other stakeholders in remote locations, the imperative for diversity and choice was also apparent:

- Some families in highly isolated locations (e.g. pastoral stations, outstations and homelands) do not want to or cannot travel to a physical preschool delivery location (particularly in the wet season) and want some combination of virtual delivery (e.g. through Schools of the Air), regular outreach services from preschool providers, mobile playgroups and periodic visits from qualified teachers¹³¹
- Some families in remote Aboriginal communities prefer a culturally grounded, Aboriginal community-controlled provider and service model, whereas others prefer preschool in government schools delivered in a culturally relevant way¹³²
- Providing a diversity of settings in remote Aboriginal communities can be an important means of mitigating the impact of inter-family conflict on preschool attendance¹³³

“Offering a choice of Preschool models rather than a 'one size fits all' approach is usually responsive to the local community needs.”

Educator in a government school

It is clear that there is no one-size-fits all approach to preschool in urban or remote settings. Instead, the challenge for the department as system steward is to foster diversity and choice, within the parameters of preschool as a structured, play-based learning program, delivered by a degree qualified teacher, and the four essential features outlined in section 4.1.

The Review has identified six service delivery models that can each deliver on the four essential features in different contexts and respond to different family needs and preferences. Each option is shown in Figure 21 and draws on existing good practice service delivery identified during site visits and other stakeholder engagement.

¹³¹ Preschool Review, Isolated Children's Parents' Association submission, written submission; Preschool Review, Katherine Isolated Children's Service, written submission; Preschool Review, site visit interviews.

¹³² Preschool Review, Children's Ground, sector expert consultation.

¹³³ Preschool Review, Shepherdson College, site visit.

Figure 21 | Service delivery model options



The Department can drive increased diversity of providers

To promote a diversity of service models the Department can:

- **Explicitly recognise the existing diversity** of preschool service models and providers in its communication and policy settings.
- **Change the perception of preschool as being exclusively delivered in a government school.** This will require a system wide approach where a high-quality preschool experience is possible irrespective of setting. It will be particularly important to promote and maintain the strength of the regulatory regime through the NQF in maintaining quality in different settings.
- **Set up a funding allocation system that is setting-agnostic** and reduces the incentives for multiple enrolments for the same child. Recommendation 9 suggests an approach to simplifying and pooling funding for preschools in the NT that will enable a diversity of providers.
- **Ensure the funding allocation model creates incentives for service providers to implement core service features of quality, continuity, flexibility and culturally responsiveness.**

The Department should carefully consider how to avoid the outcome of an inequitable preschool system that channels families that can pay more into private, better resourced providers who charge higher fees. Funding allocation models should encourage as low as appropriate fees across all settings to ensure equity of access to high-quality services. The Victorian model of differentiating funding for long day care providers offering lower fees could be a way to maintain equity of access (see section 4.3.2 below for more detail).

4.3.2 Providing enhanced continuity of experience is a priority, particularly for government schools

Continuity of experience is about providing children and families with a joined-up early childhood service experience with minimal disruptions over the course of the day, week, month or year. The related concept of continuity of learning is about providing children with learning pathways with smooth transitions between ages and stages of learning.

Fragmenting children’s early childhood education and care between settings creates discontinuity of experience and brings a number of risks and disadvantages:

- **Fragmentation of relationships across multiple settings.** There is clear research demonstrating the importance of relationships between educators and children, particularly to emotional development.^{134 135 136}. One expert has noted the risks of a fragmented approach to early childhood education and care: “If early childhood services are considered just as places to meet

“The Northern Territory is unique among Australian states and territories as children will sometimes transition from an LDC to a preschool and back within a single day.”

Goodstart Submission

¹³⁴ Jennifer Bowes et al. ‘From child care to school: Influences on children’s adjustment and achievement in the year before school and the first year of school - Findings from the Child Care Choices longitudinal extension study’ *New South Wales Department of Education and Training and NSW Department of Community Services* (2009) Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹³⁵ Heather Sandstrom, Sandra Huerta ‘The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: A Research Synthesis’ *Urban Institute* (2013). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹³⁶ Sarah A Schmidt et al., ‘Longitudinal relations among child care stability during the prekindergarten year and behaviour problems’ *Children and Youth Service Review* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

the needs of working families, and the right of children to build strong and constant relationships and friendships is not taken into consideration, there is a risk of environmental, cognitive and affective fragmentation that could disorient children.”¹³⁷

- **The costs of fragmentation for children as they must adjust to the different routines, rules and pedagogies and sometimes different languages between settings**¹³⁸. Adjusting to multiple settings in one day (teachers, staff and peers) can be particularly challenging for vulnerable children¹³⁹ and exacerbate behavioural disruption and disengagement in some children.
- **Financial barriers to accessing preschool.** This includes transportation costs between settings, and the related opportunity costs of working time for parents and carers.

The Review heard that many preschool settings do not provide a continuous experience for children and families. Most government schools offer fixed hours, often through a sessional model, which is not convenient for working parents and requires children to attend more than one setting in a day. Figure 22 illustrates how 15 hours of preschool might be delivered differently in a sessional model and preschool within a long day care setting.

Figure 22 | Illustration of sessional and other preschool models



Many government schools have taken action to address these issues. For example, some have adapted the timing of preschool sessions in consultation with parents.¹⁴⁰ Some communities prefer shorter daily sessions, whereas others prefer a two and a half full day model. Other schools (e.g. Ludmilla Primary School) provide additional flexibility to priority groups, allowing children to attend any available session during the week. However, these models remain constrained by the sessional model and are limited to school hours and terms.

A small number of government schools have established onsite access for preschool children to other forms of early childhood services. For example, Ludmilla Primary School offers Out of School Hours Care to preschool aged children, and Clyde Fenton School in Katherine offers onsite long day care through a provider established by the school council. The Review heard that other schools are discouraged from establishing similar arrangements due to the legislative and industrial complexities of government schools

¹³⁷ Carla Rinaldi, 'Re-imagining Childhood: The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia' *Adelaide Thinker in Residence 2012-13, Government of South Australia* (2013). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹³⁸ Preschool Review, Preschool Review Workshop 1, sector expert consultation; Carla Rinaldi, 'Re-imagining Childhood: The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia' *Adelaide Thinker in Residence 2012-13, Government of South Australia* (2013). Available at [\[link\]](#); Child Australia, 'Plan Effective Transitions for Children In Education and Care Services' (2012). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹³⁹ Preschool Review, Key Stakeholder Advisory Group Briefing Workshop, sector expert consultation.

¹⁴⁰ Preschool Review, Stage 1 Preschool Review consultation workshop and Big Rivers virtual consultation workshop, sector expert consultation.

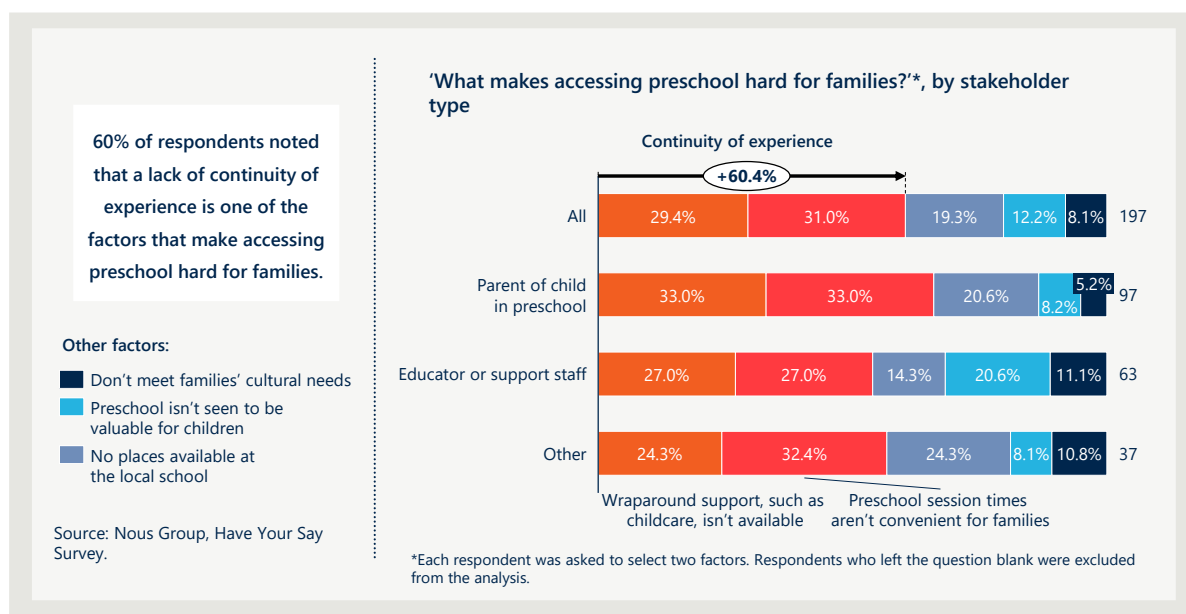
running long day care services, employing child care workers and charging parents (and therefore the Australian Government, via the Child Care Subsidy).

Parents identify discontinuity of experience as a significant challenge

Throughout the Review, issues related to continuity of experience were most frequently cited as a major challenge in preschool in the NT, particularly by parents. For example, in the stakeholder survey conducted as part of the Review, almost two thirds of respondents identified one of two factors as one of the biggest preschool access challenges:

- A lack of wraparound support (e.g. child care in the hours preschool is not running).
- Inconvenient session times.

Figure 23 | Survey responses to the access challenges facing families



Preschools delivered in government schools present the most immediate opportunity to improve continuity

Enhancing continuity of experience across all preschool settings is an important element in the creation of a contemporary early childhood system. This can include:

- **Increased access to preschool not delivered in government schools.** Increasing access to settings that combine preschool and child care services, including Early Learning Centres and long day care services that offer a preschool program. This requires removing attitudinal (recommendation 1) and financial (recommendation 10) barriers.
- **Changing the way preschool is delivered in government schools.** This requires redesigning the predominantly sessional preschool service models in government schools to enhance continuity of experience and provide more 'wrap-around care'.

As the most common preschool setting at this time, supporting government schools to redesign service models is likely to be the most effective strategy. The Review does not advocate a single model, or that all government schools must change their service models. As outlined in section 3.3.1, a diverse range of service models is desirable.

Government schools should be able to choose (with their local community) which of these models to adopt.¹⁴¹ Depending on the school's current approach and the choice of model, it may need to:

- **Establish dedicated governance mechanisms for preschool and early years services** – in order to ensure a community driven approach.
- **Set up on-site age-appropriate Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) service** – this may be achieved by expanding an existing OSHC service or establishing a dedicated early years OSHC service. Current OSHC arrangements may not be appropriate for preschool aged children¹⁴² so this might require designing OSHC for the needs of preschool aged children.
- **Establish on-site Long Day Care** – under current policy settings, this would need to be delivered by a third-party provider.
- **Reconfigure infrastructure to facilitate continuity of experience and integration** – this could include co-locating all early years related services (e.g. preschool, FAFT, early years OSHC), and providing space for external health and parenting providers.
- **Redesign staffing models** – this could include making changes to staffing ratios and rosters, appointing a head of early years, creating new early childhood roles across preschool, OSHC and (potentially including job-share arrangements), targeting local Aboriginal recruitment and
- **Build partnerships with community organisations** – this could include local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

It is also noted that potential changes to the number of funded hours for four-year-olds (recommendation 7) and expanding access to funded preschool for three-year-olds including through the FaFT program (recommendation 8) will have additional implications for government schools' delivery models.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Encourage continuity of experience in all settings, particularly in government schools.

The Department will need to work with government schools to support the transition

Schools cannot be expected to transition their preschool service models alone. The Department will play a crucial role in driving and supporting the change, including by:

1. Designing and implementing a **staged transition approach** under which the Department:
 - Engages with schools to articulate the rationale and implications of the change.
 - Identifies early adopters for each service model option (potentially through an expression of interest process), providing targeted funding and support.
 - Monitors and evaluates the early adopters to build the evidence base and to inform guidance and support material for other schools.
2. Providing **direct support to schools**, including:
 - **Advice on staff structures**, including how to design and implement changes to staff roles, rosters and structures
 - A **toolkit for schools to engage with their community** to understand how their preschool service model can be adapted to provide flexibility and enhance continuity of experience.
 - **Advice on reconfiguring existing infrastructure** to accommodate continuity of experience

¹⁴¹ Models 1,3,4 and 6 in Figure 21 are most relevant for government schools.

¹⁴² South Australia Royal Commission, 'Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care Report' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

3. Provide **system-level support** to enable the transition:

- Update relevant **policy settings**, including enrolment policies and procedures¹⁴³, school fees and contributions policy (to enable schools to charge fees for OHSC and/or long day care),
- Negotiate **relevant industrial instruments** with relevant stakeholders to enable a skilled and suitably remunerated workforce with flexibility to provide continuity of experience.
- Negotiate **changes to child care funding arrangements with the Australian Government**. This could include amending the Child Care Subsidy Minister Rules 2017 to facilitate care on government preschool sites out of school hours (as recommended by the recent South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood and Care¹⁴⁴)
- Change the **preschool funding model** (see section 4.5.1)
- Invest in **appropriate infrastructure** (see section 4.6.2)
- Build the **evidence base** for effective preschool in the NT (see section 4.6.3)

Continuity of learning has also been raised as an issue throughout the Review

Continuity of learning focuses on transitions between the ages and stages of a child’s learning journey, reducing the well-documented risks of transition, particularly for priority cohorts.¹⁴⁵ In recognition of these risks, the Department has a clear policy statement and suite of resources on early childhood transitioning to school.¹⁴⁶

The Review heard from some stakeholders that the transition from preschool to the transition year of schooling is not generally well designed or implemented, with overlapping age groups and significantly different workforce and funding models. Some smaller schools address these challenges through “split” classes combining preschool and transition year children; some larger schools ensure that the same teacher stays with each cohort through both the preschool and transition years. The Review did not extend its analysis and findings to the transition year but considers there is an opportunity to review the transition year in the light of the findings and recommendations of this preschool review.

Implementation considerations

The Department may want to consider:



- Reviewing the role of the Transition year of schooling with a view to support continuity of learning and smooth transitions to school.
- Further research to understand the barriers (real and perceived) to continuity of experience in preschool delivered in government schools.

4.3.3 Integrating preschool with other services can improve outcomes for priority cohorts

There is substantial evidence from practice and the literature to support delivery of integrated early childhood services and place-based approaches. Service integration can take several forms:

¹⁴³ Northern Territory Government Department of Education ‘Enrolment – procedures’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#)

¹⁴⁴ South Australia Royal Commission, ‘Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care Report’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#), Recommendation 5

¹⁴⁵ Jacynta Krakouer, ‘Early years transitions: supporting children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability: rapid literature review’ *Victoria Government Department of Education and Training* (2017). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁴⁶ Northern Territory Government Department of Education ‘Early childhood transitioning to school – policy’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

- **Integrated and co-located service models** based around a service hub, such as Child and Family Centres in the NT¹⁴⁷. In a recent study, these are characterised as Integrated Child and Family Centres.¹⁴⁸
- **Integrated service models** that do not rely on a single hub but pull together a range of service types. The Child and Family Centres (CFCs) operating across the NT are an example of integrated services.¹⁴⁹
- **Service brokerage approaches** that use collective impact and/or place-based approaches to build structured collaboration between early years' service providers driven by local community governance and supported by a backbone organisation. In the NT, an example is Connected Beginnings.¹⁵⁰

The vision is that children and families receive wrap-around supports through joined-up and proactive effort by a range of provider service providers. This is predicated on the view that integrated service models create 'natural' opportunities for families with children at preschools to connect and benefit from more coordinated decisions about their care.¹⁵¹ Service integration helps families navigate the complex service system and improve early intervention while easing the pressure on teachers.¹⁵² Integrated services have been shown also to improve health and wellbeing of both children and parents.¹⁵³ There is a mutually reinforcing benefit in that families' use of health or other services may promote stronger engagement with preschool as well.

There are many examples of integrated early childhood services in the Northern Territory – notably CFCs. For example, the CFC in Gunbalanya has integrated preschool, FaFT and long day care. CFCs in the NT are funded and operated through either the Department of Education or the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities. We note that the coordination of this program by two Departments has led to inconsistent management and operations of these services across the 12 CFC sites in the NT.

“Lack of intervention support to help identify and assess student needs puts more workload on school staff.”

Nemarluk site visit

As well as CFCs, there are integrated school-based preschools that work closely with the school and may provide consulting rooms for allied health or counselling services. These services have a more integrated operating model (i.e. shared philosophy and strategy, shared reporting lines, shared professional development, and multidisciplinary teams).

Service integration typically, but not always, involves co-location, but this may not be appropriate if there is only one co-located 'hub' in one area. For example, families may not want to attend a site if there is conflict between communities or families. Any reforms should ensure an element of choice remains for families.

Service integration can be challenging to achieve in areas that need it most

Well-implemented integrated early years services are widely viewed as a promising model particularly with respect to improving outcomes for children and families experiencing disadvantage.¹⁵⁴ They are effective when there is a strong relationship with the community and when they can innovate and respond to

¹⁴⁷ Northern Territory Government, 'Early childhood support for remote children and families' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁴⁸ Deloitte, 'Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres' *Social Ventures Australia* (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁴⁹ SNAICC, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child and Family Centres *Changing Futures with our Children and Families*'. Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁵⁰ Australian Government Department of Education, 'Connected Beginnings' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁵¹ Children's Ground, 'Our Approach' (2023) [\[link\]](#); Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 'Literature Review: Evaluation of Victorian Children Centres' (2008). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁵² Preschool Review, Indy Kindy, site visit.

¹⁵³ Kate Noble, Hazel Fetherston, Jen Jackson and Melinda Craike, 'Integrating Health Promotion in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings', *Australian Health Policy Collaboration, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University* (2020). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁵⁴ Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 'Literature Review: Evaluation of Victorian Children Centres' (2008). Available at [\[link\]](#).

complex challenges.¹⁵⁵ Integration of health promotion in early childhood services is especially valuable in disadvantaged communities.¹⁵⁶ This was confirmed in a recent report that advanced the case for Integrated Child and Family Centres (ICFCs) as a means to address the significant needs of vulnerable families in the Northern Territory,¹⁵⁷ implying a need to build on the existing CFCs. Similarly, other studies have found that service integration can better meet the broader needs of Aboriginal children and families through provision of holistic and coordinated care.^{158 159}

In some communities, service integration will be the best way of achieving desired preschool participation and outcomes. Already programs such as FaFT provide a platform for children and families to be connected into preschools. That said, achieving service integration where it is needed most is challenging for a number of reasons. The ICFC report identified that session times and having the right staff are important conditions to enable successful integrated service models. In particular, it highlighted the specific challenge for remote communities in attracting and retaining the appropriate workforce.¹⁶⁰ Staff required range from educators, allied professionals, child and material health practitioners and service leaders that coordinate the integration of services and maintain strong community and partner relationships.

“Lack of integration in all areas (governance, funding, provision and delivery) often leaves families and communities confused.”

ECA Submission

The fragmentation of funding for family services drives fragmentation of delivery, particularly for remote communities where multiple government- and non-government-funded and delivered programs are in place. Slow approval processes and the administrative burden associated with complex application processes compound the problem.¹⁶¹ Many integrated services are funded with short-term grant funding, meaning they do not have funding certainty to build toward long-term integrated models.¹⁶² Siloed, prescriptive and service-specific funding also does not support service integration where the aim is more wraparound care.¹⁶³

While integrated models such as CFCs and Children’s Ground are delivering good outcomes for children, they face challenges over and above those cited about. These include the cost to scale and access to the required infrastructure. To drive improved outcomes across the Territory, the Department can identify a more scalable model for integrated services, drawing on the strengths of CFCs that place a focus on early learning, as well as established preschool and FaFT programs.

¹⁵⁵ Nick Hopwood, ‘Creating Better Futures: Report on Tasmania’s Child and Family Centres’ *University of Technology Sydney School of Education* (2018). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁵⁶ Kate Noble, Hazel Fetherston, Jen Jackson and Melinda Craike, ‘Integrating Health Promotion in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings’, *Australian Health Policy Collaboration, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University* (2020). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁵⁷ Six of the 10 SA2 geographic areas in Australia with the highest level of need for integrated centres were in the Northern Territory. Page 27, Deloitte Access Economics, ‘Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres’ *Social Ventures Australia* (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁵⁸ Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, ‘Service integration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood development: A multiple case study from New South Wales and Queensland’ (2019). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁵⁹ Children’s Ground, ‘Evidence’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁶⁰ Deloitte Access Economics, ‘Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres’ *Social Ventures Australia* (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁶¹ Deloitte Access Economics, ‘Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres’ *Social Ventures Australia* (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁶² Deloitte Access Economics, ‘Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres’ *Social Ventures Australia* (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#); Preschool Review, consistent theme across site visits in rural and urban NT.

¹⁶³ Deloitte Access Economics, ‘Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres’ *Social Ventures Australia* (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

RECOMMENDATION 6

Improve service integration, particularly in priority locations where co-location through hubs or precincts may be appropriate.

The Department should identify and scale service integration in priority locations

There is a clear case of increased integration of early childhood and other services, especially for communities and families experiencing disadvantage. Sustainable, responsive, flexible and easy to access funding for integrated services will enable service integration. This is further explored in recommendation 11.

In priority locations, the Department can fund and support establishment and improvement of integrated early childhood services, including as a site for preschool delivery. Integrated services should be responsive and meet the needs of the community.

This recommendation is enabled by other recommendations:

- A pooling of Australian Government early childhood funding (recommendation 11) will set up the funding landscape for more service integration in priority locations.
- Shifting the perception of preschool out of solely in a school setting (recommendation 1) will enable better integration between preschool and other services.

“A key feature of a child-and-family focused system is its ability to respond in a coordinated, collaborative and integrated way.”

ECA Submission

Implementation considerations

The department may want to consider:



- Conducting a stocktake of existing early childhood integrated service models across the NT, including their funding sources.
- Accelerating consideration of the *Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and families' centres* report with the Australian Government.

4.4 Additional funded preschool hours for three and four-year olds needs careful consideration

Section 4.4 explores whether the Department should consider expanding the funded preschool offer to:

- 30 hours per week for four-year-olds (recommendation 7)
- Three-year-old preschool (recommendation 8).

4.4.1 There is some demand, but mixed evidence, for expanding funded four-year-old preschool to 30 hours per week

Currently the funded preschool offer in the NT is 15 hours per week, consistent with the PRA. Actual participation varies, as is shown in Figure 20 with some attending less than 15 hours. The barriers to participation and potential solutions are explored in section 4.2.

There is an emerging policy view that 30 hours of preschool is an appropriate baseline entitlement. The Centre for Policy Development posits that 30 hours would improve development outcomes for the child, ease cost pressures on families and lift labor force participation.¹⁶⁴ Other jurisdictions, including NSW and Victoria, are testing the feasibility and value of increasing preschool hours from 15 to 30.¹⁶⁵ The increase to 30 hours will require an even greater focus on workforce attraction and retention in an already constrained market.¹⁶⁶

Under a 30 hour model, the NT Government would provide funding for up to 30 hours per week per child. Services would have flexibility to configure their delivery to best meet the needs of children and families in their communities. This model could look like:

- Government schools and other providers offering five days of six hours of preschool.
- Providers offer five days of six-hour sessions of preschool integrated within long day care, with families paying for non-funded hours.

The NT should focus on improving access for priority cohorts before expanding universal access to 30 hours

The evidence for the ideal number of hours of preschool for a child's development is mixed. The 15 hours of preschool stipulated by the PRA is consistent with the international consensus that suggests a minimum of 15 hours of preschool is needed to achieve significant learning outcomes.¹⁶⁷ On average, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have 22.7 hours of preschool a week, with many European countries, the United States and New Zealand exceeding the minimum dosage.¹⁶⁸ Higher preschool hours internationally have historically been driven by support for families rather than the existing evidence that highlights the benefits for the child's development.¹⁶⁹

There are few Australian studies on the effectiveness of 30-hour preschool. There is compelling evidence from a limited number of studies showing strong cognitive gains for vulnerable children in settings that provide a higher dosage of preschool.¹⁷⁰ Other studies have found there is no 'right' amount of early childhood education and care as it will depend on both the child and the quality of the service.¹⁷¹ Some evidence suggests that non-vulnerable children achieve lower developmental outcomes with increased hours.¹⁷²

"15 hours of preschool is not manageable for two working households. Families are often staying at child care as they can't do pick up and drop off to preschool during their work hours."

Educator in government preschool

¹⁶⁴ Centre for Policy Development, 'Starting better: A guarantee for young children and families' (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁶⁵ Benito Kolovos, 'Victoria and NSW announce overhaul of preschool education with extra year of school' *The Guardian* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁶⁶ Victorian Government Department of Education and Training, 'Working Together to Build Victoria's Early Childhood Education Workforce' (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁶⁷ John Bennett, 'Benchmarks for early childhood services in OECD countries' (2008). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁶⁸ OECD, 'Starting Strong 2017, Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care' (2017), Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁶⁹ Arno Engal et al., 'Early childhood education and care policy review: Norway' *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)* (2014). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁷⁰ Preschool Review of the NT, Goodstart Submission, written submission; Thomas Van Huizen and Janneke Plantenga, 'Do children benefit from universal early childhood education and care? A metaanalysis of evidence from natural experiments' *Economics of Education Review* (2018); Susanna Loeb et al., 'How much is too much?: The influence of preschool centers on children's social and cognitive development' *Economics of Education Review* (2007). Available at [\[link\]](#); Stacey Fox and Myra Geddes, 'Preschool - Two years are better than one' *Mitchell Institute*. Available at [\[link\]](#).

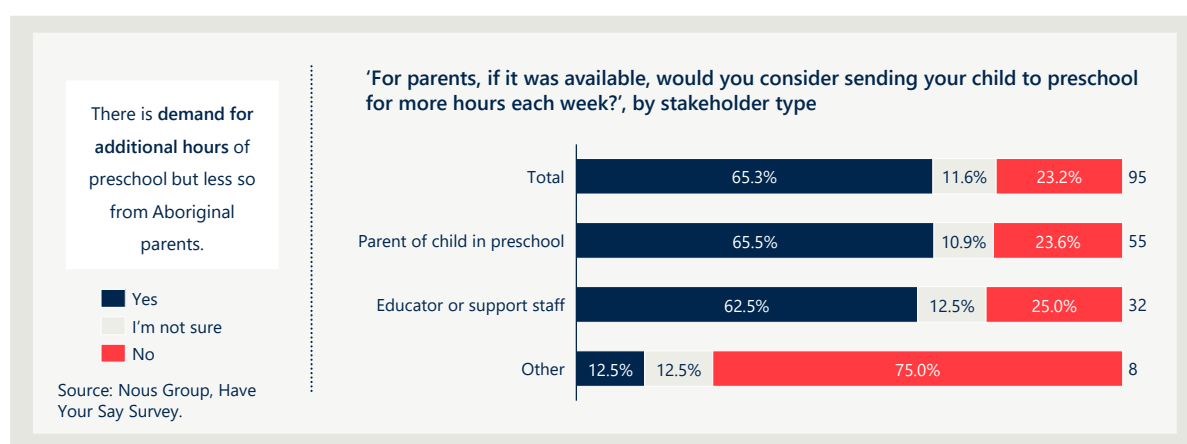
¹⁷¹ Timothy Gilley et al., 'Too late and not enough for some children: early childhood education and care (ECEC) program usage patterns in the years before school in Australia' *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* (2015). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁷² Susanna Loeb et al., 'How much is too much?: The influence of preschool centers on children's social and cognitive development' *Economics of Education Review* (2007). Available at [\[link\]](#); Australian Government Institute of Health, 'Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development' (2015). Available at [\[link\]](#).

In considering expanding access to preschool, it is important to consider workforce and infrastructure capacity constraints and learn lessons from implementing increased hours in other jurisdictions. Other jurisdictions that have sought to roll out universal 30 hours of preschool for four-year-olds and 15 hours for three-year-olds (e.g. NSW and Victoria) have encountered significant workforce constraints, requiring investment in educator capacity. Similarly, expanding access will require significant investment in new infrastructure.

There is some demand for additional hours of preschool from parents in the NT. The Review has heard that only 23.2 per cent of respondents would not consider sending their child to additional hours of preschool each week, as shown in Figure 24.¹⁷³ Aboriginal respondents were more likely to not consider sending their children to additional hours of preschool. This may be skewed by a smaller sample size of Aboriginal parents in the survey or reflect higher levels of distrust of the current high proportion of preschool delivered in government schools.

Figure 24 | Survey results on additional hours of preschool



The Review finds that the NT should prioritise improving equity of access for the currently funded hours of preschool before increasing the number of funded hours for all children. If children are not engaging in the existing 15-hour program, increased hours will have little to no impact on their development. There is a strong consensus that increasing the number of hours is only effective if preschool is financially accessible and high quality.¹⁷⁴

There is a stronger case for increasing the funded hours for priority cohorts. Aboriginal organisations have advocated for expanding access to 20 hours.¹⁷⁵ Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT noted that preschool delivery for Aboriginal Children should be a minimum of 20 hours but “optimal access” is 30 hours. Evidence from a limited number of international studies shows that children experiencing disadvantage benefit from a higher dosage, as argued by Goodstart.¹⁷⁶

RECOMMENDATION 7 Progressively increase the funded hours of four-year old preschool, starting with priority cohorts.

¹⁷³ Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

¹⁷⁴ Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, 'Federal Budget Proposals: Early childhood education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children' (2020). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁷⁵ Preschool Review, AMSANT Aboriginal Corporation Written Submission and Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory, written submission.

¹⁷⁶ Preschool Review of the NT, Goodstart Submission, written submission.

The Department should explore expanding to 30 hours, starting with priority cohorts

The limited evidence base and substantial cost of increasing to 30 hours for all children mean the first priority for increased investment is improving the quality of existing services.¹⁷⁷ The Department can review the case for 30 hours of preschool in 2025 when lessons from the implementation of the 30-hour preschool program in Victoria and NSW will be available.

The Department should explore expanding to 30 hours for priority cohorts earlier than 2025, based on the evidence that children who are disadvantaged benefit from a higher dosage of preschool.¹⁷⁸ The Department can consider:

- Whether it is worth expanding access for some cohorts first given the potential operational impacts of increase hours (e.g. preschools will need additional staff, days and infrastructure).
- How expanding the funded hours for some children will impact service delivery for non-priority cohorts at the same preschool.

Implementation considerations

The Department may want to consider:

- The workforce and infrastructure implications. Expanding access to preschool is likely to further stretch a limited early years workforce in the NT. Other jurisdictions that have sought to roll out universal 30 hour preschool for four-year-olds and 15 hours for three-year-olds (e.g. NSW and Victoria) have encountered significant workforce constraints, requiring investment in educator capacity. Similarly, expanding access will require significant investment in new infrastructure.
- Whether to do a staged roll-out. Some jurisdictions (e.g. ACT, South Australia and Tasmania) are implementing a staged roll-out of expanded access to preschool, initially targeted at developmentally vulnerable children.
- Service and funding model implications. There is a risk that expanding access through the current default service model of government schools will exacerbate some current challenges.

4.4.2 Three-year-olds can benefit from expanded access to preschool

In recent years, the Northern Territory Government has taken steps to fund preschool for three-year-olds. Six preschools are piloting the NT's Three Year Old Preschool Trial and children in very remote areas are funded to attend preschool with parents at the age of three. Initial feedback from the pilots suggests the trial is having a positive effect on relationship building with parents and communities, especially for vulnerable cohorts. Just over half (47 per cent) of three-year-olds in the NT are enrolled in an early childhood program. Most commonly, three-year-olds are enrolled in long day cares that offer child care services for parents at work.¹⁷⁹

Expanding a preschool's offer to three-year-olds could exacerbate existing infrastructure and staffing challenges.¹⁸⁰ Some preschools participating in the trial have created multi-level classes to overcome these

¹⁷⁷ For a detailed exploration of the evidence for additional hours in Australia, see Evidence for Learning, 'Extra Hours' (2023), Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁷⁸ Weilin Li, George Farkas, Greg Duncan, Margaret Burchinal and Deborah Vandell, 'Timing of High-Quality Child Care and Cognitive, Language, and Preacademic Development' *Dev Psychol* (2013); W.S. Barnett 'Effectiveness of Early Educational Intervention', *Science* (2011); Noreen Yazejian, Donna Bryant, Karen Freel and Margaret Burchinal, 'High quality early education: Age of entry and time in care differences in student outcomes for English-only and dual language learners' *Early childhood research quarterly* (2015); Thomas Cornelissen, Christian Dustmann, Anna Raute and Uta Schönberg, 'Who benefits from universal childcare? Estimating marginal returns to early child care attendance', *The Journal of political economy* (2018).

¹⁷⁹ Mitchell Institute, 'Two years are better than one: Preschool programs in the Northern Territory Fact Sheet' (2016). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁸⁰ 3 Year Old Preschool Trial Initial Insights provided by the Northern Territory Department of Education (2022).

challenges. Participants in the trials noted that multi-level classes can be challenging for staff managing additional children. However, they seem to broadly create better outcomes for three-year-olds and strengthen social skills among the four-year-olds who are informally mentoring the younger children.¹⁸¹ Some principals also noted that the trials create opportunities for early intervention for children experiencing vulnerability because it gave staff more opportunities to identify and act on needs.

Classroom models in Three Year Old Preschool Trials:

- **Multi-level classes (3 and four-year-olds):** Tennant Creek, Malak, Ludmilla and Braitling.
- **Dedicated three-year-old program:** Manunda Terrace and Berry Springs.

The NT currently offers a FaFT or Stay Play Learn FaFT program for three-year-olds in over 50 sites. FaFT is highly regarded across the NT as a culturally safe entry point for families and three-year-old children into mainstream schooling.¹⁸² Current Australian Government funding for FaFT through the Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment (NTRAI) expires in 2024.

According to stakeholders engaged for this review, successful FaFT programs can provide the basis for 3-year-old preschool by leveraging the following features of the model: :

- Outreach staff with strong and trusted relationships with the community,
- Transport options that improve access for children and families in remote communities to FaFT programs
- Programs that are responsive to the specific learning and development needs of the children and families accessing the services
- Promoting FaFT sites as a safe space and access point to other community, health or social services with information on Centrelink, Medicare, housing and health services

There are opportunities to continue and evolve FaFT to improve participation for priority cohorts across the NT, particularly Aboriginal children. FaFT prioritises parental engagement and can be a great entry point for children into the schooling system. Some survey respondents noted an opportunity for FaFT to be better integrated with preschool to help with the transition.¹⁸³ Many co-located FaFT and preschool settings are seen as a success that supports with school readiness by building meaningful relationships between staff, families and children from the age of three.¹⁸⁴

The evidence base for three-year-old preschool is emerging in Australia

The emerging policy view is that funding preschool in the two years before school is appropriate. Many OECD jurisdictions offer two years of preschool.¹⁸⁵ Emerging data suggests that children attending an additional year have an eight-month developmental advantage compared to three-months for students who only attend one year, with developmentally vulnerable cohorts receiving the greatest gains.¹⁸⁶ Two years of preschool can be beneficial when it is provided

“We have seen the great benefit for the children attending, especially children with additional needs or disadvantaged.”

Educator in a government school participating in the Three Year Old Preschool Trial

¹⁸¹ Preschool Review, Ludmilla Primary School, site visit.

¹⁸² Dorothy Gapany et al. ‘Empowering Aboriginal Families as Their Children’s First Teachers of Cultural Knowledge, Languages and Identity at Galiwin’ku FaFT Playgroup’ *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* (2021) . Available at [\[link\]](#); Preschool Review, Families as First Teachers Parent Yarn survey data.

¹⁸³ Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

¹⁸⁴ Preschool Review, Ntaria School and Ludmilla Primary School, site visits.

¹⁸⁵ OECD, ‘Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators’ (2020), Box B2.1. Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁸⁶ Susan Pascoe and Deborah Brennan, ‘Lifting Our Game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions’ (2017). Available at [\[link\]](#); Stacey Fox and Myra Geddes, ‘Preschool – Two years are better than

in high-quality services and reinforced by continued schooling. The evidence has influenced a stronger national case to justify funding preschool in the two years before formal schooling.¹⁸⁷

There is limited recent evidence from Australian jurisdictions on the benefits of two years of preschool, especially in the context of the NT. Other states and territories are reviewing the case for three-year-old preschool. Most notably, Victoria and NSW are extending preschool universally to all three-year-olds.

The evidence for expanding to three-year-old preschool for vulnerable children is stronger but is not recent or Australia-specific. Some research shows a positive effect of attending preschool at a younger age for cognitive development, language and social skills in children from socio-economically disadvantaged area and that speak English as an Additional Language (EAL).¹⁸⁸

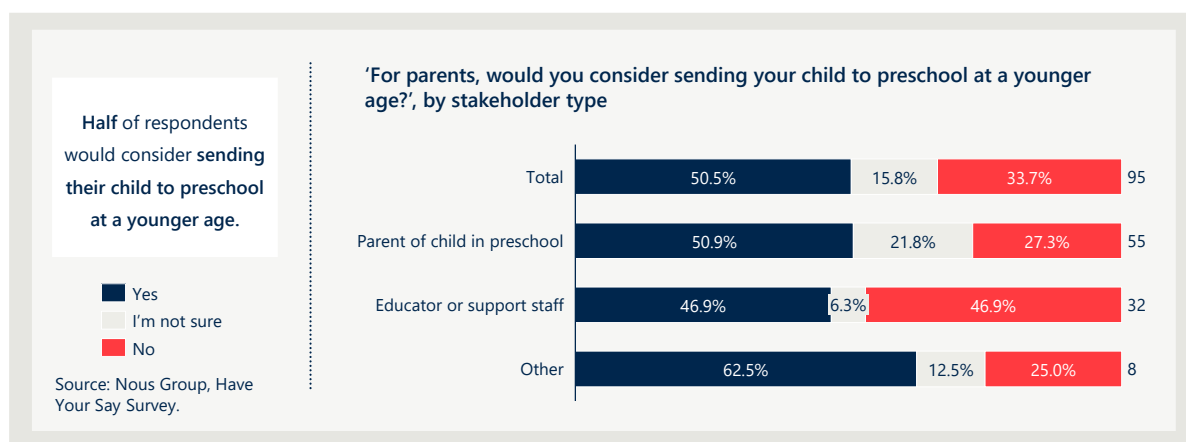
Quality and attendance may be stronger indicators of outcomes than starting preschool at an earlier age. The research suggests that developmental gains are primarily achieved with consistent attendance in high-quality early childhood environments.¹⁸⁹ Without measures to ensure consistent attendance and quality of settings, the full benefits of expanding to three-year-old preschool will not be realised.

RECOMMENDATION 8 Take an evidence-based approach to further expansion of fully subsidised access to three-year-old preschool.

The Department should consider the case for expanding funded hours to three-year-old preschool further as the evidence emerges

The Review heard that there is not strong demand for three-year-old preschool in the NT. Only half of the respondents to the survey said they would consider sending their child to preschool at an earlier age.¹⁹⁰

Figure 25 | Survey results on an additional year of preschool



There is anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of FaFT and three-year-old preschool in remote areas in engaging younger children. The Department can use the forthcoming evaluation of FaFT and any evidence of the Three-Year-Old Preschool trial to decide whether to continue existing funding. Continuing the Three-Year-Old Preschool Trial would be an opportunity to add to the NT-specific evidence for three-year-old preschool.

one' *Mitchell Institute* (2016). Available at [\[link\]](#); For a detailed exploration of the evidence base for starting preschool earlier, see Evidence for Learning, 'Earlier Starting Age' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁸⁷ Centre for Policy Development, 'Starting Better: A Guarantee for Young Children and Families' (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#)

¹⁸⁸ The evidence is considered very limited, according to Evidence for Learning, 'Earlier starting age' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁸⁹ Stacey Fox and Myra Geddes, 'Preschool - Two years are better than one' *Mitchell Institute* (2016). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁹⁰ Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data. 44.6% said 'yes', 13.2% said 'I'm not sure', '42.1% said 'no'.

Given the cost implications, lack of strong demand and limited evidence, the NT should review the case for expanded funding for three-year-olds in 2025. Initial early lessons from the roll-out of three-year-old preschool in Victoria and NSW, as well as the evaluation of FaFT, should inform any expansion of the three-year-old preschool offer.

4.5 Achieving the vision requires rethinking how funding works

This section describes the recommendations to improve the funding of preschool in the NT:

- Simplify and design a bespoke funding mechanism that enables choice and quality (recommendations 7 and 8).
- Pursue pooling of Australian Government and NT Government early childhood funding (recommendation 9).

4.5.1 A fit-for-purpose preschool funding model can promote choice, equity and continuity of experience

The current approach to preschool funding is flawed

As summarised in section 3.2 the current approach to preschool funding has three key drawbacks: Firstly, it **creates a two-track system** where different provider types access different sources of funding. The NT Government spent \$46.2 million on preschool education for government and non-government settings in 2022 – 23.¹⁹¹

The majority of the NT Government’s investment in preschool is allocated to government schools through the School Resourcing Model (SRM). The SRM funds preschool in government schools through per child amounts of between \$6,792 and \$16,313 per year, depending on child and school characteristics. Of this amount, \$1,378 is funded by the Australian Government under the PRA. In addition, schools are supported through central funding support for some preschool costs, equivalent to an estimated \$2,560 per child per year.

Preschool in other settings is funded primarily through the Australian Government and parental contributions, with smaller amounts coming from the NT Government and philanthropic sources. Australian Government funding is through three main channels:

- Support to parental contributions through the CCS and Additional Child Care Subsidy. This is not available for child care (including OSHC) in government school settings;
- Block and programmatic funding to child care providers through the CCCFR, Inclusion Development Fund and Community Child Care Fund¹⁹²; and
- The PRA, under which \$1,378 per child of Australian Government funding is distributed via the NT Government to non-government preschool settings if children are only enrolled in that setting and not in a preschool run in a government school.

The NT Government Early Childhood Services Subsidy is available for non-government preschool settings to claim, at an equivalent

“Long Day Care centres don't get enough funding to secure a good number of qualified staff and have to be closed very often. We need more funding to deliver high quality care.”

ELC Service Manager

¹⁹¹ NT Government, Budget 2023-24, Budget Paper No. 3 Agency Budget Statements, p. 125

¹⁹² The Community Child Care Fund includes the special circumstances grant, the disadvantaged and vulnerable communities grant, the limited support grant, and Connected Beginnings.

flat rate of \$880 per year (totalling \$5.7 million per year¹⁹³ across preschool and other early childhood services). Excluding PRA funding, the NT Government funding contribution to non-government preschool settings is 5 –11 per cent of NT Government funding to preschool in government schools.

This two-track system creates strong incentives for parents to send their children to preschool delivered in government schools and to split their child's enrolment between settings if they need additional child care. It also different workforce pay and conditions workforce created by different award structures between government schools and other preschool settings.

Secondly, the SRM effectively **treats preschool as another year of school**. The School Resourcing Model is based on the logic of education and was designed for schools rather than the play-based learning focus of preschool. This means that some elements of effective preschool (e.g. parental engagement, community outreach, care-based services such as toilet training) are undervalued or not recognised in the funding model. A related issue is that the SRM relies on a diagnosis or functional assessment (based on NCCD data and definitions) to provide funding for additional needs. This is more applicable to school aged children because preschool children are unlikely to have a formal diagnosis or assessment. There is also no current mechanism that provides visibility on the extent to which, and how, SRM funds allocated for preschool programs are used for the intended purpose.

Thirdly, **preschool funding is unnecessarily complex, fragmented and opaque**. Providers (particularly non-government providers) must combine a range of funding sources. A range of grant programs support preschool delivery, either directly or by funding complementary programs and initiatives (e.g. FAFT, Connected Beginnings, Children's Ground, and mobile playgroups).

Under current funding arrangements, it is difficult to monitor and track investment in preschool:

- For preschool delivered in government schools, schools have the flexibility to move funding around between years under the global budget allocation. This means there is no transparency around funding being spent on preschool compared to other years.
- For non-government preschool providers, apart from the passthrough of Australian Government funding under the PRA, there is no way of distinguishing funding from preschool from funding for other forms of early childhood education and care.

Lessons can be learned from funding models in other jurisdictions

Comparisons with funding models in other jurisdictions can inform future NT preschool funding models. Figure 26 below summarises funding models in other jurisdictions, including how they differentiate between preschool delivered in different settings (e.g. community or not-for-profit preschools, long day care, government schools). Of note:

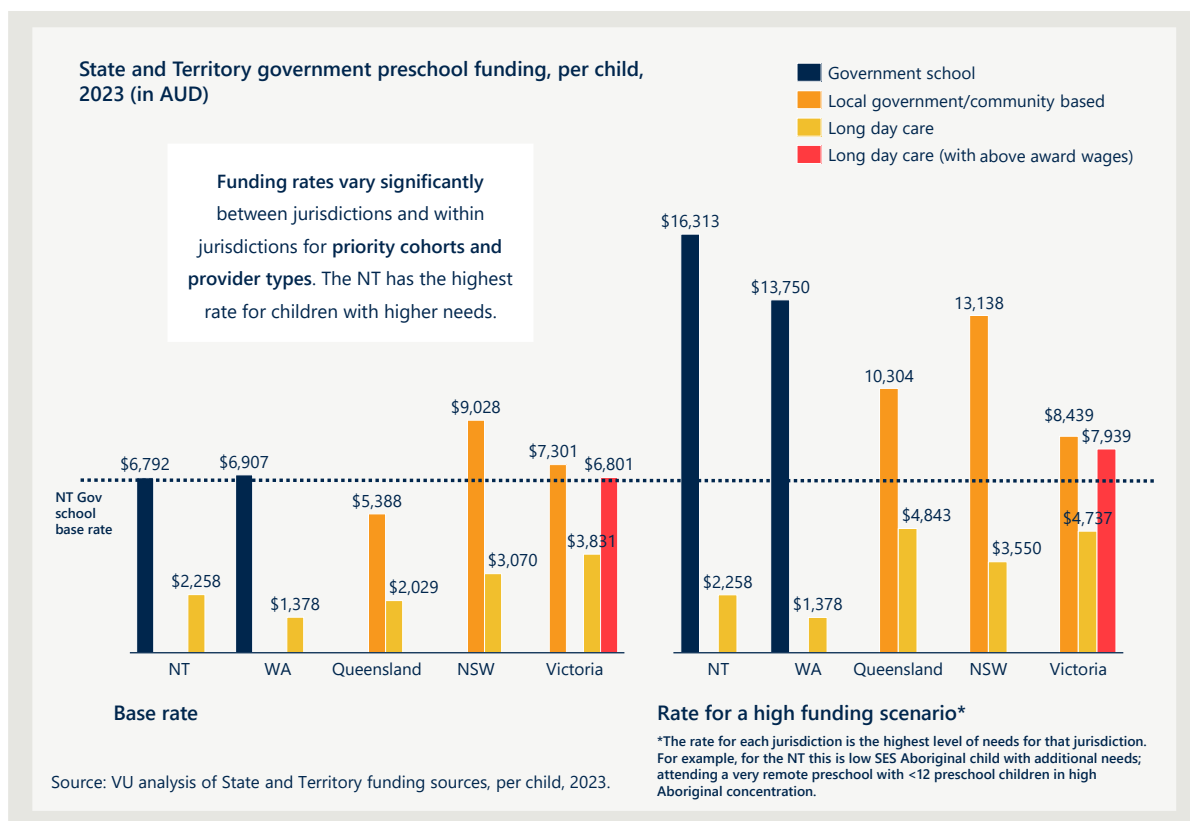
- All jurisdictions have different loadings for priority cohorts. The NT has the highest rate for needs chosen as an example in the chart. NSW provides loadings for preschools in remote areas, socio-economic disadvantaged areas, children with additional needs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.¹⁹⁴
- Jurisdictions where government school is the dominant setting (such as the NT and WA) have a higher rate for government schools than other settings.
- While the NT base per child rate is lower than most other jurisdictions, this is due to some costs being centrally funded (estimated as equivalent to \$2,560 per child per year). The NT SRM has larger loadings for priority cohorts, resulting in a greater per child rate for these children. The NT also has a higher proportion of priority cohorts.

¹⁹³ NT Government, Department of Education Annual Report 2021-22 p. 103

¹⁹⁴ NSW Department of Education, '2023 Start Strong for Community Preschools program guidelines' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

- Other jurisdictions have designed funding models that reduce out of pocket fees for attending preschool in different settings.¹⁹⁵ In Victoria, preschools can receive an extra payment if the preschool agrees not to charge fees (known as 'free kinder'). In NSW, preschools are eligible for higher amounts of Strong Start funding if they are not-for-profit, community-based or a mobile service. Providers are further encouraged to have low fees because they are eligible for additional Service Safety Net funding of \$149,320 per annum if they have daily fees less than \$55 per day, prior to the pass through of Fee Relief Payments.¹⁹⁶ In Queensland, sessional kindergartens must "adopt a fee structure that is not a barrier to participation" and align to their purpose as a community not-for-profit.¹⁹⁷
- The Victorian Government uses its funding model to incentivise better pay and working conditions for early childhood staff. Services who operate under approved Enterprise Agreements (which offer above-award pay and conditions) are eligible for a higher per capita funding rate.¹⁹⁸ For example the base rate for long day care providers with above-award pay and condition is almost 80 per cent higher than other long day cares (\$3,831 compared to \$6,801).

Figure 26 | Funding arrangements in different jurisdictions



Funding reform will require careful consideration of equity and contestability

The current funding model needs to be simplified and redesigned. The funding model should promote choice and continuity for families (through a diversity of providers). This may increase the proportion of preschool delivered by non-government providers that charge higher fees than government run services. Should the NT Government fund more non-government providers, measures (such as those adopted in

¹⁹⁵ Preschool Review, Victoria University Delivery Funding analysis.

¹⁹⁶ NSW Department of Education, '2023 Start Strong for Community Preschools program guidelines' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁹⁷ Queensland Government, 'Queensland Kindergarten Funding Essentials (sessional kindergartens)' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

¹⁹⁸ Victoria Department of Education, 'Kindergarten Funding Guide' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

Victoria) should be put in place to avoid unintended consequences for equity, and to ensure greater transparency of, and accountability for, existing expenditure on preschool.

To overcome funding complexity and fragmentation, the Department should pool all preschool related funding (recommendation 9) and establish a bespoke funding mechanisms for preschool (recommendation 10) that promotes choice and integrated delivery of quality services. A contemporary funding system be simple, flexible, responsive and drive equity.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Simplify funding for preschool by consolidating all Northern Territory Government funding into a single funding pool.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Design and implement a bespoke preschool funding mechanism that promotes choice and high-quality preschool with continuity of experience for children and families.

Design of new funding arrangements is a priority

The first step will be to consolidate all Northern Territory Government funding into a single funding pool. This will bring disparate funding sources that preschool programs access into one pool to significantly simplify preschool funding. The new pool for funding should include preschool funding from the School Resourcing Model, together with the PRA funding currently passed on to non-government preschool settings, some or all of the Early Childhood Service Subsidy and the range of programs and/or grants that fund preschool or preschool related services.

The majority of the funding pool (around 90 per cent) should be allocated using a bespoke preschool funding mechanism. The remainder should be allocated to the participation and engagement grant fund mentioned in section [4.2.2] and the infrastructure fund mentioned in section [4.6.2]

The second step will be to design the new preschool funding mechanism, based on the following design principles:

- **Child centred and needs based** – Consistent with the design principles of the SRM, the mechanism should provide a per child amount that reflects the efficient cost of high-quality preschool delivery, with loadings for additional needs.
- **Crowd-in rather than crowd-out funding sources** – The funding mechanism should encourage other funding into preschool settings, including parental contributions (subject to access and equity principles below), Australian Government funding (including through the CCS and the PRA) and philanthropic sources.
- **Equity and accessibility** – The funding mechanism should ensure that any parental contributions are not a barrier to enrolment and participation and avoid the creation of a two-track system. The Department could consider how to incentivise private providers to keep fees low.
- **Incentives for continuity of experience and learning** – The funding mechanism should encourage settings to provide preschool as part of a broader early childhood service offering, connected to schools.
- **Adequate loadings for children with from priority cohorts** – Loadings should be sufficient to meet the additional cost of servicing priority cohorts, and the costs of ongoing effort required to lift and sustain participation rates (as distinct from shorter term initiatives to lift participation rates, to be funded from the participation and engagement grant fund). These may need to differ markedly from the SRM loadings currently applied.

- **Transparency on the use of preschool funds** – The Department can incorporate requirements for all providers to acquit the use of the funding on preschool services. This includes the fulfilment of ‘Funding Follows the Child’ provisions in the PRA.

As in other jurisdictions, such a funding model is likely to involve differential rates for government and non-government settings and will need to consider current and future industrial arrangements, in both government and non-government preschool settings.

4.5.2 There is an opportunity to incorporate all early childhood funding into a pool in remote communities

The Review has heard that the current early childhood system is not working well in remote and other priority locations. Priority locations include locations with a high proportion of socioeconomic disadvantage, town camps and remote communities.

As a result of thin markets, the national approach to child care services does not work in the remote NT, resulting in “child care deserts”. Child care deserts are significantly more likely in remote and very remote areas. 85 per cent of remote and 78 per cent of very remote areas in Australia are classified as ‘child care deserts’ where there are more than three children per child care place.¹⁹⁹ There are also significantly less child care places in disadvantaged socioeconomic areas.²⁰⁰ Most of the NT, outside Greater Darwin, has less than 0.1 child care places per child.²⁰¹ The Australian Government responses to thin markets through the CCCFR and various additional child care payments) have mixed effectiveness. The CCCFR is currently under review.

Remote communities face challenges in delivering preschool and other early childhood services, including acute workforce constraints. The Review heard that regional and remote locations face challenges retaining staff due to a lack of peer support and connection to other staff,²⁰² higher cost of living in remote areas and a lack of other services, such as health clinics.²⁰³ Teachers in small schools may manage multi-level classes, including preschool alongside primary school and be unable to continue further study or gain qualifications due to geographic isolation.²⁰⁴ The Review heard that some remote preschools cannot get accreditation through the NQF (and meet quality standards) because they cannot recruit a qualified teacher. To improve access to quality preschool for all children, all preschools must be within scope of regulation and on a path to being assessed by having access to a qualified teacher.

As a result, a range of programmatic solutions have been developed and are funded from a range of often short-term funding. This reflects a range of locally tailored solutions to the challenges of early childhood service provision in remote or isolated communities. The Review has heard anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of services such as IndiKindy, Mobile Playgroups, Schools of the Air and Children’s Ground.

This form of funding poses significant challenges for service and the NT Government:

- **There is overlap in expenditure effort between the NT and Australian Government.** In 2020 there were a total of 136 early childhood grants, 104 administered by the Australian Government and 32 by

“Pooling funds gives us a higher chance of achieving stable and predictable funding, which allows for better long-term planning and continuity of programs.”

Early Childhood Sector Expert

¹⁹⁹ Peter Hurley, ‘Deserts & oases: how accessible is child care in Australia?’ *Mitchell Institute* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²⁰⁰ Median number of child care places per child in the most disadvantaged decile is 0.35, compared to 0.46 in the most advantaged.

²⁰¹ Mitchell Institute, ‘Deserts & oases: interactive maps’ (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²⁰² Big Rivers virtual consultation workshop, sector expert consultation.

²⁰³ Preschool Review, Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association (ICPA), written submission.

²⁰⁴ Preschool Review, Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association (ICPA), written submission.

the NT. This does not include the hundreds of other grants for family support, education, sport and wellbeing and child protection.²⁰⁵

- **Short-term funding prevents long-term planning and investment in services.** Short-term funding creates challenges for providers with staff retention and development on short term contracts.²⁰⁶
- **Fragmented and opaque funding sources are hard for providers to navigate.** Early childhood and family support services are funded by as many as seven different sources.²⁰⁷
- **Funding and subsidies are difficult for families to navigate.** Service fragmentation also exacerbates workforce constraints in remote communities.

These challenges create inequitable outcomes where some communities have an abundance of service providers and other have insufficient access.

Governments' responses to these well-known challenges tend to be to invest in service brokerage services such as Child and Family Centres, Communities for Children or Connected Beginnings. The Review has heard that these are successful in some places. However, they face similar funding challenges and are often high-cost solutions that do not address the root challenge of service fragmentation.

There is work underway to better coordinate funding for the early childhood sector between the Australian and Northern Territory Governments

The Generational Strategy for Children and Families sets a goal for more coordinated government investment between the Australian and NT governments. This is consistent with the priority reforms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the NT Government Local Decision-Making Agenda.

The Coordinated Funding Framework Agreement (CFFA) supports the Generational Strategy and provides a framework for improving the way that NT and Australian Government funding is coordinated. The CFFA is intended to reduce duplication of efforts through increased coordination, create a co-design process for providers and communities, promote long-term funding, reduce complexity and provide a framework for negotiating new funding linked to regional plans.

These frameworks and existing work lay the foundations for improving funding for the early childhood sector in priority locations. The Department can draw on this existing work to reform funding for priority locations.

RECOMMENDATION 11

In remote communities and other priority locations, pursue pooling of all Australian and NT Government funding for early childhood services, to fund service integration and place-based approaches with local community governance.

The Department should pursue pooling of early childhood funding and greater community control

The previous recommendations should apply across the NT, but in all remote and other priority locations the Review recommends further action to address disadvantage:

"It doesn't make sense to have separate funding models...pooling enables multi-disciplinary support."

Government Inclusion Expert

²⁰⁵ Australian Government Productivity Commission, 'Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory: Productivity Commission Study Report' (2020). Available at [\[link\]](#). p 8.

²⁰⁶ Generational Strategy Working Group, '10-Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory: Discussion Paper' (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²⁰⁷ Australian Government Productivity Commission, 'Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory: Productivity Commission Study Report' (2020). Available at [\[link\]](#). p 7.

1. **Pool NT Government and Australian Government funding for early childhood services to create a larger pool in remote areas.** The Department should pursue pooling of preschool and other early childhood funds to enable greater investment in other non-preschool local solutions. This could involve the “cashing out” of the per capita needs based equivalent of CCS, CCCFR, Inclusion Development Fund, Community Child Care Fund and the range of programmatic funding approaches (e.g. FAFT);
2. **Create greater community control and local decision making in how the local early childhood system is designed and managed.** It is important to note that the focus should be on availability of high-quality and accessible preschool at a minimum that adheres to the essential features of service models identified in section 4.1. Investment in non-preschool early learning services should always be based on the best available evidence and in consultation with local communities based on their needs.

The first steps to delivering on these recommendations are:

- Under the auspices of the Coordinated Investment Framework and in consultation with local cultural leadership, pick a region to test and refine the roll-out of this approach.
- Explore the potential for the Australian Government to “cash out” its early childhood funding, including FAFT, CCCFR, CCS and specific programs).

Implementation considerations

The Department may want to consider:

- How the funding model incentivises service integration in priority locations.
- How the funding models incentives the four service model qualities identified by the Review.

4.6 Stronger workforce, infrastructure and evidence are needed to support preschool providers

This section describes the three enabling recommendation to build:

- The capability and capacity of the early childhood workforce, particularly in remote and Aboriginal staff (recommendation 12)
- Fit-for-purpose infrastructure, starting with locations with the greatest need (recommendation 13)
- An evidence-base for what works for preschool in the NT (recommendation 14).

4.6.1 Overcoming workforce limitations is critical to support quality, flexible preschool provision

The early childhood workforce is central to improving preschool outcomes in the NT and underpin many reforms suggested in this Review. Quality preschool delivery depends on trained teachers, educators and other staff, including Aboriginal staff to deliver culturally safe and relevant services. This Review has not developed a workforce strategy but provides the direction to build on the strengths of the existing workforce in the NT.

Attracting and retaining an appropriate workforce is widely recognised as a substantial barrier to the expansion and improvement of early childhood

“The amount of paperwork and lack of support is driving good teachers out of the system.”

Ex-preschool teacher

services across Australia. The key challenges are low wages compared to other education sectors²⁰⁸, a lack of career progression²⁰⁹ and negative public perceptions of the sector.²¹⁰ These challenges cause high workforce turnover and a difficulty retaining experienced educators.²¹¹ Site visits also highlighted that preschool teachers have a high workload and sometimes mentally or emotionally challenging role.²¹² The Northern Territory faces particular challenges attracting and retaining staff in remote and very remote areas.²¹³ The 2021 ECEC National Workforce Census found the 2365-strong workforce in the NT has not grown substantially since 2013.²¹⁴

“You have amazing teachers in charge that are giving up so much of their own time to make our preschools run smoothly.”

An educator in a government preschool

The Review heard that most teachers, educators and support staff are providing excellent support to children and their families, despite, not because of the system. Most stakeholders in the survey noted that high-quality staff was one of the biggest strengths of preschool in the NT. Some respondents noted that preschool staff are passionate and dedicated educators.²¹⁵ However, some note system barriers such as needing to commit their own time or challenges gaining Early Childhood qualifications. Any investment should draw on the strengths of the existing workforce and support existing experienced staff to succeed.

There is an opportunity to build on the substantial investment already underway

Significant effort is underway from the Australian Government, the Northern Territory and the private sector to address workforce barriers. The National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2022 – 2031 has identified 21 actions under six focus areas to grow the early childhood workforce. This investment includes research into the barriers and strategies for improving pay, reviewing requirements for the registration of teachers, promoting early childhood careers, providing wellbeing support and growing professional development opportunities.²¹⁶ Ongoing multiemployer bargaining cases are likely increase in wages in the sector overall and contribute to improved attraction and retention of staff.

The recommendations of this Review will require additional investment. Many recommendations will either compound existing workforce challenges by increasing demand or depend on greater workforce supply for success. At the same time, the expansion of preschool in other jurisdictions is increasing demand for workforce, and leading to competition between jurisdictions for qualified staff.

The Review should build on recent improvements in the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. The ECEC National Workforce Census found that 37.1 per cent of the workforce surveyed in ‘dedicated preschools’ in the Northern Territory were Indigenous.²¹⁷ This number has grown significantly from 2013 (98 Aboriginal staff) to 2021 (282 Aboriginal staff).

²⁰⁸ Preschool Review, Stage 1 Site Visit Review Workshop, sector expert consultation.

²⁰⁹ Health Employees Superannuation Trust Australia, ‘State of the sector 2021: Early childhood education and care workforce insights’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²¹⁰ South Australia Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education, ‘Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education & Care’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²¹¹ The Front Project, ‘The case for system stewardship in Australia’s Early Childhood Education and Care System’ (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²¹² Preschool Review, Namarluk School site visit highlighted that teachers require significant knowledge of working with children with additional needs and resilience to stress and high workloads.

²¹³ Preschool Review, Reflections from staff at Tennant Creek Preschool; Preschool Review Big Rivers Review Workshop, sector expert consultation.

²¹⁴ Social Research Institute, ‘2021 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census’ *Australian Government Department of Education* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²¹⁵ Preschool Review, Have Your Say survey data.

²¹⁶ Education Services Australia, ‘Shaping Our Future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children’s education and care workforce 2022–2031’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²¹⁷ Social Research Institute, ‘2021 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census’ *Australian Government Department of Education* (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#) Appendix 3, table 39.

The Department should invest in the capacity and capability of the workforce

The Department should develop a refreshed early childhood workforce strategy to support delivery of the preschool vision. The strategy should build on Starting Early for a Better Future 2018-2028²¹⁸ and the National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2022-2031²¹⁹ to determine tangible, practical and locally appropriate steps to grow the workforce in the Northern Territory.

In many cases, workforce planning is better done at a regional or local level using whole-of-community approaches. Local organisations are better placed to understand the barriers to workforce attraction and retention at a local level to facilitate local solutions. The Department should develop programs to support local areas with the funding, capacity and capability to plan workforce locally.²²⁰

The Department can do the following to attract additional workforce to the NT, specifically in remote areas:

- **Invest in the Aboriginal workforce** – Build on existing investment through the Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education (RATE) program and grow the Aboriginal workforce. Focus investment specifically across all roles in preschool, including teachers, principals and support staff (e.g. providing transport, teacher’s aides) to deliver on the Closing the Gap priority of a “dedicated, identified and appropriately remunerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce”, including in the early childhood sector.²²¹ The Department can explore scholarships for Aboriginal workforce to undertake further study and gain qualifications, on-the-job training and professional development²²² or community developed initiatives to increase the Aboriginal workforce.
- **Promote careers in early childhood education and care** – Run a communications campaign promoting the value of and opportunity in early childhood careers. The Department could focus on improving information available to students in high school through career advisors in government schools.
- **Provide financial incentives to train as a preschool teacher and/or work in a remote area** – Financial incentives could include scholarships for education and training, such as the existing Aboriginal Teacher Education Scholarship, or access to professional development. Financial or housing support for relocation to remote or very remote communities could grow the remote workforce, where there are limited opportunities to grow the local workforce.
- **Develop education and training pathways** – Broker partnerships between employers and education and training providers to ensure the newly trained workforce is connected to employers. Employers can also create employment-based pathways into teaching to ensure students can ‘earn while they learn’.²²³ The Department should ensure these pathways are recognised in qualifications.

²¹⁸ Northern Territory Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, ‘Starting Early For a Better Future: Early Childhood Development in the Northern Territory 2018-2028’ (2018). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²¹⁹ Education Services Australia, ‘Shaping Our Future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children’s education and care workforce 2022–2031’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²²⁰ The Northern Territory Government can draw inspiration from the Child care Leadership Alliance in the Isaac Regional Council in Queensland. See Child care Leadership Alliance, ‘About us’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²²¹ National Indigenous Australians Agency, ‘National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²²² Closing the Gap, ‘Sector Strengthening Plan: Early Childhood Care and Development’ (2021). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²²³ South Australia Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education, ‘Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education & Care’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

- **Review education and training programs** – Education and training programs require culturally appropriate delivery, paid and supported placements for students and flexible delivery for remote students or those with work or caring responsibilities.²²⁴

The Department can do the following to retain and train existing experienced staff:

- **Foster inclusive and supportive work environments** – Preschool services, like many other educational environments, involve distributed leadership and teams of educators, administrators and leaders to deliver a quality service. This includes tools that assure inclusive and support work environments such as professional development opportunities and anti-racism or discrimination hotlines and procedures. The Department can also work to assign responsibilities in service providers for building and maintaining inclusive environments (i.e., ‘inclusion’ roles).
- **Develop tools that make it easier to deliver a preschool program** – Operationalising and delivering a preschool program places a significant burden on educational and administrative staff. Further support from the Department including resources or surge-capacity to understand and deliver on regulatory requirements for preschool could reduce the pressure on staff. This was raised consistently at site visits when meeting with school principals, preschool teachers and school administrative staff.
- **Offer pathways for existing staff to gain additional qualification needed to become a preschool teacher** – There is an opportunity to support existing staff in remote areas to become a degree-qualified preschool teacher. The Department can provide financial support to participate in the degree or advocate for paid placements.
- **Create professional development opportunities** – Fund and promote access to mentoring, leadership programs or other professional development programs that encourage learning, reflection and career pathways.²²⁵ Staff are particularly in need of professional development on teaching children with additional needs²²⁶ and early identification of delays and communication needs.²²⁷ Examples include graduate teacher professional networks or local learning networks.

“Training and competency of early childhood education and care workers in speech, language and literacy development is critical for early identification of delays in relevant milestones.”

Speech Pathology Australia

Implementation considerations

The Department may want to consider:

- How any Northern Territory Government investment is complemented by or builds on investment at a national level.
- How investment in workforce can solve challenges at a system and regional level, rather than focussing solely on individual schools.
- How schools can be enabled to tailor workforce initiatives to local challenges to recruiting and retaining staff.

²²⁴ South Australia Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education, ‘Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education & Care’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²²⁵ South Australia Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education, ‘Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education & Care’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²²⁶ Preschool Review, Namarluk School, site visit.

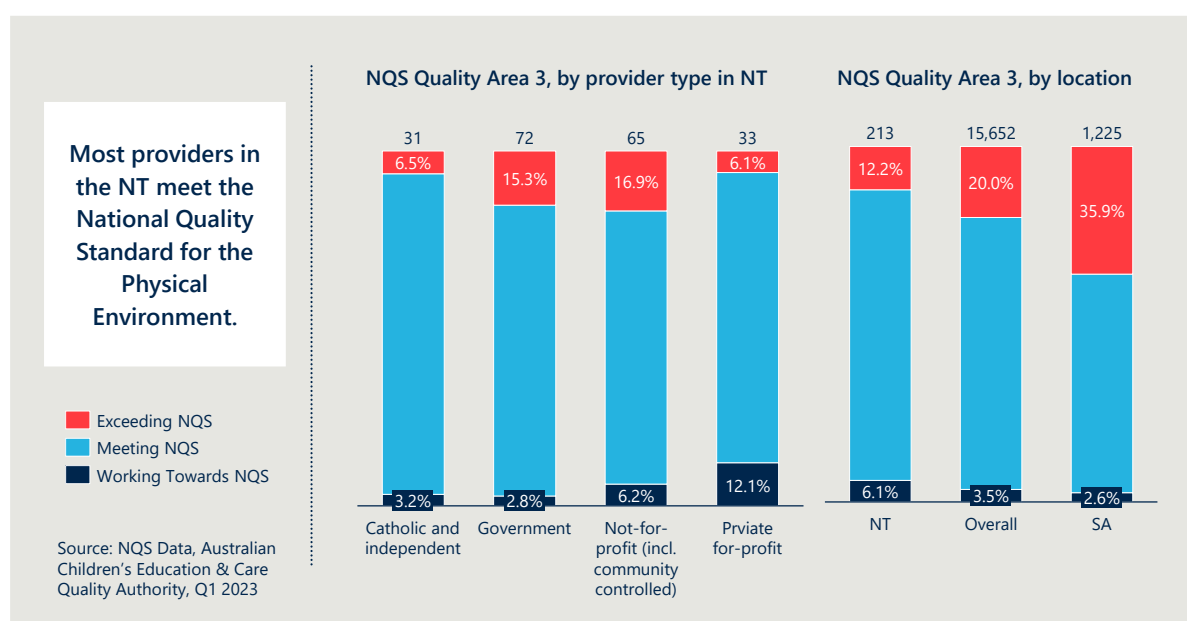
²²⁷ Preschool Review, Speech Pathology Australia, written submission.

4.6.2 Safe, inclusive and appropriate infrastructure will improve outcomes

The physical environment is a key component of preschool quality and a driver of child outcomes. Quality Area 3 under the National Quality Standard is to “ensure the physical environment is safe, suitable and provides a diverse range of experiences that promote children’s learning and development”.

Most providers in the Northern Territory provide high-quality physical environments. 93.9 per cent of providers in the NT are meeting or exceeding the NQS Quality Area 3 compared to 96.5 per cent of providers in Australia overall. However, private for-profit providers are more than four times likely to be working towards the NQS than those that are government run (12.1 per cent compared to 2.8 per cent). Figure 27 illustrates the NQS Quality Area 3 data.

Figure 27 | National Quality Standard Quality Area 3



In some areas, facilities are a constraint to quality preschool. Many facilities are up to 40 years old and lack fit-for-purpose toilets, laundering facilities, sleep facilities, food servicing, and weather-resistant infrastructure.²²⁸ Providers that do not meet elements of the NQF Quality Area 3 are most likely to not meet ‘inclusive environment’ and ‘environmentally responsible’.²²⁹

Many of the future directions proposed in the report will increase demand and require greater or differently distributed capacity. To meet this demand the Review recommends additional investment in quality and appropriate infrastructure across the NT, with a focus on locations with low participation. Preschool educators and principals noted that some preschools would need significant infrastructure improvement before being able to take additional capacity, such as additional hours for four-year-olds or expanding to three-year-old preschool.

RECOMMENDATION 13 Design and progressively roll out fit for purpose infrastructure, starting with locations with the greatest need.

²²⁸ Preschool Review, Stage 1 Site Visit Review Workshop, sector expert consultation; Preschool Review, Indy Kindy, site visit.

²²⁹ 3.8% of providers in the NT do not meet the element ‘inclusive environment’ and 3.3% of providers in the NT do not meet the element ‘environmentally responsible’.

Future steps should include a facilities audit, capital plan and infrastructure fund

Northern Territory Government (NTG) should conduct a full audit of the facilities available to preschool programs to identify their infrastructure needs and priorities. To prioritise, the Department should start with the providers that are not meeting NQS Quality Area 3.

A capital plan and associated fund can support the improvement of preschool facilities. Similar improvement grants, such as the Building Blocks Grants Program in Victoria, support early childhood providers to upgrade or make minor improvements to existing facilities and build new facilities to accommodate additional preschool places.²³⁰

“Infrastructure needs to be community informed.”

Early childhood advocate and sector expert

All future investment in infrastructure should be aligned to the four essential features of preschool recommended in this Review. Any investment should ensure early childhood infrastructure is considered as part of addressing other community needs, such as integration with health and other services. As discussed in section 4.2.2, some remote or very remote preschools may invest in laundry, washroom or other facilities to address food, health and hygiene needs of

students. The fund should be appropriately flexible to allow preschools and communities to identify local needs for preschool facilities.

“The current [infrastructure] needs to be improved rather than looking to extend services with infrastructure that cannot cope as it is. We need to have our existing buildings updated and improved.”

Preschool educator

Implementation considerations

The Department may want to consider:

- How the fund encourages increased continuity of experience.
- How the fund encourages infrastructure projects that address local community need.
- An integrated approach to infrastructure that addresses multiple community needs (e.g. early learning, family services and health services).

4.6.3 Effective preschool delivery depends on quality evidence specific to the NT

Accurate, locally-relevant and current evidence underpins high-quality preschool delivery. As evidenced in section 1.1 and 2.2, domestic and international literature reinforces the value of early childhood education and care for child developmental outcomes, especially for priority cohorts. Access to a strong evidence base is key to making the funding and policy decisions that ensure all preschools aligns with the foundations of learning discussed in section 3.1.

The NT requires a specific early childhood evidence base that can respond to the diversity of setting and cohorts. National and international findings are difficult to generalise to the NT’s higher levels of developmental vulnerability, levels of remoteness, cultural and linguistic diversity and models of early childhood and preschool delivery. Early childhood services in the NT have also changed in recent years with the introduction of the NQF, FaFT and the Abecedarian approach, requiring an evolving and up to

“The evidence base for preschool is very specific and does not generalise to all programs.”

Sector expert

²³⁰ Victorian Government Department of Education, ‘More government funding available for early childhood infrastructure’ (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#).

date evidence base. International studies and stakeholder submissions have identified the need for a greater early childhood evidence base.²³¹

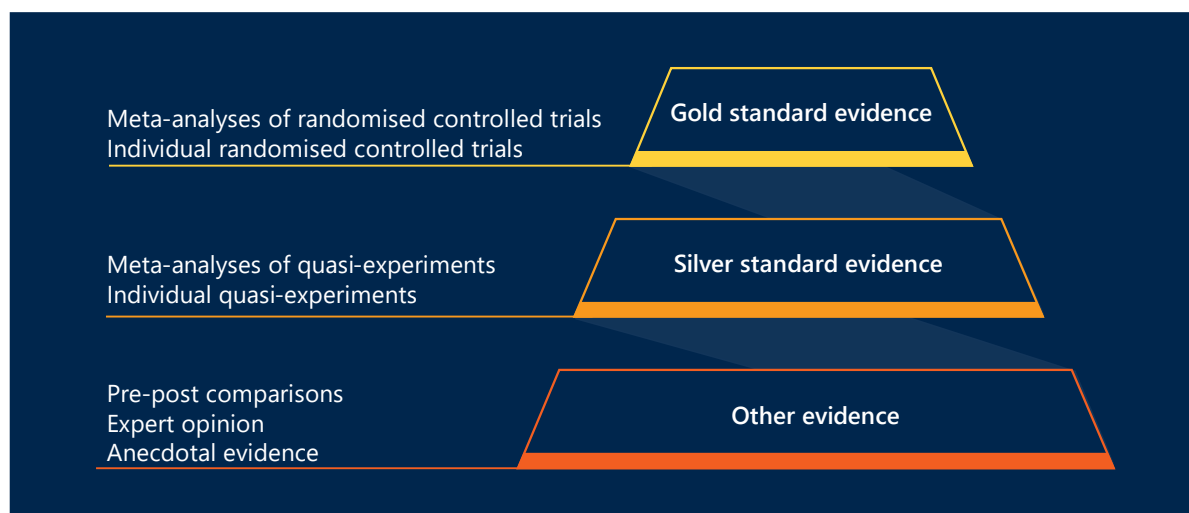
Work is currently underway to build the NT-specific evidence base.

The NT has and is currently building a strong evidence base. Researchers from the Australian and NT Government, universities, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and early childhood organisations have identified barriers to child participation and locally adapted delivery. The Child and Youth Development Research Partnership between the NT Government and the Menzies School of Health Research is using de-identified linked data from over 80,000 children and young people that includes preschool, schooling and developmental outcomes.²³²

Under the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement, the Australian Government has agreed to work with states and territories to improve preschool outcomes measurements.²³³ The Australian Government has committed to spend an additional \$28.7 million to improve the quality and transparency of preschool data nationally and developed a Preschool Performance Framework.

The Review has identified specific evidence that is currently missing from the evidence base. Additional evidence is needed about the impact of additional hours of preschool on children, effectiveness of three-year-old preschool, the best ways to balance quality and local delivery and the impact of different delivery models on priority cohorts. Some stakeholders noted the importance of building 'gold' or 'silver' standard evidence for preschool, as aligns with the CESE evidence hierarchy in Figure 28.

Figure 28 | CESE evidence hierarchy



RECOMMENDATION 14 | Develop an evidence base for what works for preschool in the NT.

The Department should develop the NT-specific evidence base across all early learning programs.

Building the preschool evidence base allows the Department to steward the system, as described in section 4.2.3, by measuring and tracking the system. In response to high-quality evidence, the Department

²³¹ Evidence for Learning 'Play-based learning' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#); Preschool Review, Charles Darwin University Early Childhood Special Interest Group, written submission. For greater consideration on building an evidence base see Hirokazu Yoshikawa et al., 'Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education' *Society for Research in Child Development* (2013). Available at [\[link\]](#), Appendix.

²³² Menzies - School of Health, 'Child and Youth Development Research Partnership CYDRP 2017-2024' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

²³³ Department of Education, 'Preschool Reform Funding Agreement'. Available at [\[link\]](#).

can put in place mechanisms for understanding and intervening through funding and policy decisions. One example is funding, developing and evaluating place-based models for government preschools.

The Department also plays a role in putting existing and emerging evidence into practice and enabling practitioners to develop evidence-based practice. The system steward's role in collecting and sharing information is crucial to ensure that families know where they stand and what options are best for them, to informing delivery strategies on the part of providers and evidenced-based and high-quality approaches to play-based learning in preschool settings.

As a system steward, the Department's role in developing the evidence base and enabling practitioners to develop evidence-based practice may be to:

- Incorporate the most up-to-date research in its decision and policy making to drive high-quality preschool delivery across all settings.
- Invest in building the early childhood evidence base by commissioning rigorous evaluations, meta-analysis, longitudinal studies and similar gold-standard evidence.
- Communicate evidence-based findings to providers on innovative models of delivery such as the three-year-old preschool trial.²³⁴
- Develop and distribute evidence-based tools to teachers, educators and service providers. Examples of evidence-based tools developed in other jurisdictions include Victoria's Early Years Assessment and Learning Tool.²³⁵

Implementation considerations



The Department may want to consider:

- How to build on investment nationally in preschool outcomes measurement through the PRA.

²³⁴ Menzies - School of Health 'Mobile Preschool Evaluation Summary Report' (2013). Available at [\[link\]](#), is a quality example of rigorous evidence gathering to inform future service design.

²³⁵ Victorian Government Department of Education, 'Early Years Assessment and Learning Tool' (2022). Available at [\[link\]](#).

Appendix A Stakeholder engagement



The Nous and Department teams have engaged extensively with stakeholders across the span of the Review. Figure 29 shows the site visits throughout the Review and Table 1 describes all stakeholder responses to the Discussion Paper in Stage 3 of the project. A workshop register is provided in Table 2.

Table 1 | Stakeholder responses to Discussion Paper

Consultation type	Stakeholders
Public submissions (17)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT) • Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT) • Catholic Education Northern Territory (CENT) • Charles Darwin University (CDU) • Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC) • The Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet NT (CM&C) • The Department of Health NT • The Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics NT (DIPL) • The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC) • Early Childhood Australia NT (ECA) • Goodstart Early Learning • Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA) • Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS) • Kids First Australia • Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) • Remote Indigenous Parents Australia National Indigenous Corporation (RIPA) • Speech Pathology Australia
Parent yarns (14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ludmilla Preschool (3 responses) • Borrooloola FaFT (2 responses) • Jabiru Preschool (3 responses) • Mimik-ga FaFT Centre (5 responses) • Warruwi School (1 response)
Have Your Say questionnaire (111 unique responses)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40 educators or support staff members in a government school/preschool • 7 educators or support staff members in a non-government early education and care setting • 56 parents or carers with a child in preschool currently (or in the last 5 years) • 4 parents or carers with children of preschool age but not currently in preschool • 5 community members • 10 Aboriginal or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Table 2 | Workshop register

Workshop type	Name
Parent Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Darwin Preschool Parent Session • Gillen School Parent Session
Expert workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Engagement Advisory Group (SEAG) Meeting • Early childhood Key Stakeholder Advisory Group (KSAG) Meeting • NT Department community engagement team • Principal Briefing • Goodstart workshop • Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities
Site visit workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Darwin (& Clyde Fenton): Preschool review consultation workshop • Big Rivers virtual consultation workshop
Future directions workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review Workshop [1] • Review workshop [2] • Review workshop [3]

Figure 29 | Site visit register

