

Review of Preschool Funding and Delivery in the Northern Territory

Policy context

This document has been developed to summarise the policy context (as at July 2024) surrounding the Review of Preschool Funding and Delivery in the Northern Territory.

Overview of Preschool

Preschool is an important and fundamental part of the broader Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system. The benefits of early childhood education in boosting a child's development in the crucial first five years of life are well-known. During this period, children build the foundations for learning and are equipped with the social, cognitive and emotional skills necessary for school, and life.

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

Policy Context

It is a time of significant reform and opportunity for early childhood education and care in Australia. There are a range of reviews and initiatives either complete or in progress across the system which will help inform national policy direction within the ECEC space. These include, but are not limited to:

- The **Productivity Commission's current inquiry into the early childhood services sector**: A *path to universal early childhood education and care* final report was delivered to the Australian Government in June 2024.² The report sets out the Commission's findings and recommendations to address the barriers that affect access to ECEC services and support better outcomes for children and families. The report proposes the establishment of a new National Partnership Agreement for ECEC by 2026 which articulates the national vision for ECEC, clarifies roles and responsibilities between governments and builds on the Preschool Reform Agreement.
- The **National Preschool Reform Agreement (2022-2025)**³ Under the agreement, the Australian Government provides a per-child contribution to states and territories to support the delivery of 15 hours of preschool a week – 600 hours a year – for all children in the year before they start school. The agreement commits the Australian Government and all states and territories to work collaboratively to progress three important reforms to enhance funding equity; improve preschool participation and improve child outcomes.
- **National Early Years Strategy** launched on 7 May 2024.⁴ The Australian government have developed the Early Years Strategy to set out the Government's vision to best support Australia's children and families. The strategy articulates how the Australian Government will prioritise and support child-centred policy development, and target investment in early years supports and services over the next 10 years.

¹ [Preschool Education methodology, 2023 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#)

² [Early childhood education and care - Public inquiry - Productivity Commission \(pc.gov.au\)](#)

³ [Preschool Reform Agreement - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

⁴ [Early Years Strategy | Department of Social Services, Australian Government \(dss.gov.au\)](#)

- **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, the national peak body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.⁵ The strategy provides a community-informed and evidence-based pathway to achieve the National Agreement on Closing the Gap targets and outcomes for early childhood, and to fulfil joint commitments to priority reforms.
- **Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) Childcare Inquiry 2023** final report, delivered in December 2023, reflects an inquiry into the market for the supply of ECEC services.⁶ The report contains ACCC's findings and recommendations relative to accessibility of such services, and specifically to the Cheaper Childcare reforms, prices, costs, profits and competition within childcare markets and subsidies and price regulation models.
- **South Australia Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care** heard expert evidence and the experiences of families to provide advice to the government on delivering a high-quality early years system that is fit for the future.⁷ Key themes from the final report included: every child benefiting from greater access to quality services, including an additional year of school by offering up to 30 hours of preschool per week for 3 and 4-year olds who need the most developmental support, actioning scientific knowledge and leading national policy conversation.
- **Expanded hours:** Most jurisdictions are expanding access to preschool, to 30 hours for children in their year before full time school (New South Wales and Victoria) and to three-year-olds (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).⁸

Northern Territory Department of Education, reviews and evaluations:

- **The Review of Preschool Funding and Delivery in the Northern Territory:** The Northern Territory Department of Education commissioned an independent review of preschool in the Northern Territory.⁹ Through extensive stakeholder engagement, the review has identified a vision for preschool and 14 recommendations to implement this.
- **Evaluation of three-year-old preschool trial** and **Evaluation of Families as First Teachers program:** An evaluation of the 'Three-Year-Old Preschool' trial and Families as First Teachers (FaFT) is currently underway. FaFT and the Stay Play Learn FaFT program, which is available to three-year-olds, has anecdotal evidence of effectiveness in engaging younger children in remote areas. Evidence and experience from these programs and other jurisdictions will be used to inform future decisions regarding offering three-year-old preschool.

What does this mean for communities across the NT?

- In 2024, the findings and recommendations from this Review will be considered alongside the national reform agenda to ensure the NT's ECEC system meets the needs of all Territory children and families. The Review is an important contribution to the national reform discussions.
- Changes to the way preschool operates cannot be considered in isolation from the rest of the ECEC system. They are deeply entwined in terms of child and family experience, service models, funding models and policy choices.
- Delivering the reform presented in the Review will require collaboration between the NT and Australian governments, the ECEC sector and the community.

⁵ [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy | NIAA](#)

⁶ [December 2023 final report | ACCC](#)

⁷ [Publications | Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care \(royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au\)](#)

⁸ Review of Preschool Funding and Delivery in the Northern Territory (page 8)

⁹ Review of Preschool Funding and Delivery in the Northern Territory