



# Review of Preschool Education in the NT **SUMMARY**



## Introduction

High quality preschool supports children's transition to school, enables access to other services including health and family support and, as part of the early childhood system, enables parents' and carers' participation in the workforce.

Through participation in quality early learning services and programs, children have a strong sense of identity and well-being, and start their journey as confident and involved learners. This will improve the foundational skills of children and reinforces engagement through to later years of schooling.

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



## Approach

The Review of Preschool Funding and Delivery in the Northern Territory (NT) (the Review) was conducted by the Nous Group between November 2022 and October 2023.

The Review considered how preschool is currently delivered in the NT, how preschool could better meet the needs of all children and families, and proposed future directions for preschool delivery and funding.

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

## Current context of preschool in the NT

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in the NT is delivered by both government and non-government providers in multiple settings and places, using different service delivery and funding models.

Preschool is mainly provided in government school settings but is also delivered through non-government schools, long day care services and early learning centres.

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



### School-based preschool

- **144** preschools delivered by schools
- **137** government run
- **4** non-government schools in remote areas, funded by government
- **3** non-government schools

### Other services

- **48** preschool programs delivered in long day care (LDC)
- **17** LDCs run by various providers (child care centres, early learning centres)
- **12** run by independent provider Goodstart
- **9** run by the Catholic Education NT (including 7 early learning centres)
- **8** run by NT Christian Schools (including 7 early learning centres)
- **2** LDCs at Independent schools (including 1 early learning centre)

# Review recommendations

Overarching recommendations set the future reform direction: changing the way we think about preschool, taking action to improve access and participation for all and defining the Department's leadership role.

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

Strengthened diversity and flexibility of delivery models, improved continuity of child and parent experience and integration of preschool with other early years services.



## Expanded offer

Targeted and evidence-informed expansion of funded preschool



## Simplified funding

Funding is transparent, equitable and supports smooth transitions



## Supported providers

Providers can access a skilled workforce and appropriate infrastructure; policy and regulation supports quality

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.

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**.

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

Pursue **pooling all Government funding** for early childhood services for **service integration** and **place-based** approaches with **local community governance** in remote and other priority locations.

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 Northern Territory**.

## The case for change

The Review identified strengths of preschool in the NT, including a passionate, dedicated and skilled workforce and innovative, locally-adapted delivery models. However, to provide universal high-quality and accessible preschool, the following challenges need to be addressed.

### There are barriers to participation in preschool for many children

- System barriers to participation are amplified for certain groups including First Nations children, children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, children living remote or very remote, children who speak English as another language, children who are experiencing, or at risk of being vulnerable, and children with additional needs.

### The development outcomes of NT children are behind national averages

- The Australian Early Development Census 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.
- 39.2% of children in the NT are developmentally vulnerable on one or more of these domains which is almost twice the national average of 22%.

### The 'sessional' model of shorter days of preschool creates challenges for families

- Preschool providers deliver 600 hours per year (equivalent to 15 hours per week ) of funded preschool in many ways. In government schools, these hours are often split across shorter days (known as "sessional" preschool).
- This current sessional model of preschool is often challenging for families trying to balance work and family commitments. It also means some children attend multiple early education and care services (i.e., accessing a combination of government preschool and long day care).

### There is limited availability of preschool in some parts of the Territory

- Availability of preschool in some remote communities does not meet demand. Families and children are on waitlists or must travel long distances to attend preschool.

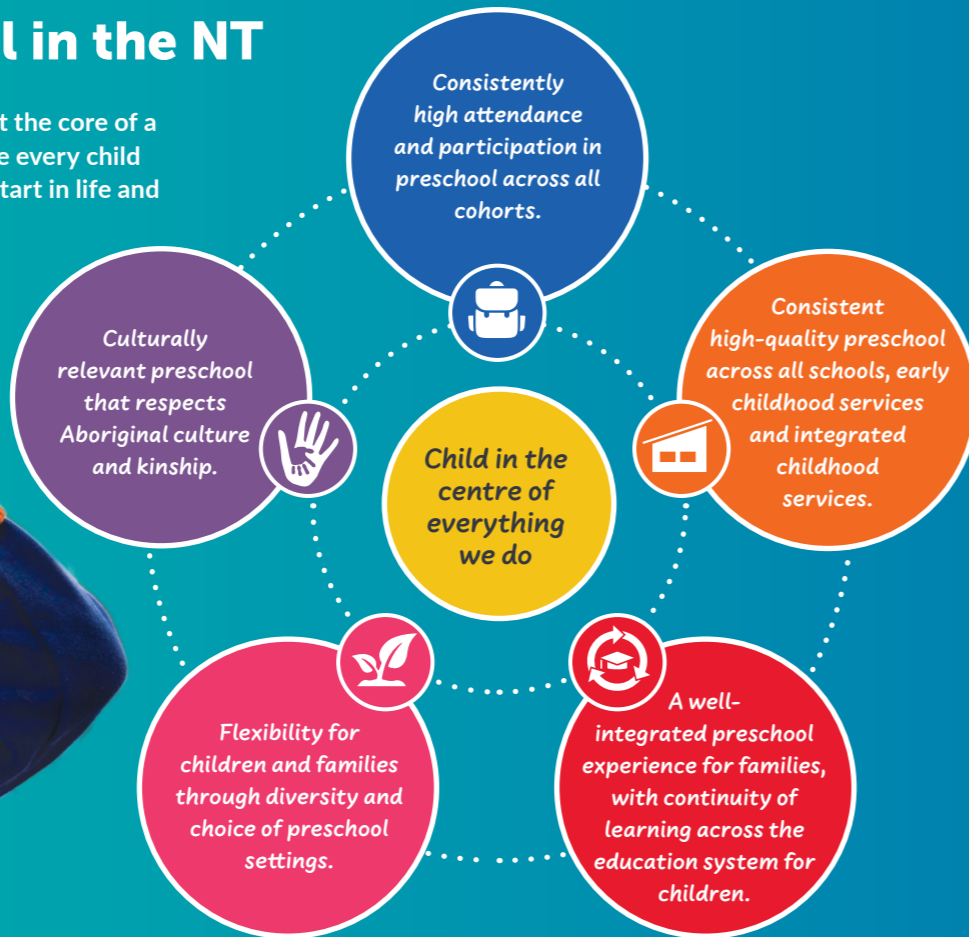
### The current funding model creates fragmentation and relies on significant investment from the NT Government.

- Funding arrangements for ECEC services are complex, making them hard for providers and parents to navigate.
- The NT Government bears more of the funding burden for ECEC services than other states and territories.



# Vision for preschool in the NT

The Review sets out a vision for preschool at the core of a broader early childhood system that will give every child in the NT the opportunity to have the best start in life and gain a bright future through early learning.



# Implementing for success

The reform agenda proposed by the Review would represent a significant change in the way preschool is understood, delivered and funded in the NT.

It would deliver increased access, diversity and flexibility for families, and increase participation in preschool, especially those children who will most benefit.

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.

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.





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