

Public Submission:

Draft National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care

Following the invitation from the Department of Education to provide feedback on the Australian Government's draft *National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care*, including its key messages, content, and design, please find below the Australian Childcare Alliance's feedback and recommendations.

For ease of reference, we have provided our feedback directly in relation to each statement from the draft vision.

Draft Scope:

This vision encompasses all forms of ECEC including preschool, long day care, family day care and out of school hours care. We recognise all forms as being essential to workforce participation as well as an environment of learning, development, and care both in the early years and during school years. The vision is also intended to intersect with broader early childhood development systems and programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The language should reflect pedagogy principles which informs Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers and educators to support the learning, growth, and development of each child. It is recommended to reflect these principles, the language used should be inclusive and integrate 'play' and 'quality' within the scope.
- The importance of 'play' should be included within the scope – "...an environment of learning, development, **play**, and care..."
- The importance of 'quality' should be included within the scope - "The vision is also intended to intersect with broader early childhood development systems and **quality** programs."
- There needs to be greater emphasis on the fact that ECEC has a wider impact on communities and society; effectively, that ECEC operates as a **social infrastructure** that creates a strong foundation for a child's development and their social, emotional, and educational outcomes.

Draft Principles:

Equity

All children are supported to succeed, regardless of their circumstances and abilities. Carefully designed strategies and targeted investment provide additional support to children and families when and where they need it.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We would like to see the importance of embedding proportionate universality reflected in this statement to ensure an approach that targets the needs and level of disadvantaged of each child and family, based on their individual circumstances.
- When discussing equity, the statement should reflect financial, developmental, and social vulnerabilities experienced. A truly equitable system will remove barriers for **all** types of vulnerability which includes the ease of access, low or no cost options, and systems that can adequately support vulnerability in practice.
- We suggest rewording the first sentence as: ***'Children from all backgrounds, circumstances and abilities are supported to succeed.'***

Affordability

ECEC is within the means of all families. Sustainable, flexible funding systems are in place to support providers in reducing cost barriers for all children and families.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Affordability needs to encompass financial assistance and supports for all. Particularly, with affordability interwoven with equity and access, that requires different levels of government and funding to work well together to support families and children to access ECEC.
- Suggestion - 'Sustainable **cohesive** and flexible funding systems...'
Currently, the funding systems does not work well together and there are jurisdictional issues across the States which could be a goal through the National Vision for ECEC to change.
- We suggest rewording the sentence as: ***'Sustainable cohesive and flexible funding systems are in place to maintain affordability regardless of family circumstances.'***

These amendments would achieve a positive, strengths-based language and move away from the negatively framed language of ‘reducing cost barriers’.

Quality

ECEC services are culturally appropriate for their community and meet high standards in providing learning and development outcomes. Children build relationships with a stable, qualified workforce that is recognised for its critical role in the community, and families have confidence in ECEC services.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- When we are talking to quality, it is recommended including **‘continuous quality improvement’** to reflect the ongoing commitment and sustainable approach to upholding high quality within the ECEC sector.
- Central to developing and implementing a high quality ECEC service is **‘appropriately qualified workforce’**. The ECEC workforce of teachers and educators underpins and are fundamental to quality in ECEC services.
- We suggest replacing the first sentence with: ***‘All children have the right to be valued as individuals, in their cultural histories and are nurtured in high quality ECEC services.’***

Accessibility

Geographic or cultural barriers to attending a high quality ECEC are removed. Services are supported to provide flexible models that meet the needs of their community and link with support services where families need them.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We have concerns around the current negative framing of the first sentence, and would like to see greater focus on inclusion more broadly.
- Each of the Vision’s Principles (equity, affordability, quality, and accessibility) evoke a different meaning for different interest groups (for children, families, carers, and communities). We strongly believe these definitions should represent and communicate to adequately consider and reflect the **breadth** of the audience.
- We suggest removing the first sentence and replacing with: ***‘Facilitate access to high quality ECEC by providing assistance to address geographic or cultural barriers.’***

- We suggest amending the second sentence as follows: ***‘Services are supported to provide flexible and inclusive models that meet the needs of their community and link with support services where families need them.’***

Draft Vision - A Thriving Australian Society where:

Every child can access and participate in high-quality, culturally responsive ECEC, including preschool, to support their right to thrive, grow their sense of identity and connection to the world, and become confident and engaged learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- There needs to be greater emphasis on inclusion, belonging, and what it means for a child to experience the full benefits of learning within an ECEC service. The current wording of ‘access and participation’, fails to encompass the impact of ECEC extensively.
- We suggest amending the title to: ***‘Vision: A Flourishing Australian Society where:’***
- We suggest amending the sentence to read: ***‘Every child can become agents of their own learning, identity and abilities with a sense of belonging through high-quality, inclusive and culturally responsive ECEC across all of its settings.’***

Every parent can access an affordable, high-quality service to support their participation in the workforce, and the associated social and economic benefits.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- As the description of participation in the workforce fails to represent the diverse families, parents and carers that may need ECEC with young children, we recommend changing the word ‘parent’ to ***‘family’***.
- We suggest amending the sentence to read: ***‘Every family can access an affordable, high-quality service to support their personal and professional growth, and their child’s early education, that contributes to wider social and economic benefits including increased participation in work or study.***

The ECEC workforce is highly skilled, valued, and professionally recognised and the sector is supported to attract and retain workers.

No recommendations – ACA supports the wording of this statement.

Governments take a holistic approach as stewards of the ECEC system in partnership with the sector, shaping a system that is nationally coherent and connected and responsive to community needs and outcomes for families, providers, and the workforce.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We strongly believe there is a need to highlight the importance of **national consistency** throughout the different state and territory jurisdictions for policies, funding and approaches to ECEC. The current inconsistencies have led to a complex system for families trying to navigate when seeking to access support and includes the CCS, additional support for their child and services for children experiencing developmental vulnerabilities.
- We recommend an emphasis on national consistency by including the term '**coordinated stewardship**' - we need national consistency that is not currently achieved.
- We suggest amending the start of the sentence to read: '***Governments take a holistic approach with coordinated stewardship of the ECEC system...***'

Draft Outcomes:

Outcomes: 1.1 All children are supported to reach their potential

- *Children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage receive the support they need.*
- *Children are engaged lifelong learners.*
- *Services respond to community, cultural and family contexts and can provide continuity of learning and care to children.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We would like to see a move towards outcomes that are targeted and have universal provision to resource and deliver ECEC services at a scale and proportion of children with higher needs, including trauma or undiagnosed disabilities. This may include greater collaboration across sectors to facilitate health and other interventions for meaningful partnerships that will benefit the child, family and lead to greater health, wellbeing, education, and development outcomes.
- The outcomes needs to reflect strengths-based language with a greater focus on better outcomes for developmentally vulnerable children.
- We suggest reframing this statement to remove the negatively framed language: ‘Children and families at risk of or experiencing...’. We recommend replacing the first sentence with - **‘ECEC supports social empowerment and equality, working to reduce disadvantage and vulnerability’**.
- We suggest rewording the third bullet point/sentence as follows: **‘Responding to community, cultural, family and developmental contexts and can provide continuity of learning and care to children.’**

Outcomes: 1.2 First nations children are empowered to embrace their identity and culture

- *First Nations families feel supported to consistently access quality, culturally inclusive ECEC.*
- *ECEC services respect and nourish First Nations culture and kinship. We grow our First Nations and Aboriginal community-controlled workforce, recognising the importance of children seeing themselves, their identities, and cultures reflected in their environment.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- As ECEC services play a critical role in cultivating and supporting, respectful and trusting relations with Indigenous families to feel comfortable in education settings, we suggest breaking the second paragraph down into two separate points:
‘ECEC services respect and nourish First Nations culture and kinship.’
and
‘We grow our First Nations and Aboriginal community-controlled workforce, recognising the importance of children seeing themselves, their identities, and cultures reflected in their environment’.

Outcomes: 2.1 Parents and carers who want to work or study can do so

- *ECEC supports parents and carers, especially women, to work when they want to.*
- *Families get the services they need where they need them.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We suggest amending the first bullet point/sentence to: ***‘ECEC facilitates work and study opportunities for parents and carers, especially women.’***
There is a lot of unpaid work undertaken by families such as caring for aged family members and doing volunteer work for the community, which is not truly captured by the term ‘work’. Excluding these activities from the outcomes statement may have the impact of undervaluing and disempowering the important role these people (largely women) play in our society.
- We suggest amending the second bullet point/sentence to: ***‘families having access that may facilitate...’***
- We believe the second statement that ‘families get the services they need, where they need’ places a lot of pressure and expectations solely on the ECEC sector to solve all problems families experience relating to work or study. There are greater challenges in term of systematic barriers that need to be considered and will take long-term change to remove.

Outcomes: 2.2 ECEC is an entitlement for all families

- *ECEC is recognised as an essential service that all families who choose to use can access.*
- *Cost is not a barrier to accessing an appropriate quality service.*
- *Where practicable, services offer integrated education and care to support a more holistic approach to development.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We believe the use of the word ‘entitlement’ does not adequately express the value of the education component in ECEC and the enormous benefits for the child. We recommend framing the language around the ‘rights’ of the child in terms of their early education and social inclusion as this would have greater alignment with the language of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- We suggest changing the heading to read: ***‘ECEC is a right for every child’***
- We suggest amending the second bullet point/sentence to read: ***‘Children have access to high quality ECEC, beyond the family circumstances.’***

Outcomes: 3

- *ECEC workers are valued and respected.*
- *A sustainable and experienced workforce builds relationships with children.*
- *Workers feel supported and are retained in the sector.*
- *New workers are inspired and supported to train and work in the ECEC sector.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We suggest amending the first bullet point/sentence to replace ‘ECEC workers’ with ‘early childhood teachers and educators’ ... so it reads ***as “Early childhood teachers and educators are valued and respected.”***
- We believe this outcome should more clearly reflect a greater commitment from government to systemic workforce strategies and investment.

Outcomes: 4.1 Governments are stewards of the system

- *The ECEC system is joined up and easy to navigate, providing connections between ECEC and broader early childhood development systems and programs.*
- *Governments use funding, regulatory, and policy levers within the market environment in combination with service delivery to shape a system that is sustainable, flexible, aligned to need, and driven by outcomes for beneficiaries.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- There needs to be a commitment to move towards national consistency of the services, regulatory, policies and funding.
- Outcomes that reflect a review of systems, administration, and barriers to access information like ISP for greater navigation by parents should also be considered.

Outcomes: 4.2 Governments are aligned and accountable

- *Governments take shared responsibility for the system and collaborate together and with the sector to realise shared goals.*
- *There is holistic governance and clear roles and responsibilities for the ECEC sector.*

No recommendations – ACA supports the wording of this statement

Draft Levers:

Funding: *The way that funding is allocated and to whom has an enormous impact on the way the system operates. Funding policy must be an enabler, not a barrier to access.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We recommend amending this statement to focus on **‘investing’** rather than **‘funding’**. This would reflect that ECEC is not an expense, but rather it is an investment in a child, the community and across all levels of the system for better individual and society outcomes.

Regulation: *Laws and regulations shape the system to respond in a particular way to implement governments’ overall policy intent. Safety and quality standards underpin the system.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We suggest including the word “data” so that the statement reads as ***“Laws, regulations and data shape the system...”***
- We suggest amending the second sentence to: ***‘Commitment to quality improvement, high quality standards and safety underpin the system.’***

Policy: *Governments actively intervene in the system to forge strategic partnerships, broker solutions, or address particular areas of need.*

No recommendations – ACA supports the wording of this statement

Draft Enablers

Workforce: *Attracting, training and retaining a high quality workforce is a critical factor in achieving the vision.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We suggest amending the sentence to read: '**Workforce: Long term strategy and investment in attracting, training and retaining a high-quality workforce is a critical factor in achieving the vision.**'

Leadership: *Quality leadership is essential at all levels: leadership from governments and within governments, leadership from prominent advocates and community members, leadership by providers and within the workforce. Leadership must be effective, clear, and aligned to the vision.*

No recommendations – ACA supports the wording of this statement

Data and evidence: *Policies, models, and interventions must be underpinned by comprehensive high-quality data and evidence.*

No recommendations – ACA supports the wording of this statement

Accountability framework: *Clear roles and responsibilities are critical, especially with shared system stewardship.*

No recommendations – ACA supports the wording of this statement

Communities and families: *Services must be shaped around the needs of communities and families of all backgrounds including First Nations people.*

No recommendations – ACA supports the wording of this statement

Philanthropy: *The not-for profit sector plays a fundamental role in the sector including direct provision and the important role of philanthropic advocacy and investment.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- We recommend removing this section as:
 - a. Philanthropy should not be relied upon to cover gaps in government policy.
 - b. It is confusing.
 - c. It is not clear if this statement is referring to Not-For-Profit (NFP) ECEC service provision, or other NFP philanthropic organisations.
 - d. It may be interpreted that Not-For-Profit (NFP) services are being pitted against For-Profit services which compromises the need to focus on the best outcomes for children under the existing infrastructure.
 - e. Furthermore, "direct provision" and 'as an enabler' are ambiguous terms and are open to interpretation, resulting in the core message being lost.
- There are many organisations across the ECEC sector that are not philanthropic, and they are strong advocates for greater investment in the educational, wellbeing and developmental outcomes of children.

About the Australian Childcare Alliance

The Australian Childcare Alliance (ACA) works on behalf of early learning (long day care) service owners and operators to ensure families have an opportunity to access affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) throughout Australia. We represent over 3,000 early learning service providers across the country.

Our national and state bodies work collaboratively with all levels of government, regulatory authorities and other stakeholders with an evidence-based approach, to ensure that families are supported into the future with a sustainable, affordable and viable ECEC sector.

ACA believes that with the right policy and financial frameworks in place, we could ensure that every child in Australia has access to high quality, affordable and sustainable early learning (childcare) services, and therefore the **best start in life**.

Email: president@australianchildcarealliance.org.au

Website: www.childcarealliance.org.au

Phone: 0411 587 170