



Attention:

Manager Engagement
Department of Education
Early Childhood Education Directorate
Level 11, 1 Oxford Street
DARLINGHURST NSW 2010

Dear Early Childhood Education Directorate

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the *Regional and Remote Early Childhood Education Strategy: Consultation Paper*, on behalf of NSW Children's Services Forum.

The NSW Children's Services Forum (CSF) is comprised of state-wide, not-for-profit community based children's service organisations in NSW. Secretariat support is provided by the NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS).

The CSF aims to:

- Promote the role of not- for-profit children's services;
- Advise governments on the quality, range and provision of children's services in NSW;
- Advocate for policies to improve the quality range and provision of children's services in NSW;
- Engage in regular dialogue with other stakeholders in children's services; and
- Promote principles of social justice in the planning, funding and delivery of children's services.

The current list of members of the CSF is attached to this letter in **Appendix 2**.

With the recognized and vitally important role that Early Childhood Education (ECE) services play in the wellbeing and development of children and young people it is encouraging to see the Department working to develop a *Regional and Remote Early Childhood Education Strategy (The Strategy)* that specifically addresses the unique challenges and needs faced by regional and remote communities. We would like to congratulate you on the development of this very important strategy.

Below are our key summary comments on the Strategy. Responses to individual consultation questions can be found in **Appendix 1**.

1. Staffing, Training and Development:

Workforce capacity is an increasing problem in regional and remote areas, in particular finding and retaining qualified staff. There is a need for increased training, support, supervision and access to mentoring and development opportunities and pathways. It is important that the strategies to address these concerns form part of a more holistic set of initiatives by the Department, and are articulated in the broader ECE Workforce Strategy, and the Aboriginal Early Childhood Education Strategy currently being developed.

2. Transport

Transport and access to transport remains a significant barrier for accessing childhood educational services in regional and remote communities. Lack of transport options, affordability and variation in transport types are key issues. It is important that transport barriers, and the high cost of service delivery in regional and remote areas be acknowledged and accommodated in any future planning for the provision of quality, affordable child care services, and that adequate leadership is established in taking responsibility for transport issues.

3. Integrated service provision and support for referral pathways

Integrated or coordinated service provision is the most effective and efficient approach to delivering ECE services in regional and remote settings. Developing referrals pathways between ECE services, early childhood intervention services and other agencies can occur with creative solutions. Additional funding, appropriate mapping of services, and upscaling of information and resource provision will support this. Local community engagement is essential to adequately assess needs, identify gaps in service provision and capacity building within the community.

4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Access and Representation

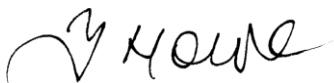
We believe that strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation, such as previously provided by Aboriginal Early Childhood Support and Learning (AECSL), is critical to the success of efforts aimed at making serious gains in this area. In the absence of such a body, further support should be provided to Aboriginal run and controlled ECE services in NSW and implementing policies and strategies to develop career and training pathways and support in these services.

It is equally important to develop a systematic and sustained approach to improve cultural accessibility of mainstream services through cultural competency training, development of resources and ongoing support. These considerations should form part of the Aboriginal Early Childhood Education Strategy the Department is developing.

Congratulations once again on the development of such an important strategy, and we would be happy to elaborate further on any of the comments in this submission with you at a future date.

If you would like to discuss this further, please contact Caroline Dimond, Policy Officer at caroline@ncoss.org.au or 8960 7922.

Yours sincerely



Tracy Howe
CEO
NSW Council of Social Service
(On behalf of the Children Services Forum)

Appendix 1: Consultation Questions

(1.) How could the delivery of early childhood education in regional and remote NSW benefit from more integration and collaboration?

The provision of holistic and integrated service delivery is critical to increasing families' access to and engagement with early childhood services in regional and remote settings. In many cases ECE services act as key hubs that link families to a variety of early childhood support services and are often the first and, at times, only connection they have with service networks, and thus referrals between early education and other services are crucial.

Enhancing this integration and collaboration involves offering and engaging with a comprehensive range of services that cater for children's learning and development needs, while also actively involving and supporting families and communities. Greater data collection and mapping of regional and remote areas to see what services exist, and where the gaps in delivery are, and what the challenges will be, would be the first step in designing better service delivery.

NCOSS, as part of our [2016 Pre-Budget Submission](#), has been advocating for the establishment of [\\$250 million Early Childhood Education Investment Fund](#), to complement existing funding measures and ensure vulnerable children are able to access the full benefits of quality early education. A key outcome of the fund would be to incubate cross-sectoral partnerships - such as between any combination of early childhood services, children and family services, Aboriginal services, employment services, educational institutions, housing providers, government, the private sector and employees - that will encourage collaboration to deliver new services and build on innovative approaches to service delivery. The establishment of such a fund would be particularly impactful for vulnerable families in regional and remote communities.

(2.) What are Commonwealth and State Government Early Childhood Programs that the Department could link with

Federal Government Department of Social Services- Communities for Children:

Communities for Children work to give all children the best start in life by focusing on prevention and early intervention approaches in disadvantaged communities throughout Australia.

NSW Department of Families and Communities - The reform of Targeted Earlier Intervention Programs:

We consider ECE a critical enabler of a successful early intervention system. We believe there is considerable opportunity for early intervention services in NSW to work more closely with ECE services towards the goal of universal access. Further, there is scope to build on the potential for ECE services to provide pathways through which developmental and other issues can be identified early and ensure families are connected into a more targeted service system.

[NSW Department of Health – Sustaining NSW Families program](#): A nurse-led evidence-based sustained health home visiting program that commences in pregnancy and continues until the child's second birthday. We believe it important to ensure vulnerable families are assisted and linked early on in life, to ensure a seamless support system throughout a child's life.

(3.) How can the Department assist early childhood services to engage with Aboriginal families and communities more positively and effectively

The NSW Children's Services Forum is committed to working with Government and other stakeholders to improve access to early education for all children. While ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can benefit from quality early education is one of the Forum's highest priorities, we believe that strong Aboriginal representation is critical to the success of efforts aimed at making serious gains in this area.

Aboriginal Early Childhood Support and Learning (AECSL) previously provided support and advocacy for Aboriginal early childhood in NSW, but following changes to Commonwealth funding arrangements there has been a gap in terms of Aboriginal representation since early 2015. There is need for this support to ensure:

- Aboriginal services can capitalize on increased investment in early education and thereby deliver benefits to the children and communities they serve.
- Increased investment in early education channeled through mainstream benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- Services are able to navigate a rapidly changing service landscape whilst ensuring the families they work with are not negatively impacted as a result of these changes.

In the absence of such a body, it is increasingly important for the department to support and advocate for Aboriginal run and controlled ECE services in NSW. Furthermore, provide additional support for Aboriginal ECE workers in Aboriginal controlled/ run and mainstream organisations, and implement policies and strategies to develop career and training pathways and support in these services. This should form part of the ECEC Workforce Strategy the Department is developing.

In the absence of Aboriginal run and controlled ECE services, it is important to develop a systematic and sustained approach to improve cultural accessibility of mainstream services through cultural competency training, development of resources and ongoing support. The delivery of early childhood education in Aboriginal regional and remote communities must recognise the history of disempowerment experienced by these communities and ensure that services are flexible, responsive and collaborative with local Aboriginal children and families.

These considerations should form part of the Aboriginal Early Childhood Education Strategy being developed by the Department.

(8.) How can the Department offer greater support to the early childhood education workforce in regional and remote areas?

(9.) What can the Department do to help early childhood services in regional and remote areas recruit and retain early childhood teachers?

Workforce capacity is an increasing problem in regional and remote areas, in particular recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Generally, collegial support, training and professional learning as well as general systems support is lacking, which exacerbate the problem

Additional support for the early childhood education workforce in regional and remote areas could come in the form of additional provision of increased or targeted funding to assist in the provision of, or access to support, training and mentoring of staff. It is important that early childhood workers are provided with professional development, training and career opportunities and pathways to ensure that they continue to provide services which reflect the current accepted best practice.

Training and support areas include: identifying developmental concerns and raising these with families, understanding inclusion and using inclusive practices, working collaboratively with early childhood intervention practitioners, upholding children's rights, and working with children with developmental delay and/or disability and challenging behavior.

Attracting and retaining a professional and skilled workforce could be achieved through promoting existing programs and incentivizing positions in rural and remote areas, and offering assistance to address broader issues ranging from higher cost of living to housing shortages.

Attracting and developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECE educators, particularly in remote communities and in locations with significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, will have significant benefits for the ECEC sector and these communities. Achieving this through consulting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people regarding training preferences and available opportunities, encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students to consider children's services qualifications and building on existing programs to attract Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the ECE sector, including through effective collaboration across government agencies.

These unique issues found in regional and remote communities need to be articulated and considered in the broader ECEC Workforce Strategy, and the Aboriginal Early Childhood Education Strategy being developed by the Department.

Appendix 2: NSW Children Services Forum Members

- Australian Community Children's Services - NSW
- Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA)
- Community Child Care Co-operative NSW
- Contact Inc and Mobile Children's services association of NSW Inc
- Early Childhood Australia NSW Inc
- Early Childhood Intervention Australia NSW
- Ethnic Community Services Cooperative Limited
- Goodstart Early Learning
- Gowrie NSW
- KU Children's Services
- Local Government NSW
- Montessori Australia Foundation
- Network Of Community Activities
- NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS)
- NSW Family Day Care Association Inc
- Occasional Child Care Association Of NSW
- Playgroup NSW Inc
- SDN Children's Services
- Uniting
- SNAICC, represented by Nikinpa Aboriginal Child & Family Centre
- YMCA
- ACEQA, represented by Ms Sandra Cheeseman
- Mission Australia