

ECMS Response to Review of the Universal Access National Partnership

September 2019



**ECMS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the
Review of the Universal Access National Partnership
Discussion Paper**

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1. Introducing ECMS

Early Childhood Management Services (ECMS) has been providing high quality and inclusive early childhood education for Melbourne children, families and communities for more than 22 years. Our 65 preschools and early childhood education centres now touch the lives of over 6000 children across Melbourne.

Each of our preschools ('preschools' within the context of this report) and early learning centres (long day care) is designed to reflect the needs of its children, local community and families. This model ensures children and families get the most out of their time in their ECMS centre. Whilst each of our centres is unique, at every ECMS preschool and early learning centre you will find:

- high-quality play-based educational programs designed around children's interests and developmental needs
- highly qualified and dedicated educators who work in close partnership with families to maximise children's learning outcomes before school
- safe and stimulating indoor and outdoor learning environments that are well-resourced to support children's learning and development
- strong ties to the local community to enhance children's social connections and sense of belonging.

As a not-for-profit organisation, it is our vision, purpose and values that guide our work each day.

Our Vision

For every child to realise their right to a strong foundation for lifelong success.

Our Purpose

To make every day count by providing high-quality play-based learning in a safe and inclusive environment - ensuring that children and families in our community thrive in life.

Our Values



Strategic Goals



2. Introducing this response

ECMS commends the State, Territory and Federal Government's ongoing investment to increase the access and participation of all children in high quality early learning care in the year before school.

ECMS supports the review of the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP) and is committed to providing an informed response to the questions posed under each category.

ECMS undertook a process of consultation with our Executive/Senior Leaders, Area Managers and Preschool Business Management teams to inform this response. Discussion was held on each of the questions and feedback collated to provide this response paper.

It is noted that this paper will have a Victorian Metropolitan focus as ECMS operates only in Victoria, with all centre based care services within 75kms of the Melbourne CBD.

2.1 Question 1

To what extent have the UANP policy objectives, outcomes and outputs been achieved?

ECMS agrees that the UANP has improved access and participation in 15 hours of preschool in the year before school and increased awareness of the importance of

early years programs at a national, state and community level. This is evidenced in ongoing increases to participation rates and in research highlighting that quality education and care sets a strong foundation for life long success.

Cost: It is ECMS' experience though that access, enrolment and ongoing participation do differ across communities and more needs to be achieved in supporting all families to participate in the 600 hours throughout the year. This is especially significant for the vulnerable and disadvantaged families that we work with.

Funding mechanisms available in Victoria do offer some (note: but not all) of these families free or low-cost early learning. This is evidenced in the state governments Early Start Kindergarten, Preschool Fee Subsidy and Pre-Purchased Places funding programs, that are intentionally designed to support access and participation. However, it is our experience that a program being 'free or low cost' does not always translate into regular attendance and engaged, enduring participation of children.

It is ECMS' experience that for some families, any potentiality of a cost is a barrier for those not eligible for 'free' access. ECMS' and other providers note that preschool costs/parent fees continue to rise each year, with fees for 15 hours nearing \$2,000 per annum in sessional preschool. Whilst funding is welcome and needed, the true cost of service delivery is ever increasing and this is not recognised in ongoing funding mechanisms.

Participation: Whilst funding for fee subsidy may provide access/enrolment to preschool programs, ongoing participation is also an issue. Many ECMS families, for a variety of complex reasons, struggle with ongoing participation in the program across the 600hours. ECMS believe that a suite of 'wrap around' services are required to support children and families to regularly participate in their early education program. ECMS believe that outreach family support models are required to ensure all children and families not only have access but are supported in ongoing participation in their preschool program.

ECMS would support and encourage the Australian Government to maintain its leadership role by funding early childhood education reforms to ensure all objectives of the UANP are realised and preschool is embedded as the foundation of the education continuum. We would advocate to embed universal access to early childhood education as an *entitlement for all children* that is enshrined in an enduring National Agreement.

We would also support the actioning of recommendations in the *Lifting Our Game*¹ report (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017), which lays out future reforms to complement the quality agenda for schools.

¹ Pascoe, S & Brennan, D 2017 *Lifting our Game: report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*. Retrieved 24 September 2019 from <https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/whats-happening-in-the-early-childhood-education-sector/lifting-our-game-report/Lifting-Our-Game-Final-Report.pdf>

It is also noted that Australia is yet to realise the long-term benefits of providing enduring universal access – our first universal cohort are only just entering their teenage years, therefore testing of the long-term benefits is yet to be realised in international assessments such as PISA and TIMSS in the secondary years.

2.2 Question 2

What should the UANP target and measure, and how should data be collected and used?

In addition to access and enrolment, ECMS believes that the UANP should focus on:

1. participation/attendance, and alleviating the barriers in this area
2. 3YO participation, and
3. ongoing affordability concerns across the sector.

ECMS would support that regular participation/attendance data be collected and analysed to inform knowledge of barriers. This information would inform understandings of the barriers to ongoing participation and respective supports and costs can be factored into the funding mechanisms to support the 90% attendance targets.

At present the Victorian annual preschool census in the first week of August is not providing the qualitative or quantitative evidence of participation trends throughout the year/600 hours. Termly collections or similar to CSS – weekly submissions via electronic processes would highlight true participation. The implementation of such data collections must be a considered and a supported approach with respective government and provider systems updated and supported to ensure more administration challenges are not placed on providers and educators.

Further to this, ECMS would support that 3 year old access and participation in funded preschool programs needs to be considered and supported as an intrinsic part of the UANP, as recommended in the *Lifting Our Game* report. The benefits of high-quality education and care at these early stages of development are well researched and we have seen Victoria become the first state or territory in Australia to introduce funded three-year-old Preschool for all children.

The UANP needs to measure ongoing affordability. With the cost of living increasing, wage growth stagnation and weak GDP growth forecasted, preschool fees need to be measured and controlled. All parties need to ensure that cost is not a barrier to access and participation to the entitlement of universal access to a quality 600-hour program.

2.3 Question 3

Are the current UANP arrangements efficient and effective and how could the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of UANP funding be improved?

With the success of the UANP and resulting increased participation in preschool both at a state as well as national level, Australian families have come to accept and value preschool as a vital foundation for learning before school, and increasingly, do not want their child to miss out on this experience. Evidence is clear that children who attend preschool:

- are better prepared when they start school,
- that preschool assists in achieving higher outcomes throughout schooling and
- that a preschool experience contributes to higher performing test scores in NAPLAN.

The introduction of Universal Access – along with the introduction of the National Quality Framework – has laid the foundation of a strong early childhood education sector but there is more to do in terms of improving quality, equitable access and ongoing participation for all children.

We know that too many children who would benefit the most from preschool - including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds – are still missing out. Preschool is proven to be an effective early intervention to improve equality of educational opportunity, particularly for the most vulnerable children, as well as providing significant developmental and social interventions.

Research clearly demonstrates that the benefits of early learning via preschool and high-quality birth to three programs can be long lasting – significantly, into adulthood. This is particularly pertinent for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Australian Early Childhood Development Census (AEDC) indicates that one in five non-Indigenous children and two in five Indigenous children are starting school developmentally vulnerable – but children who attend early childhood education were less likely to be vulnerable across all five developmental domains of the AEDC. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children still remain under-represented in early childhood education - they start early education later and attend fewer hours compared to non-Indigenous children.

We have the evidence that right across the country, children who would benefit the most from early childhood education are still the least likely to be attending. To address this issue within the communities that ECMS work with, in 2017, ECMS trailed an Outreach Family Support Worker (OFSW) model, which saw a 300% increase in enrolments across given communities over a 12-month period. We are seeing similar results with the engagement of OFSW's funded in initiatives around School Readiness Funding (SRF).

Participation also speaks to the need for ongoing professional development for teachers and educators, to ensure that programs for children are meeting their actual development and learning needs. This includes support for teachers and educators to deliver the appropriate pedagogy for their children and community. For example, many of our services are required, because of the communities that they work with, to have a strong foundation in trauma informed practice and pedagogy to ensure that their children can actively engage in the teaching and learning program in ways that met their individual and collective needs. At this point in time, this work is funded by the Approved Provider (often at the expense of other worthy programs) to ensure child and adult safety and children's ongoing participation.

ECMS believe that targeted, funded programs, such as Outreach Family Support Programs and ongoing professional development for the teaching workforce, can work to support the access and ongoing participation of these (and indeed, all) children.

2.4 Question 4

How does the preschool system operate across States and Territories and settings?

As previously mentioned, Early Childhood Management Services (ECMS) has been providing high quality and inclusive early childhood education for Melbourne children, families and communities for more than 22 years. The below will highlight ECMS' operations in Victoria.

ECMS is an Early Years Manager. Early Years Management is the dominant model of community preschool management in Victoria². As of May 2018, 59% of Victoria's community preschool services, a total of 922 services, were under one of 53 EYM organisations (Early Learning Association Australia, 2019).

ECMS preschool programs are delivered in two settings: sessional preschool and integrated into long day care programs with government funding all 4YO children accessing 15 hours of preschool per week. This per capita funding equates to \$3637.50 per annum for each enrolled child and is paid direct to the Approved Provider. Further subsidies paid direct to the Approved Provider (as mentioned in Question 1 response) and are available for all indigenous children and those with an eligible concession. Acquittal of respective data is submitted by the Approved Provider via the Department of Education and Training online platform - Preschool Information Management System (KIMS).

Sessional Preschool

In Victoria, and within ECMS, 15 hours per week is delivered is by an Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) in a range of operating models, with 3 days x 5 hours and 2 days x 7.5hrs per day being the most popular across ECMS and the state.

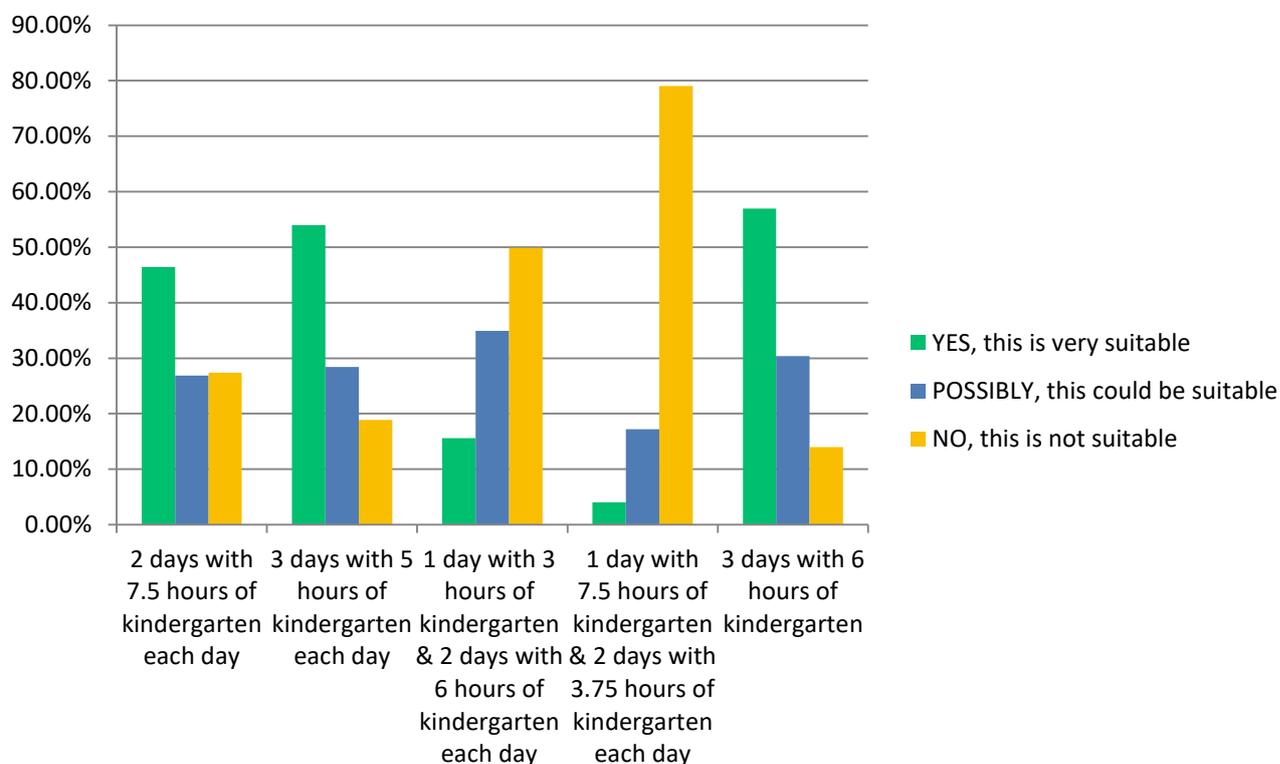
All ECMS preschools utilise a term fee with the total cost of approximately 65% coming from government funding and 35% from parent fees. Group sizes range from 22 – 33 with legislated ratios and staff qualifications.

Session times and respective start and finish times can act as a barrier with families not participating in the full 15 hour per week. The following chart is taken from ECMS 2019 parent survey to plan for the 2020 preschool sessions. This chart highlights the preferences of how 15 hours is delivered. Interestingly the most favourable option is 3 days x 6 hours: equalling 18 hours of preschool. This model is closely aligned to the primary school model. ECMS currently offer a small number of programs with these hours, however the cost is greater as the additional 3 hours is not funded. Respective

² Early Learning Association Australia (2019) *Early Years Management – Achieving a sustainable service system*. ELAA - Retrieved 24 September 2019 from <https://elaa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ELAA-Early-Years-Management-Achieving-sustainability-Mar-2019.pdf>

communities are consulted with to ensure cost is not a barrier to access and participation.

How suitable would each of the below listed 4YO preschool session options be for meeting the needs of children and families? (Please provide a response for EACH option)



Integrated Long Day Care Programs

All ECMS Early Learning and Care programs offer preschool integrated in the long day care model. The operating model consists of an ECT delivering 5 hours of the 11-hour day in the 4YO or 3YO – 4YO group at the centre. The hours outside of the 5 delivered by the ECT are led by a Diploma qualified staff member.

Children must access 3 days of care, 15 hours of the ECT delivered program for the provider to claim per capita funding from state government. Early Start Preschool funding is available in ELC, however Preschool Fee Subsidy is not. Child Care Subsidy on the daily ELC Fee is available to families accessing preschool integrated into long day care.

Within ECMS' operation, preschool is also provided in Integrated Early Years Hubs. The hubs provide local families with a range of quality and affordable integrated services and programs, including long day care, kindergarten, maternal and child health, allied health and specialists as well as access to community rooms and facilities.

The hub model provides infrastructure to support a gathering place for families, and this being especially beneficial in new communities. These services support parents and families to connect and build community, build social cohesion and prevent social isolation.

The State Government in Victoria via the Children Facilities capital program fund three major grant categories.

Integrated Children's Centre grants

Provides up to \$2 million (GST exclusive) as a contribution towards new facilities that bring together a range of services that support children and their families including early childhood education, care, health and support services.

New Early Learning Facility grants

Provides up to \$1 million (GST exclusive) as a contribution towards new facilities delivering three and four year old kindergarten programs.

Early Learning Facility Upgrade grants

Provides up to \$500,000 (GST exclusive) as a contribution towards increasing licensed capacity, renovating or refurbishing existing facilities that deliver three and/or four-year-old kindergarten.

In ECMS's experience Integrated Children's Centres/Hubs are delivered in partnership with local governments. This model is the preferred option for new builds in communities and a component of ECMS' strategic direction. Families accessing kindergarten within the hubs are able to attend to both sessional kindergarten and ELC programs based on their individual needs. As per funding guidelines only 15 hours of funding is available per child. Wrap around care for families accessing sessional kindergarten is provided in this model.

Central Enrolment – Preschool and Long Day Care

Within the Victorian context, access to preschool is supported by Local Governments by way of Central Enrolment (CE) for the majority of the state. Central Enrolment enables families to register and apply for their preschool and in some cases, long day care, of choice within their respective municipalities.

Places are centrally managed by Council across the municipality and allocated to families in line with state government's priority of access. This methodology enables councils and state government to manage and analyse data sets and trends, plan for infrastructure and set respective service capacities in partnership with providers. 95% of ECMS preschool services are part of a Central Enrolment scheme for the year before school cohort.

Within ECMS' services access and participation is further supported by council with Preschool Field Officers, Best Start Partnerships and EYM/Provider networks facilitated by council Early Years teams.

Within the *Preschool Central Enrolment: Current State Analysis* report (Acil Allen, 2018) to the Victorian Department of Education and Training, it was identified that in 2017, 68% (66,000 enrolments) participated in CE schemes in the year before school.

“CE schemes currently operate in 48 council areas and 31 council areas do not have a CE scheme. Of the 22 metropolitan councils, 19 have a scheme operating and four do not have a scheme operating. Of the ten interface councils, nine have a scheme operating. Of the 47 councils located in

regional centres and rural areas, 20 have a scheme operating and 27 do not have a scheme operating."

The Acil Allen reports puts forward 4 Visions for Central Enrolment:

Vision 1. Expanding participation in CE schemes

Vision 2. Engaging vulnerable families

Vision 3. Implementing CE schemes consistently

Vision 4. Enhancing demand data and information collection.

2.5 Question 5

Based on your experiences, should changes be made to future national policy on preschool for children in the year before full-time school, and why? What improvements would these changes make? What works well with the current UANP arrangements?

ECMS would endorse the recommendations in the *Lifting Our Game* report to provide a preschool experience in the **2 years** before school – the introduction and roll out of a national 3-year-old funded preschool program (not just in progressive states), enshrining preschool equity across the nation. As the report suggests

'evidence points to this as the single most impactful reform Australia could undertake, with international comparisons highlighting it as the biggest gap in the current system. The case for this investment is compelling.' (pg. 8)

ECMS would also be highly concerned about any reduction to the UANP funding arrangements. Reduced access to preschool, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, would mean more children would start school developmentally vulnerable. Evidence shows that they are therefore less likely to do well at school and more likely to leave school early, leading to poorer long-term life outcomes.

To meet the targets set out in the UANP, their needs to be considerable enduring funding, strategy and policy initiatives around addressing national workforce issues. The *Lifting Our Game* report (pg. 84) identifies several significant elements that require a collective, national response. As an Approved Provider, ECMS is experiencing the impact of these elements:

- the quality and appropriateness of pre-service training in both universities and vocational education and training institutions
- ongoing professional development
- workforce diversity
- the need for viable career paths
- the importance of service and sector leadership
- strategies to address turnover and instability within the workforce
- the ability of the workforce to engage with parents and
- the status of the early childhood education profession in the community.
- remuneration and conditions of all roles engaged in the delivery of early childhood education.

We would also endorse further campaigns to grow community awareness and understanding of the importance of early learning experiences (preschool/ preschool) for children under 5 years, alongside an evidenced based campaign on

the first 1000 days. There is still a significant way to go to grow community awareness and commitment to early learning for Australia's children.

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