

28 September 2019

UANP Review
Level 19, 567 Collins Street
Melbourne
VIC 3000

To the Review Team

Submission in response to the Review of the Universal Access National Partnership

Logan Together welcomes the independent review of the national funding arrangements that support access by all children in Australia to 600 hours per year of quality early childhood education in the year before full-time school

Logan Together is a ten-year whole-of-community effort to ensure that Logan children, 0-8 years of age, grow up healthy and full of potential as any other group of Australian children. It is one of Australia's largest place-based initiatives that works with its local community and with support from all tiers of government as well as philanthropic and community organisations.

While some parts of the Logan community are strong, many experience deep and persistent disadvantage, with correspondingly high levels of developmental vulnerability in children. The 2018 Australian Early Development Census revealed that 31% of five year olds in Logan (some 1,511 children) are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains – which is significantly higher than the state and national averages.

Logan Together's core mandate is to improve developmental outcomes in Logan children at the population level and to close this gap by 2025. Supporting more children and families to participate in kindergarten (preschool), is a key part of our mandate and critical to changing children's developmental trajectories and life course.

Logan Together's submission to the UANP Review addresses questions 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the discussion paper.

Question 1 To what extent have the UANP policy objectives, outcomes and outputs been achieved?

In Australia evidence demonstrates that kindergarten programs have the greatest benefit for disadvantaged children (Melhuish, 2004). However despite reforms providing access to 15 hours of pre-school per week, the most disadvantaged children have the lowest uptake of this service (Baxter & Hand, 2013; O'Connor et al., 2016).

This is consistent with the Logan context where around 52% of children aged 4.5 years (2300 kids) attend kindergarten. Kindergarten uptake is also lower in some of Logan's cultural communities than others including First Nations, Pasifika/Maori, Refugee and other culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Community listening activities and sector consultations undertaken by Logan Together reveal that cost continues to be a significant barrier to kindergarten participation for Logan families. In this regard universal access is not being achieved because cost remains a barrier for vulnerable families.

Other barriers such as the complexities of navigating the kindergarten system, cultural factors, parental beliefs about child rearing, and workforce and quality issues compound this issue further.

We recommend UANP arrangements be reformed to provide zero cost kindergarten placements in either targeted postcodes or for families meeting low income / vulnerability eligibility criteria.

Question 3 Are the current UANP arrangements efficient and effective and how could the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of UANP funding be improved?

Children in Logan experiencing vulnerability and disadvantaged are continuing to miss out on quality kindergarten education, due to cost. To achieve equity in the model, differential funding arrangements are needed to remove financial barriers to kindergarten participation for marginalised children and their families.

By removing the financial barrier in low SES communities and boosting access to kindergarten, we can also underwrite the viability and quality of early childhood education and care centres through boosting enrolments and more stringently enforcing quality requirements. When parents are unable to afford the cost of kindergarten education, low enrolments result, centres struggle for viability, have difficulty in retaining staff and quality is impacted.

Tying funding to performance would also incentivize centres to meet quality standards.

Question 4 How does the preschool system operate across States and Territories and settings?

In Logan, kindergarten is mostly delivered largely by private providers in long day care settings and there are a limited number of stand-alone kindergartens. Stand-alone centres consistently demonstrate very high quality although places are limited. By contrast a significant number of long day care centres have difficulty meeting quality standards and face a range of other workforce challenges. To maximise the impact of the funding arrangements quality and workforce issues and the lack of standalone kindergartens in Logan also needs to be addressed.

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?

Yes. In Australia kindergarten is free in some states and territories but not in others like Queensland. Despite reforms, universal access is not being achieved and children who are most vulnerable are missing out, because cost continues to be a significant barrier for their families. A more equitable model that offers differential funding arrangements for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities is needed to achieve universal access. Put simply, arrangements need to be reformed to provide free kindergarten to target populations.