



**Submission to the Australian Government
Department of Social Services**

30 April 2023

This submission may be quoted in public documents.

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Acknowledgement of First Nations Peoples

Anglicare Southern Queensland acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first Australians and recognises their culture, history, diversity and deep connection to the land. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which our service was founded and on which our sites are operating today.



*Artwork by Olivene Yasso to celebrate 150 years of Anglicare
Read more at anglicaresq.org.au/reconciling-story/150-years-of-anglicare-sq-commemorating-our-indigenous-past-present-and-future*

We pay our respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders both past and present, who have influenced and supported Anglicare Southern Queensland on its journey thus far. We also extend that respect to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, clients and partners (past, present and future) and we hope we can work together to build a service that values and respects our First Nations people.

We acknowledge the past and present injustices that First Nations people have endured and seek to understand and reconcile these histories as foundational to moving forward together in unity.

Anglicare is committed to being more culturally responsive and inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and we are committed to embedding cultural capabilities across all facets of the organisation.

About Anglicare Southern Queensland

Anglicare SQ's experience in identifying and responding to the needs of vulnerable members of our many and varied communities is underpinned by 150 years of delivering innovative, quality care services.

More than 3,000 staff and volunteers operate across southern Queensland and in Longreach and Townsville. We offer a comprehensive, integrated range of community services that comprises community aged care, residential aged care and community support programs, including child safety, disability support, counselling and education, mental health, homelessness and chronic conditions. Our services are designed to 'wrap around' clients in a comprehensive way, recognising their health needs but also addressing the social needs which contribute to wellness.

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1.0 Introduction

Anglicare Southern Queensland (Anglicare SQ) welcomes the invitation to make a submission to the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) consultation to inform a new Early Years Strategy, in recognition of the vital importance of the first five years of every child's life.

We bring to this submission the direct experience and expertise of Anglicare Southern Queensland staff in working with children 0-5 years and their families in metro, regional and rural communities, through in-home family support, playgroups, social groups for children and/or adults, parenting skill programs, emotional intelligence skill groups for children, and groups supporting the transition to school.

In addition, the submission reflects the input of staff who have work roles that involve little contact with young children. They are, however, parents, grandparents and carers; aunts, uncles and friends. They know that the future of Australian children is important to us all, and that we all have a stake in that future.

In March 2023, we prepared a staff survey based on the DSS public survey at engage.dss.gov.au. The survey was not intended to be representative of the broader Australian community, and the results are not statistically rigorous. Rather, we wanted to provide an opportunity for our own Anglicare community to share their hopes for and opinions on how to ensure a thriving future for our youngest Australians.

The input we received was both thoughtful and pragmatic. People acknowledged the critical role of systemic challenges such as housing and poverty in influencing the life changes of our children; as well as noting the importance of prevention and early intervention strategies such as parenting and educational support programs.



The Anglicare Early Years staff survey

This submission begins therefore by contextualising the early years against a background of systemic challenges. We also acknowledge and draw on work that has been done previously at national level to ensure "all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation".¹

We then address key questions from the discussion paper, and conclude by drawing together the threads of the discussion to summarise the contributions of the Anglicare SQ community to this consultation.

2.0 'By 1990, no Australian child will live in poverty...'

2.1 *Income insufficiency*

Former Prime Minister Bob Hawke made a bold promise that by 1990, no child would live in poverty. Despite decades of policies and initiatives, however, one in six Australian children, or five students in a classroom of 30, still live below the poverty line.²

The evidence is incontrovertible that poverty diminishes the lives of young children now, and into their future. Toni Wren, Executive Director, Anti-Poverty Week, recently highlighted just a few of the many sources that demonstrate this fact:³

- The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) found that growing up in poverty is a strong predictor of a child being developmentally vulnerable by the time they start school. In 2021, more than 1 in 5 Australian children were assessed as developmentally vulnerable; and more than one third from the most disadvantaged postcodes.⁴

- Melbourne University research found that:

Experiencing just a single year of poverty during childhood is associated with poorer socio-economic outcomes in terms of educational attainment, labour market performance and even overall life satisfaction in early adulthood. Children from poor households are 3.3 times more likely to suffer adult poverty than those who grew up in 'never poor' households.⁵

Many of Anglicare's staff describe client backgrounds of current and/or previous disadvantage that impact the life chances of families and children in an intergenerational cycle of poverty:

Most of the clients in our program are from disadvantaged backgrounds and or have a child protection history dating back to when they were children. Many have no positive role models or supports.⁶

The combination of insufficient income and a desperate lack of housing availability means that families currently in, or on the edge of, poverty are more than likely to never find their way out. As one of our staff members commented in a recent survey about the cost-of-living impact on the families they work with:

When Centrelink payments were increased during early Covid stages, Anglicare closed or redistributed staff from emergency relief roles as there was not enough demand. That was brilliant. Now we are constantly seeking donations and supporting families to meet the basic needs of themselves and their children. Our capacity to promote long term positive change and good outcomes for children, who are our future, is significantly negatively impacted.⁷⁸

2.2 *The housing crisis*

The impact of rising costs is impacting households everywhere, we are seeing more and more families homeless & living in cars or having to move far away from supports & jobs. The cost of food is reducing the options for families to feed themselves well, having to instead shop at cheap places & eat food that isn't exceptionally healthy or in good condition. The cost of rent at the moment has increased exponentially, to the point that people are risking their safety by living with too many people in order to afford to live in a home.⁹

There are obvious implications for children 0-5 years in these scenarios. Children experiencing homelessness are more likely to have poor health, suffer trauma and development delays, and struggle in school. Without a stable place to live, children may struggle with accessing healthcare, proper nutrition, and developmental stimulation, all of which can impact their mental and physical health.

Anglicare SQ's recent *Rental Affordability Snapshot* revealed that of the nearly 3,000 rental properties surveyed this year, there were only 9 properties (0.3%) that were affordable and appropriate for households on income support; and only 82 (2.9%) properties for those on minimum wage. For a couple with two children on minimum wage, assuming they could find a property, median rent was nearly 40% of their income — and this was the *best* scenario for families with young children.¹⁰

When families have to reduce spending on essential items like education, healthcare, or groceries; and carry the emotional burden of uncertainty and potential homelessness, it has direct impact on the quality of life and life chances for young children.

3.0 **'By 2020, all children will have the best start in life...'**

In 2009, the then Council of Australian Governments (COAG) drove a significant collaboration between the Commonwealth and the state and territory governments with the goal of ensuring that by 2020 all children would have access to "the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation".¹¹ The resulting document, *Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*, outlined areas of action needed to address gaps, and build system effectiveness and capacity.

Anglicare SQ has drawn heavily on this document in the following text. The strategy is sound — built on principles we value, evidence we respect, and areas of concern we share. In fact, we strongly suspect that most of the submissions received to this inquiry will reflect a similar stance, and that the final *Early Years Strategy* will have much in common with the 2009 COAG document.

4.0 By 2030? Shaping the *Early Years Strategy*

The following section of this submission addresses specific questions included in the Early Years Discussion paper.

4.1 *The proposed structure of the Strategy*

Anglicare SQ considers that the proposed structure of the *Strategy*, as outlined in the *Discussion Paper*, comprehensively addresses required elements.

We suggest that the associated Implementation Action Plans should be explicit in committing to, and being accountable for:

- new actions that can be put into place immediately within existing resources
- reform initiatives to be implemented within specified timelines: ie the next Budget cycle, two years, three years
- reform initiatives that require additional research, including specified timelines and an identified process and funding for further development.

4.2 *Our vision for our youngest children*

As noted in the introduction to this submission, Anglicare staff were given the opportunity to provide input to a survey based on the DSS public survey at engage.dss.gov.au

For our staff, the most compelling priorities for the Australian Government to concentrate on *first* were, equally

- material basics, such as water, housing, clothing and food
- strong and supportive families
- safety.

These same priorities came through strongly in the visions and hopes that staff held for children in the early years in Australia. Many saw these three priorities as foundational for access to education, health and welfare services:

My hope is:

- *That children are safe and have opportunities to thrive.*
- *My biggest hope for children is that they can have their basic needs covered — housing, food, education, affordable access to the health system and a safe and loving home life. Beyond that, teachers who are trauma informed and support for parents who need it to raise healthy children.*
- *That all children will live in a safe environment with equitable access to quality education, supports and services provided in a timely manner.*

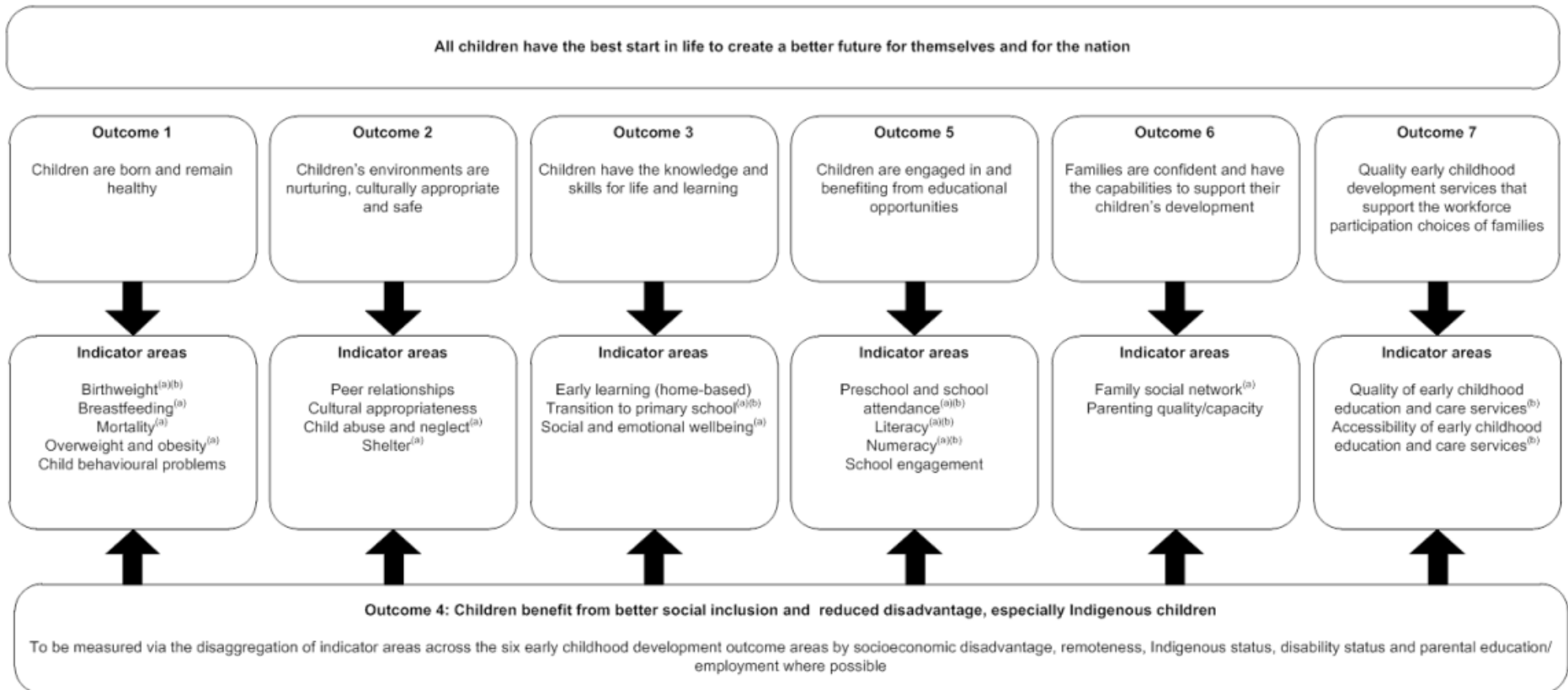
- *That all children have access or made welcome to kindergarten, playgroups and day care regardless of income, culture or parents' social skills.*
- *Having connections (to family and wider community). Having access to allied health and general health.*
- *I am a strong advocate for children to have a childhood free from harm, stress and abuse. I would like to see more children have access to affordable childcare where they can be supported to grow and develop emotionally, socially and educationally. Too many children are being left behind and are not school ready by the time they get to primary school. Children need to be provided with supported play opportunities to develop their skills and abilities to succeed at school.*
- *Children being able to feel loved and emotionally and psychologically safe in the family home. More supports for children with disability and neurodivergent needs.*
- *That families feel supported and are given opportunities to develop their parenting skills and knowledge of their child's development.*



Photo by Guillaume de Germain on Unsplash

4.3. Most important outcomes

Anglicare SQ recommends the comprehensive summary of outcome areas in the diagram below, from the Early Childhood Development Reporting Framework of the *National Early Childhood Development Strategy*.¹² This is a solid starting point, covering all of the positive outcomes we would want for our 0-5 year olds, and encompassing a range of important indicators to ensure accountability and progress toward genuine change.



4.4 Policy priorities

As noted above, for Anglicare staff, the most compelling priorities for the Australian Government to concentrate on *first* were, equally:

- material basics, such as water, housing, clothing and food
- strong and supportive families
- safety.

Addressing the absolute basics of a satisfactory life — ensuring that children are warm, well fed and housed appropriately — is beyond the scope of an Early Years Strategy, but well within the remit of the Australian Government. As the Early Years Strategy *Discussion Paper* points out:

*The Commonwealth's footprint includes everything from **universal services for all families and children**, targeted support for families and children who face particular challenges, and tertiary interventions where needed to help address challenges to achieving the best outcomes for children in the early years (our emphasis).¹³*

The *Discussion Paper* notes the importance of “connections between children, families, kin and communities”. Nurturing such connections necessarily requires an holistic, cross-government approach to children's wellbeing, in which governmental silos and barriers are addressed — an early priority also identified in strong terms in the same document:

If there is not a coordinated, joined up approach across Government, there is a lack of ultimate responsibility and accountability for Australia's children.¹⁴

A truly coordinated approach to the wellbeing of children 0-5 years and their families would see the Australian Government heed the advice of the Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee report released in mid-April 2023 to increase Jobseeker (and related payments) and Commonwealth Rent Assistance, and lift children immediately out of poverty.

Beyond this core priority, we stress the importance of supporting and strengthening families of all kinds — recognising that families are now more diverse than ever, and that the important thing is that they all have capacity to provide a loving, supportive and safe environment in which children can thrive.

This is, again, a cross-agency and cross-sectoral priority encompassing, among other concerns:

- strengthening universal maternal, child and family health services
- developing the skills and capacity of parents, kin and carers to safely care for and protect their children
- expanding the size and skills of the workforce across early childhood development and family support services

- a particular focus on children and families suffering disadvantage
- the inaccessibility and unaffordability of childcare for many families, particularly women in vulnerable circumstances (our staff note that childcare is vital to support access to our programs and to enable women to participate in community)
- the ongoing need for high quality information, a solid evidence base and meaningful channels of communication with families to inform decision-making about what policies and programs will best support children 0-5 years and their families to flourish.

4.5 *Improving outcomes for children from vulnerable and/or disadvantaged backgrounds*

It is clear from our discussion above that we believe one of the most important actions the Australian Government can take to improve outcomes for children from vulnerable and/or disadvantaged backgrounds is to increase income support to a point where children and families no longer live in poverty.

In their frontline work with clients, our staff have additionally highlighted a range of initiatives that would support improved life chances for children in the early years who suffer from disadvantage. These mainly cluster around the following issues:

- Early years education, childcare and family support
- Health, including mental health

4.5.1 *Early years education, childcare and family support*

- *Provide free and widely available parenting courses like Triple P.*
- *More services to support families with small children, such as in home educational support programs for disadvantaged families (like HIPPY).*
- *The prevalence of family breakdown, blended families, and domestic and family violence is increasing so psychoeducational programs around creating healthy relationships is important eg boundaries, respect, protective factors, how to reach out for help.*
- *Improve funding for childcare and child safety services. The current under-resourcing, particularly for staff remuneration, does not reflect the importance of the work these services provide.*
- *Consider de-privatising early childhood education and increase wages and training for educators.*
- *Provide free childcare to all Australian children*
- *Better wages to attract workers to services who look after the most vulnerable in the community ie. children, people with a disability and aged.*

One of our staff members highlighted the particular challenges that rural and regional families face in accessing early childhood education:

- *Provide transport for families in small country towns. Most towns do not have bus services. Families cannot walk to multiple appointments and if they do not have a car they probably cannot afford taxis. Only limited kindergartens have transport for the children.*

4.5.2 Health, including mental health

- *Access and availability of mental/health services for families is critical*
- *More children are displaying signs of anxiety and trauma, so psychoeducation programs teaching children how to self-sooth, self-regulate, self-care and implement healthy coping strategies.*



Photo by Ryan Fields on Unsplash

4.6 Improving coordination and collaboration in policy development

Some of the best examples of coordination and collaboration in policy and program development have a whole-of-community focus. Given what is often taken to be a truism, that it takes a village to raise a child, such approaches offer much to policy development and implementation in the early childhood area. The Logan Together initiative is one such example.

4.6.1 Logan Together (www.logantogether.org.au)

The Logan Together initiative is a community movement committed to the wellbeing of every child in the city of Logan, from 0 to 8 years of age. Through its Splash! event in 2022,¹⁵ bringing together more than 600 Logan residents, service providers, academics and funders, as well as ongoing activity, Logan Together provides an outstanding example of grassroots collaboration genuinely informing community-wide strategy and action.

We suggest that the successful implementation of a National Early Years Strategy and its associated action plans would be strongly supported by expanded funding for place-based child-focused initiatives and approaches, where communities are inspired, as a collective, to take ownership of the wellbeing of their own children. Such cross-sectoral, cross-community partnerships would also provide a rich database of evidence about initiatives that work — or don't work — for sharing with both government and community; and inform policy and program development on an ongoing basis.

Every child. Every opportunity.

Our big goal is to see Logan's children happy and healthy for generations to come.



4.7 *Underpinning principles of the Strategy*

We draw here on principles outlined in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*,¹⁶ ratified by 195 countries and by Australia in 1990.

Additionally, and as in previous discussion, we also echo some of the principles included in the COAG *National Early Childhood Development Strategy*.

Anglicare SQ endorses a focus on:

- the best interests of the child as the primary consideration in any actions or initiatives concerning children
- the whole child, across cognitive, learning, physical, social, emotional and cultural dimensions and learning throughout life
- the whole of early childhood, from the antenatal period to age 5 years
- all children, with particular attention to those children most in need, to reduce social inequity and risk and improve life chances
- respect for diversity and difference as a strength and positive asset
- the right of children to grow up with a positive sense of self and culture
- the right of children to be heard, and have a voice in decisions and actions that impact them
- the whole early childhood service system, covering both universal and targeted supports and services, across levels of government and sectors, including non-government agencies and for-profit services.

4.8 *Gaps in existing frameworks or research*

The impact of systemic issues such as poverty and lack of housing has been a constant thread in this submission. One of the most significant gaps in early childhood research is around the effect of these and other social determinants of health on a child's development. As we noted earlier, it is well-established that children who grow up in poverty are at higher risk for developmental delays and negative health outcomes, but many questions remain about what this means for children's ability to live a flourishing life as adults. How does poverty and housing stress during early childhood impact cognitive development outcomes later in life? How does the duration and severity of poverty and housing stress during early childhood impact emotional and social development outcomes as an adult? What intervention strategies are most effective in helping young children and their families overcome trauma and adversity?

A further gap in early childhood research is around the impact of different types of early childhood education on children's development. While we know that early childhood education has significant benefits, further research is needed to explore what specific elements of quality are most important in early childhood education

environments; and what type and mix of educational experiences are most beneficial at this stage. Anecdotally, for example, Anglicare staff and the teachers and parents with whom they engage are noting a rise in young children's behavioural and cognitive difficulties, correlating with increased early curriculum demands — so what balance of play-based and/or more structured experiences is best for young children?

Anglicare staff also note specific challenges for early childhood education and development in rural, regional and remote Australia. A project commissioned by Regional Development Victoria in 2022 to develop a business case “to solve early childhood education and childcare issues in rural areas” notes that:

*A problem with policy responses to this issue is an assumption that one suite of solutions will solve the problems faced in all communities. However, rural communities are differentiated from more populous areas by their smaller and geographically dispersed populations, and their higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. These traits have marked implications on the viability of early childhood education and childcare services in rural areas.*¹⁷

Additional research and a stronger policy focus is needed on place-based early childhood strategies that meet the specific needs of diverse rural, regional and remote communities, including challenges such as staffing; access to medical, educational and other specialists; and transport.

5.0 A final word

The three main sections of this submission echo commitments made over the past three decades to lift Australian children out of poverty: to give them the best start in life, and a chance to achieve their goals and dreams. There has been no shortage of research, partnerships, frameworks and declarations in that time — but still, as the Early Years *Discussion Paper* points out, nearly half of our children aged 0-5 years (and others) are struggling developmentally. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly at risk, as are First Nations children, children in rural, regional and remote areas, children with language backgrounds other than English, and children with a disability.¹⁸

This *Strategy* needs to be the one that makes a difference. It needs **genuine political will, accountability, collaboration and appropriate funding** to turn action *plans* into actual action. Even more importantly, it needs to be embedded into systemic changes that address income sufficiency and the housing crisis.

No child can grow and learn and thrive, no matter how good the program, when they come to kindy with an empty stomach.

6.0 Endnotes

- ¹ Commonwealth of Australia. 2009. *Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*. An initiative of the Council of Australian Governments. 2 July. Canberra.
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- ⁵ Vera-Toscano, E. and Wilkins, R. 2020. *Does Poverty in Childhood Beget Poverty in Adulthood in Australia?* Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne.
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- ⁶ Anglicare Southern Queensland. 2023. Staff survey to inform submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia.
www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/PovertyinAustralia
- ⁷ Anglicare Southern Queensland. 2023. Staff survey to inform submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia.
www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/PovertyinAustralia
- ⁸ In a recent open letter by the leaders of major faith-based charities, it was pointed out that scrapping the Stage 3 tax cuts could, among other benefits:

 - raise working age payments to the poverty line, lifting 2.3 million Australians, including 840,000 children, out of poverty; and
 - enable the Government to build 36,000 social homes each year. This program would end the shortfall and provide affordable homes to hundreds of thousands of individuals and families.

The costings for these two initiatives come in around \$208 billion over ten years, well below the \$254 billion cost of the tax cuts. Scrapping the tax cuts would enable Government to better support a whole array of services that support young children to flourish.
- ⁹ Anglicare Southern Queensland. 2023. Staff survey to inform submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia.
www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/PovertyinAustralia
- ¹⁰ Anglicare Southern Queensland. 2023. *Rental Affordability Snapshot, Brisbane Metropolitan Area 2023*. Brisbane. Brisbane component of the Anglicare Australia *National Rental Affordability Snapshot*, Canberra.

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- 11 Commonwealth of Australia. 2009. *Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*. An initiative of the Council of Australian Governments. 2 July. Canberra.
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- 13 Australian Government. 2023. *The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper*. Canberra: Department of Social Services, p. 6.
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