

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT NATIONAL EARLY YEARS STRATEGY DISCUSSION PAPER

The Victorian Government welcomes the development of the National Early Years Strategy (Strategy) to build a holistic, connected early years system that ensures access to high quality services for every child in Australia.

Victoria supports the cross-portfolio focus of the Strategy and supports a more coordinated approach to early years services and reform, as well as consideration by the Commonwealth of the underpinning financial supports for families in need. This will maximise the impact of state and federal investment and connect children and their families with the services that they need, when and where they need them.

The Strategy should reflect the principle of progressive universalism, with all children able to access high quality universal services such as early childhood education and health services, as well as more targeted supports for those children who require them to support their wellbeing, safety and development.

The Strategy should reflect the emphasis of the National Preventive Health Strategy on the significance of prevention, especially focusing on the wider determinants of health, from the preconception period through to the first five years of life. Improving children's health and wellbeing by supporting new parents and encouraging active living and mental wellbeing in a range of settings where children live, learn and play is crucial.

A commitment to self-determination, to culturally safe and inclusive services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families should be central to the Strategy. This includes ensuring the alignment of the Strategy with matters pertaining to the National Voice and the Uluru Statement from the Heart. There should also be a commitment to listening and acting on the full and diverse lived experience of children and their families from all backgrounds and of all abilities and needs.

National Early Years Strategy Vision

Universal and equitable access to early childhood programs on a national scale would put children and their families at the centre of the service system, ensuring children's developmental outcomes are a key focus alongside workforce participation and economic development.

Victorian's Best Start Best Life reforms will result in a significant shift in pre-school learning opportunities for Victorian children. From 2023, Free Kinder is available for all Victorian three and four-year-old children at participating services. Over the next decade, Four-Year-Old Kindergarten will transition to 'Pre-Prep' – increasing to a universal 30-hour a week program of play-based learning for every four-year-old child, alongside 15 hours per week of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten for every child. Victoria's Best Start Best Life reforms, along reforms in New South Wales, will result in a significantly greater preschool offer for children in these states.

National Cabinet has agreed to develop a long-term vision for ECEC to better support parents' workforce participation and deliver improved early learning and child development outcomes as a national priority and shared responsibility. The Strategy should consider the benefits of a nationally consistent preschool offer as a key component of broader early childhood development systems and programs. The Strategy is an opportunity to align our priorities and bring together our best efforts to work towards a common set of outcomes for children and

families, within a context of growing momentum and ambition for early childhood education and care reform across Australia.

Co-ordinated and effective investment in early years services provision

Services should be shaped more closely around the needs of families with a focus on addressing inequities in health, wellbeing and education outcomes and supporting access to both universal and additional, targeted services for vulnerable and disadvantaged families.

The Strategy should consider how Australian Government investment could better align with, or be brought together with, state and territory existing services to improve outcomes for children and their families. Maternity, maternal and child health, perinatal mental health and wellbeing, parenting support, early childhood education and targeted supports for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and their families are all critical to ensure children reach their full potential. Moreover, supporting children earlier improves lifelong trajectories in terms of long-term health, economic and educational outcomes, and reduces the need to access state services or interventions later on in life. States and Territories have a primary role in delivering most of these early years services. Further detail on Victoria's early years service system offering is provided at [Attachment 1](#).

The Strategy would benefit from mapping existing investments to identify gaps or overlaps in investments between different levels of government and opportunities to better co-ordinate and possibly bring investments together, to make early years services easier for families to navigate and maximise positive impact on outcomes. For example, the Australian Government funds Children and Parenting Support services, which provide early intervention and prevention support to children and their families. However, the services overlap with state programs and are often funded in discrete locations with limited access for families, which reduces their impact.

Beyond ensuring well-designed and intrinsically accessible early years services, the Strategy should consider taking action in localised areas to connect a range of services and, where necessary, create a team around the child and family. This can include the creation of integrated early years hubs, especially in disadvantaged communities and ideally co-located with schools. Supporting local partnerships, information sharing and collaboration across both co-located and separate services is also critical.

As part of this work, the Strategy should consider the significant role that early childhood programs play in supporting gender equity with regards to improving economic participation for women. More coordinated investments in early childhood programs across all levels of government is critical to supporting women into entering or re-entering the workforce.

Finally, consideration should be given to evidence-based frameworks to support funding decisions. For example, the Victorian Government's Early Intervention Investment Framework provides a whole-of-government approach to funding evidence-based interventions, including the provision of support for vulnerable children to engage in kindergarten and enhance parenting capacity.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

The Strategy should build on the commitment to Closing the Gap and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy and actively support communities impacted by intergenerational trauma and discriminatory policies that perpetuate disadvantage.

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring that young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families receive culturally safe early years services and have the choice to access Aboriginal led services. This includes dedicated funding to ensure access to early childhood education, initiatives under *Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan* and *Wungurilwil Gagapduir Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement*, and Koori Maternity and Aboriginal MCH services across the state. In addition, the Victorian Government has committed to the establishment of Victoria's first Aboriginal-led Early Parenting Centre in Frankston, which will support new parents and connect them with their community for culturally appropriate support.

Additionally, the Victorian Government has worked in partnership with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria – Victoria's democratically elected body for Traditional Owners and First Peoples – to establish all elements required to support future Treaty negotiations, which are expected to commence at the end of this year. Children, family services and education are specifically named in the Treaty Negotiation Framework as subjects for negotiation, and early years services are likely to be part of negotiations. Victoria's formal truth-telling process, the Yoorrook Justice Commission (Commission), is also underway. The Commission is currently inquiring into systemic injustices experienced by First Peoples in the child protection system, including how involvement in the system affect First Peoples during their early years and the adequacy of family and child services. In August 2023, the Commission will provide recommendations for immediate reform.

Removing barriers for priority cohorts

There are clear barriers to vulnerable and disadvantaged families accessing critical Commonwealth-funded early years services. The Strategy should review the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) Activity Test, as highlighted by the Australian Parliament Select Committee on Work and Care, which has called for its abolition. In addition, the Inquiry into Economic Equity for Victorian Women has noted that the Activity Test can make ECEC prohibitively expensive for parents, the majority of whom are women, who cannot engage in paid work or training because they may have other unpaid caring or domestic responsibilities. The Strategy should also consider reviewing the requirement for families to provide new evidence of vulnerability every 13 weeks to access the CCS. While some progress has been made, such requirements create heavy administrative burden and can act as a disincentive to engage vulnerable children in ECEC programs and act as a barrier to parents and carers being able to improve their life prospects.

Factors such as family socio-economic status, geographic location and disability significantly impact outcomes. The Strategy should take a holistic view of national funding and policy settings including Medicare, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and income support, which currently result in some children with additional needs not receiving care when they need it. National and bilateral agreements on disability, family violence, child sexual assault, mental health and wellbeing (i.e. perinatal) as well as the Australian Government's National Gender Equality Strategy, should be considered within this context also.

The Strategy should consider how the current funding system can be improved to support participation and drive better outcomes for disadvantaged children. This should be in addition to strengthening support for inclusion of children with disabilities or developmental delay. Victoria does this through initiatives such as School Readiness Funding, which helps to address the impacts of educational disadvantage experienced by some three- and four-year-old children in all early childhood education and care services delivering state-funded kindergarten programs. There is clear evidence that early investments in the right supports for

young children with additional needs both improves child outcomes and reduces their needs in later life.

Consideration should also be given to reducing the fragmentation of health care, such as through trialling more integrated health funding models and addressing out-of-pocket costs for primary care and essential medications. With the current increase in cost-of-living pressures, food insecurity will also be an increasing issue for children and their families. It will be important to include strategies that ensure and improve access to affordable and nutritious food for vulnerable and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged families.

Workforce

Attracting, training and retaining a high-quality workforce is critical to sustaining and growing the early years system in a way that ensures children and families have access to quality services.

Workforce supply is a national issue, and the Strategy should consider how the Australian Government could better utilise its levers, building on relevant workforce strategies such as the National Early Childhood Workforce Strategy, and the National Nursing Workforce Strategy.

While Victoria has developed innovative pathways into early childhood teaching, the success of these initiatives rests on there being sufficient Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) available at universities. While additional CSPs in education and nursing courses in 2023 and 2024 were welcomed, there is an opportunity to intervene more actively so that CSPs are allocated in a way that responds to anticipated workforce demand to support the delivery of essential services including midwives, nurses, MCH nurses, and early childhood teachers. Increased Commonwealth investment in scholarships and more employment-based pathways into the early years sector should be considered.

Following the Job Skill Summit, the Australian Government committed to undertaking practical changes to help address the skills shortages. Recent changes to migration settings, for example allowing graduates in key areas to access extended work rights following graduation, have been welcome. However, more active review of and action by the Australian Government to address migration settings to support workforce in areas of skills shortage, such as in the early years sector, should be undertaken. The Strategy should consider how further action around migration settings including skill recognition, sponsorships, and wraparound migration support services, could enhance opportunities for overseas trained entrants to enter Australia's early years sector.

The pay and conditions of the Commonwealth-funded early childhood education and care workforce has consistently been identified as having a sizeable impact on attraction and retention. Improving pay, conditions and workforce sustainability will also contribute to greater gender equity in the sector, as the workforce is currently predominately female.

We welcome the reform to embed gender equity into the Fair Work Act and to enable multi-enterprise bargaining for lower paid sectors, including many members of the early years workforce.

A Strategy that includes a full consideration of workforce needs will realise the potential of all parts of the early years sector, resulting in a workforce that feels supported, valued and heard, is professionally recognised, and able to attract and inspire new talent.

Attachment 1 – Victoria’s early years service offering

Victoria is a leader in early years investment and reform, recognising children’s right to thrive and the long-term benefits of universal and targeted programs from pregnancy through to when children start school.

Victorian children’s developmental outcomes at school entry are consistently among the best in the country. However, while most Victorian children begin school ready to thrive and learn at school, children whose family and community face greater disadvantage and poverty are much more likely to be assessed as developmentally vulnerable in one or more Australian Early Development Census domains as they exit the early years and transition into school. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are the most likely to be assessed as developmentally vulnerable at this time.

Overall, Victoria has high levels of engagement in funded early years services. More than 75% of births occur in Victoria’s network of public health services, early participation in Maternal and Child Health services is universal and funded kindergarten enrolment rates are high.

Universal services

Health

Victoria’s public health system offers **maternity services** through a tiered network of more than 50 **public hospitals** and 14 **Koori Maternity Services** across Victoria.

The universal **Maternal and Child Health (MCH)** service provides critical health, wellbeing, safety, learning and developmental support and guidance through 10 key ages and stages consultations as well as additional flexible supports, and a 24-hour state-wide **MCH over-the-phone advice line**. 15 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations deliver **Aboriginal MCH services** from 17 locations across the state, ensuring Aboriginal children and families can access Aboriginal led and culturally safe MCH supports.

Four dedicated **women’s and children’s health services** support a network of metropolitan, regional and rural inpatient and outpatient care across a range of specialist clinical areas. These services are also supported by **state-wide specialist child health and wellbeing services** including the fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, paediatric rehabilitation, parent and infant mental health and paediatric developmental services.

Early childhood education

As part of the Education State reform agenda, the Victorian Government is building a modern education system that fosters excellence, equity and wellbeing. This includes significant investment and reform in early childhood education.

The Victorian government has committed \$14 billion over 10 years to expand and increase the state’s early childhood education offering, including:

- The introduction of universal funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten
- **Free Three- and Four-Year-Old Kinder** is available across Victoria at participating services at both long day care and sessional (standalone) services. **Free Kinder** means a saving of up to \$2,500 per child, each year, for Victorian families.
- Over the decade, Four-Year-Old Kinder will transition to **Pre-Prep**, entitling all 4-year-old children in Victoria to 30 hours of fully funded play-based learning per week.
- 50 government-owned **affordable Early Learning Centres** including kindergarten and Pre-Prep will be established in areas with unmet childcare demand.

Victoria has demonstrated its credibility as an early mover in the expansion of early childhood education, as the first Australian jurisdiction to implement reforms of this scale.

Targeted programs

The Victorian Government is growing impactful investment in targeted early years services through the Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF). The EIIF is a whole-of-government approach to funding evidence-based interventions, investing over \$150 million in early years programs over the last two years. This includes support for vulnerable children to engage in kindergarten and increase school readiness, enhance parenting capacity, and reduce engagement with Child Protection. All programs report annually on the impacts delivered for clients and the service system, and must estimate the expected reduction in future need for acute government services (e.g. Youth Justice and Child Protection).

Health

Enhanced MCH services offer additional supports to families experiencing vulnerabilities. The Victorian government has expanded this program to increase the number of hours of targeted support to vulnerable young children and their families and increased the service's delivery capacity.

Victoria's **Early Parenting Centres** (EPCs) are available to parents of children aged 0–4 years seeking additional specialist support. This network is undergoing expansion from three to 13 EPCs, including an Aboriginal-led EPC.

Community health services targeted to disadvantaged Victorians offer paediatric and dental health services for young children as well as services for adults that support healthy families, such as drug and alcohol, mental health, family violence and housing supports.

Three **Child and Family Health and Wellbeing Hubs** delivered in partnership with the Commonwealth offer integrated, community-based health, mental health and parenting supports for families with children aged 0–11 experiencing developmental, behavioural, emotional and relational challenges.

The **Perinatal Emotional Health Program** supports new parents to access community-based mental health and wellbeing supports. This program has been expanded over the previous two state budgets to ensure all area mental health and wellbeing services deliver the program to meet demand.

Area mental health and wellbeing services across the state have been expanded to provide specialist mental health treatment and care to infants and young children as recommended by the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

Six **specialist parent infant units** provide residential assessment and support for mental health issues in the postnatal period, while **Pathways to Good Health** supports children entering the statutory care system to receive early health assessments and health planning that support the Child Protection Program to deliver the right health services to children as part of their case planning.

Early childhood education

The Victorian Government provides dedicated programs to help ensure children who need extra support are able to participate in kindergarten.

These include **Kindergarten Inclusion Support** and **Preschool Field Officers** for children with disability or developmental delay; **Early Childhood LOOKOUT** and **Flexible Support Packages** for children in out-of-home care or affected by trauma; and **outreach workers in culturally and linguistically diverse communities**.

Early Start Kindergarten provides funding to ensure that 3-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds and children known to Child Protection can access the maximum 3-year-old kindergarten entitlement of 15 hours per week (as we transition to this being the universal offer for all children).

Government also **pre-purchases kindergarten places**, primarily in areas of need and high demand, so that reserved places are available for vulnerable or disadvantaged children who present outside normal enrolment periods.

Targeted and specialist child and family services

Child and family services promote safety, stability, and the healthy development of vulnerable children, through case work support and practical interventions. Through the *Roadmap For Reform* the Victorian Government has invested in several targeted supports for vulnerable families with children aged 0–5 as well as vulnerable pregnant women.

Supported Playgroups and **Koori Supported Playgroups** aim to improve wellbeing and development outcomes for children through improving the quality of the early home learning environment for families with children aged from birth to school age experiencing social and economic disadvantage or parenting challenges.

The **Early Help Family Services** trial sees family services practitioners embedded in universal services, including early years services, to provide individualised and group-based support to families with emerging needs.

Specialist family disability service programs support vulnerable families with disability, including children with complex disability support needs and parents with an intellectual disability, with a focus on supporting their effective participation in the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Integrated family services provide case management support to families experiencing cumulative harm, or who have multiple, complex needs, to support child wellbeing and safety and build family resilience. Additionally, these services seek to connect families with the supports they require, for example mental health or family violence support.

Family Preservation and Reunification Services support children and their families to remain together safely and enable children in care to return home safely through the provision of evidence-informed practices. These services are tightly cohort-focused, including responses targeted to unborn children and children from birth to school age.

Government is currently trialling **Putting Families First**, a program that supports justice-involved families with multiple interactions across social, health and justice services, using an interdisciplinary, whole of family approach.

The Orange Door network provides single entry points for integrated intake and assessment services in relation to family violence needs and in response to wellbeing concerns for children including unborn children, young people and families. The Orange Door network operates across the state replaces separate intake systems across specialised family violence services and Child FIRST. The partnership model includes one or more local Aboriginal services in each local site to provide a culturally safe response.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the early years

The Victorian government is committed to ensuring that young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families receive culturally safe early years services and have the choice to access Aboriginal led services.

This includes dedicated funding to ensure access to early childhood education, initiatives under **Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan** and **Wungurilwil Gagapduir Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement**, and **Koori Maternity, Koori Parenting Support** and **Aboriginal MCH** services across the state.

The Victorian Government has worked in partnership with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria – Victoria's democratically elected body for Traditional Owners and First Peoples – to establish all elements required to

support future Treaty negotiations, which are expected to commence at the end of this year. Children, family services and education are specifically named in the Treaty Negotiation Framework as subjects for negotiation, and early years services are also likely to be part of negotiations. Victoria's formal truth-telling process, the Yoorrook Justice Commission (Commission), is underway and is currently inquiring into systemic injustices experienced by First Peoples in the child protection system, including how involvement in the system affect First Peoples during their early years and the adequacy of family and child services. The Commission will provide recommendations for immediate reform in August 2023.

Appendix: Service system enablers

Content below outlines recent Victorian government initiatives that contribute to cohesion, quality, and equitable access to Victoria's the early years offering.

Whole of system

The **Early Years Compact** is a 10-year commitment between agencies with early years service remits to work together at local level to strengthen and adapt service delivery or practices to better support access to early years services.

The **Child Information Sharing Scheme** makes it easier for these professionals to see the full picture of the child they work with, helping them to understand what they can share, and how to protect a family's privacy.

Child Link is a web-based platform that displays information about a child to authorised key professionals who have responsibility for child wellbeing and safety. Child Link shows limited but critical information, such as a child's participation in key early childhood and education services.

Early childhood education

Quality

The **Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework** is the foundation for high quality early childhood services in Victoria.

Victoria's early childhood education and care regulatory functions include a substantial ongoing service quality program. Additionally, area based **Early Childhood Improvement Branches** provide dedicated quality support to services and the **Kindergarten Quality Improvement Program** provides intensive and targeted professional development support to services in need of quality improvement support. The program aims to lift the quality of these services to improve outcomes for children, to help ensure every child starts school developmentally on track.

The **Early Years Assessment for Learning Tool** equips teachers and educators to understand and respond to the individual learning needs of kindergarten age children.

Victoria also provides services with **funding to meet ratios** in services with high demand and **to hire more experienced early childhood educators**.

Access and equity

Since 2019 **School Readiness Funding** has resourced kindergartens to address the impacts of educational disadvantage experienced by some children, ensuring all children attending a funded kindergarten program get the best start to their learning.

The **Central Enrolment Project** supports local governments to adopt best practice kindergarten enrolment models across the state, so that families are well supported to find a kindergarten place that meets their needs, and children and families who need more support to access kindergarten can be identified and engaged as early as possible.

Workforce

Through the **Kindergarten Workforce Strategy**, Victoria is leading the nation in its efforts to attract and retain a high-quality early childhood education workforce.

As part of this strategy, Victoria is **subsidising study and training** for both early childhood teachers and educators, including teacher scholarships and Free TAFE.

Financial incentives are available for eligible qualified early childhood teachers and educators to fill positions, particularly in rural and regional communities, and **recruitment supports**, such as a recruitment

agency panel and early childhood jobs board, are in place to help early childhood services recruit skilled professionals.

To support **workforce development and retention**, the Victorian government provides a range of career development opportunities, including mentoring for beginning teachers, communities of practice, and Early Years Learning Networks for teachers in leadership roles to share professional expertise. In 2022-23, Victoria is working to attract and retain skilled migrants with teaching occupations through state nominated skilled migration pathways. As of 12 April 2023, more than 650 skilled migrants (with eligible teaching occupations) have received a Victorian visa nomination. This visa nomination allows skilled migrants to lodge a visa application with the Commonwealth Government.

Health

Access and equity

Healthcare that counts: A framework for improving care for vulnerable children supports all Victorian health services to strengthen their response to vulnerable children and drive system-wide improvements to deliver coordinated and high-quality care.

Supporting families

Victoria's approach to promoting health in the early years is supported by implementation of the **Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures** child health and wellbeing plan, which includes:

INfant Feeding, Active play and NuTrition (INFANT) trains MCH nurses and community health professionals across the state to support parents to establish healthy eating patterns and active play at key developmental times in their child's first year of life through parent group sessions and supported by the My Baby Now phone app to reinforce key messages for babies from birth to 18 months of age.

Supporting early childhood education and care services

The **Healthy Eating Advisory Service** support early childhood education services to provide healthy and nutritious foods for children attending the service, assisting services to meet the National Quality Standard (NQS) in relation to nutrition.