



# **SUBMISSION TO THE 2019-20 ACT BUDGET CONSULTATION**

**NOVEMBER 2018**

## About the Children First Alliance

The ACT Children First Alliance (the Alliance) is a network of longstanding not-for-profit providers of children's service in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), including early learning centres (ELCs), family day care, preschool and after school care.

There is a significant body of research that demonstrates the importance of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) on a child's social, emotional, educational and economic wellbeing across the lifespan. Despite this, more than one in five ACT children were developmentally vulnerable when entering school.

The Alliance was established to develop and communicate a shared vision for ECEC in the ACT and to ensure that all children have access to ECEC.

The ten community ECEC providers that make up this Alliance operate 46 ELCs with 3,543 places. The Alliance has ten Founding Members:

- Anglicare NSW South, NSW West & ACT
- Belconnen Community Service
- Communities@Work
- Community Services #1
- Goodstart Early Learning ACT
- MOCCA
- Northside Community Service
- Woden Community Service
- YMCA Canberra
- YWCA Canberra

The Alliance's approach will involve:

- Developing policy and program priorities based on the evidence-base and experience of Alliance members;
- Working with the ACT Government to progress these reforms;
- Working collaboratively with like-minded stakeholders; and
- Communicating information about these reforms with the ACT community.

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## Introduction

The Children First Alliance welcomes the opportunity to provide a Submission to the *2019-20 Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Budget Consultation*.

Every child in the ACT should have access to supports, services and education they need to provide them with the best start in life. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is vital to ensuring that children are supported in their early years, which are crucial years for their development.

In July 2018, the ACT Government announced that it 'has set a goal of 15 hours per week, 600 hours per year of free, universal quality early childhood education for three year old children as a key part of the ACT Early Childhood Strategy'.<sup>1</sup> This announcement was welcomed by the Children First Alliance and the implementation of this important policy initiative will make a significant difference to lives of children in the ACT. The Children First Alliance also welcomes the consultation about the implementation of this policy to ensure that it reaches all children, including children experiencing disadvantage.

The ACT Government also released the *Future of Education in the ACT Strategy (the Strategy)*. The Strategy stated that 'Providing an equitable foundation for learning begins in early childhood settings and schools where children and young people can access what they need for their wellbeing, which leads to a stronger, deeper engagement in learning.'<sup>2</sup> The ACT Government will also release an *Early Childhood Strategy*.

While these policy measures have been welcomed, there have been significant policy setbacks at the national level, which are having a direct impact on children across the ACT. The introduction of the Child Care Subsidy (CCS), including a more restrictive 'work test' was introduced in July 2018. The Australian Government *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Strategy for Australia 2012–2016* expired in 2016 and has not been renewed.<sup>3</sup> Two Australian Government sources of funding for professional development: the *Professional Support Coordinators (PSC)* and the *Long Day Care Professional Development Program (LDCPDP)* also ceased in 2016 and 2017 respectively. This year also saw an end to Australian Government funding for the *National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care*.

All of these policy changes have direct impacts on children in the ACT and their families and the children who are impacted the most by these changes are children experiencing disadvantage, as these children have the most to gain from quality ECEC.

The policies outlined in this Pre-Budget Submission are necessary, reasonable and vital to ensure that the ACT has a strong quality ECEC sector that prepares our children for the future in school and beyond. Two areas have been identified for immediate action:

1. Create an ACT Early Childhood Educators Professional Development Fund to support the ongoing need for professional development in the ECEC sector.
2. Commence the extension of universal access to early childhood education and care to three-year-old children, with children experiencing the most disadvantage commencing in 2019-20.

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<sup>1</sup> Working toward early childhood education for every three year old, 31 July 2017, Media Statement: Yvette Berry MLA, [https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open\\_government/inform/act\\_government\\_media\\_releases/yvette-berry-mla-media-releases/2018/working-towards-early-childhood-education-for-every-three-year-old-child](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/yvette-berry-mla-media-releases/2018/working-towards-early-childhood-education-for-every-three-year-old-child)

<sup>2</sup> Education Directorate, ACT Government, 2018, Future of Education in ACT, [https://www.education.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0015/1231080/Future-Of-Education-Final-Strategy\\_Web.pdf](https://www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/1231080/Future-Of-Education-Final-Strategy_Web.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government Department of Ageing (2012) Early Years Workforce Strategy, <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/2918>

## 2019-20 Budget Priorities

1. **Create an ACT Early Childhood Educators Professional Development Fund to support the ongoing need for professional development in the ECEC sector.**

### *The current policy environment*

The ACT Government Advisory Council Early Childhood Advisory Council has identified ‘workforce and qualifications’ as one of four key elements of the Early Childhood Strategy which is to be released later in 2018.<sup>4</sup> A strong qualified workforce is essential to delivering quality Early Childhood Education and Care services. High quality early childhood education and care services make a significant impact on children, throughout their lives.

Access to ongoing professional development is key to ensuring that the Early Childhood Education and Care workforce is supported. This is important to both covering the expenses of the professional development opportunity and backfilling positions so that educators and teachers can be released to access professional development.

Despite the importance of professional development, funding for professional development for ECEC professionals in Australia has lapsed, with no plan for further policy development or support. The Australian Government *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Strategy for Australia 2012–2016* expired in 2016 and has not been renewed.<sup>5</sup> Two Australian Government sources of funding for professional development: the *Professional Support Coordinators (PSC)* and the *Long Day Care Professional Development Program (LDCPDP)* also ceased in 2016 and 2017 respectively.

The PSC was funded by the Australian Government to provide professional development to the ECEC sector in the ACT. The PSC was a single organisation selected through a tender process and provided with funding to support sector-wide professional development.

The LDCPDP was another Australian Government investment of \$200 million to support ECECs with the cost of accessing professional development and upskilling educators to meet the requirements of the National Quality Framework.

The ACT Government provides \$6,000 over four consecutive years to costs associated with an early childhood teaching qualification via the Early Childhood Degree Scholarship Program. This Program can support leave for study release, residential schools or practicum placements and course-required materials. This Program is currently under review.<sup>6</sup> However there is no funding available for educators or teachers to access other forms of professional development or leave for study release to access professional development.

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<sup>4</sup> ACT Government Education Directorate, Early Childhood Advisory Council, <https://www.education.act.gov.au/education-and-care/early-childhood-advisory-council>

<sup>5</sup> Australian Government Department of Ageing (2012) Early Years Workforce Strategy, <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/2918>

<sup>6</sup> Education Directorate, ACT Government, 2018, Careers and Training, <https://www.education.act.gov.au/education-and-care/careers-and-training>

### **Areas for action in the 2019-20 Budget**

Professional Development for educators is vital to ensuring that ECEC is high quality and results in outcomes that prepare children for school and beyond. In particular, research has drawn a direct link between the quality of teachers and educators and positive outcomes for children. Professor Edward Melhuish, a world leading expert on ECEC, indicated that an effective and efficient way to improve the quality of ECEC is to provide in-house professional development to educators.<sup>7</sup> This funding will support ECEC's to access the necessary skills to provide this training to their staff and to backfill positions while staff are accessing this professional development.

There are currently 344 centre-based ECEC services in the ACT.<sup>8</sup> A grants program for professional development and support for leave for study release should be established by the ACT Government. Funding for professional development opportunities that support children experiencing disadvantage, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other marginalised groups should be prioritised. There is also a need for professional development for trauma-informed practice to better support children experiencing trauma or neglect. The program could offer grants up to \$8,000 per annum per centre, reaching at least 100 services per year.

	2019-20	2020-21	2020-21	2021-22
<b>ECEC Professional Development Fund</b>	\$800,000	\$800,000		

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<sup>7</sup> Professor Melhuish presentation to ACT Members of The Legislative Assembly, 6 October 2017

<sup>8</sup> Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2018, NQF Snapshot Q2 2018, [https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-08/NQFSnapshot\\_Q22018.PDF](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-08/NQFSnapshot_Q22018.PDF)

## **2. Commence the extension of universal access to early childhood education and care to three-year-old children, prioritising children experiencing disadvantage commencing in 2019-20.**

### ***The current environment***

In July the ACT Government announced that it 'has set a goal of 15 hours per week, 600 hours per year of free, universal quality early childhood education for three-year-old children as a key part of the ACT Early Childhood Strategy'.<sup>9</sup> The Children First Alliance welcomes this announcement.

In 1998 the United Kingdom (UK) Government introduced subsidised preschool for four-year-old children. This was later extended to three-year-old children in 2004 and two-year-old children experiencing disadvantage in 2013. In September 2017, this was increased from 15 hours per week to 30 hours per week.

Sweden offers all three to five-year-old children 15 hours of free ECEC per week and Italy offers 40 hours of free ECEC for all three to six-year-old children.

The EPPE study assessed the impact of ECEC on participants' longer-term outcomes. The study found that the more months a child spends in quality ECEC, the better their language skills, and that an early start (aged two or three years) is linked with better intellectual attainment at school entry. The researchers concluded that two or more years in a high-quality preschool environment had the biggest statistical impact on intellectual development and early literacy skills.<sup>10</sup>

As the Mitchell Institute Report *Quality Early Education for All* identified 'Commencing work on planning the extension of Universal Access to three-year-old children would bring Australia into line with international norms. Providing two years of preschool would have the greatest impact on child outcomes and would provide greater benefits for children experiencing disadvantage for whom one year of preschool is not adequate to close the achievement gaps.'<sup>11</sup>

Currently in Australia 66 per cent of three year old children and 71 per cent of ACT children access ECEC. Of the 66 per cent of three-year-old children accessing ECEC, just 21 per cent attend a preschool program. Preschool is described by the Mitchell Institute Report *Preschool: Two years are better than one* as 'A defined learning-focused program, usually with minimum hours of attendance for children in the year or two before school and delivered by a qualified Early Childhood Teacher.'<sup>12</sup> However there is no nationally defined program of preschool for three-year-old children in Australia.

The changes to ECEC in Australia implemented over the past decade, which include the provision of funding for 15 hours per week for four-year-old children to access preschool, have brought Australia in line with minimum practices among most OECD countries. This move was taken a decade after the UK.

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<sup>9</sup> Working toward early childhood education for every three year old, 31 July 2017, Media Statement: Yvette Berry MLA, [https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open\\_government/inform/act\\_government\\_media\\_releases/yvette-berry-mla-media-releases/2018/working-towards-early-childhood-education-for-every-three-year-old-child](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/yvette-berry-mla-media-releases/2018/working-towards-early-childhood-education-for-every-three-year-old-child)

<sup>10</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B., (2004). The Effective Provision of PreSchool Education (EPPE) Project: final report. Institute of Education, University of London: London. [www.ioe.ac.uk/RB\\_Final\\_Report\\_3-7.pdf](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/RB_Final_Report_3-7.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Fox, S and Geddes, M. (2016). Preschool - Two Years are Better Than One: Developing a Preschool Program for Australian 3 Year Olds – Evidence, Policy and Implementation, Mitchell Institute

<sup>12</sup> Fox, S and Geddes, M. (2016). Preschool - Two Years are Better Than One: Developing a Preschool Program for Australian 3 Year Olds – Evidence, Policy and Implementation, Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 03/2016. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne. Available from: [www.mitchellinstitute.org.au](http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au), p 36

### ***Areas for action in the 2019-20 Budget***

The commitment by the ACT Government to extend universal access to ECEC to three-year-old children is a welcome measure that will make a significant difference to the lives of children across the ACT. The *Lifting Our Game* report recommended that ‘Australian governments progressively implement universal access to 600 hours per year of a quality early childhood education program, for example preschool, for all three year old children, with access prioritised for disadvantaged children, families and communities during roll out.’<sup>13</sup> The commencement of the provision of 600 hours of access to three year old children experience disadvantage should be prioritised in the 2019-20 Budget. This will allow for the provision to be gradually implemented, commencing with children experiencing the greatest disadvantage.

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<sup>13</sup> Pascoe, S & Brennan, D, 2017, *Lifting Our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*, 2017  
[https://www.education.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/1159357/Lifting-Our-Game-Final-Report.pdf](https://www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1159357/Lifting-Our-Game-Final-Report.pdf)