



Social Ventures Australia

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Re: Submission to the Department of Social Services

Consultation on Foundational Supports for children with developmental concern, delay and/or disability and their families, carers and kin

To the Department of Social Services,

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the design of Foundational Supports for children. SVA is a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to alleviate disadvantage, toward an Australia where all people and communities thrive. We recognise the best chance to change lifelong outcomes is during early childhood and we support a number of initiatives in pursuit of this goal.

SVA supports the Government's commitment to building an inclusive society, where people with disability can fulfil their potential as equal members of the community. We welcome the Government's commitment to introducing Foundational Supports to seek to achieve this objective, by providing additional supports that bridge gaps in mainstream services like ECEC and the NDIS.

While additional support to improve inclusion and outcomes for children is welcome, careful consideration is needed to ensure the design of Foundational Supports does not further complicate an already fragmented landscape of systems and services for children.

The National Early Years Strategy highlights that systems and services that provide supports to families are currently fragmented.¹ Attempting to navigate this landscape leaves families feeling disempowered and unsupported, with the greatest barriers to access faced by children with high needs and families experiencing disadvantage. Reflecting this issue, evidence demonstrates that children and families with the greatest needs are least likely to access services or receive the comprehensive support they need.^{2,3}

¹ Commonwealth of Australia, 2024, [The Early Years Strategy 2024-2034](#)

² Molloy, Goldfeld, Harrop, Perini, 2022, [Early Childhood Education: a study of barriers, facilitators and strategies to improve participation](#)

³ Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2018, [LSAC Annual Statistical Report 2017](#)

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Children who face disadvantage face a range of challenges that can show up as a developmental concern or delay.

As a result of the current fragmented service system, many of these children are being left behind, with 1 in five beginning school developmentally vulnerable.⁴ Communities with high levels of disadvantage are particularly impacted, with analysis by Deloitte finding 107,000 children are living in 700 communities where multiple disadvantages are present and more than 10% of children are developmentally vulnerable.⁵

The needs of these children must be considered in a holistic way, with Foundational Supports built within a system of universal and targeted high-quality early childhood services. To achieve this, the Government must address barriers to access that disproportionately affect families experiencing disadvantage. A 'no wrong door' approach must be embedded in the design of Foundational Supports as part of a joined-up early childhood system across health, education and social services.

The Government will also need to ensure the funding and service delivery model enables the delivery of quality Foundational Supports to every child who needs them. This is a particular challenge in regional communities and locations where there are insufficient to meet needs. In these communities, traditional market delivery mechanisms have failed to delivery sufficient early childhood education and care, and other early childhood services.⁶ Ensuring sufficient access may involve considering public provision in these markets.

We don't need to start from scratch – in fact this would create further silos and fragmentation, undermining the objectives of Foundational Supports. It's vital we build on the services and investment Government has already made in early childhood education and care, in child and maternal health, in Early Childhood Hubs, to ensure Foundational Supports offers the best possible support for children facing disadvantage.

To this end, our submission highlights how children who face disadvantage also experience poorer inclusion in mainstream services than their peers, and suggests considerations for the Government to ensure these children's needs are addressed in the design of Foundational Supports.

SVA's response to the consultation '[Foundational Supports for children with developmental concern, delay and/or disability and their families' carers and kin](#)' offers insights on how this initiative could fit into the broader early childhood service architecture. We propose five key recommendations for Government to consider:

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, [2021 AEDC National report](#)

⁵ Deloitte Access Economics, Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Community Child Health, 2023, [Early Childhood hubs: exploring need, funding models and a national approach](#). *The analysis identified communities where the following factors were present: high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, more than 10% of children are developmentally vulnerable as per AEDC, a range of additional vulnerabilities such as parents who are unemployed, or live in social housing or poverty*

⁶ Productivity Commission, 2024, [A path to universal early childhood education and care. Volume 2 – the operation and adequacy of the market, including types of care and the roles of for-profit and not-for-profit provider](#), P339

- 1. Ensure Foundational Supports are part of an integrated early childhood development system, which provides children and families with access to a seamless suite of supports that meet their needs.**
- 2. Ensure Foundational Supports are designed to meet the needs of children and families facing disadvantage, including through strategies to increase access to mainstream services.**
- 3. Support integrated Early Childhood Hubs as an ideal setting for delivering Foundational Supports, offering wrap-around services and supporting early identification of, and support for developmental needs.**
- 4. Ensure the funding and service delivery model for Foundational Supports is sufficient and sustainable to address community need, prioritising communities with high rates of disadvantage at first instance.**
- 5. Ensure the planning, implementation and monitoring of Foundational Supports is supported by an appropriate data framework of lead indicators, and that providers are equipped with resources and capabilities to routinely collect and act on data at a service level.**

Recommendation 1: Ensure Foundational Supports are part of an integrated early childhood development system, which provides children and families with access to a seamless suite of supports that meet their needs.

The rationale for Foundational Supports is clearly set out in the consultation paper. However, the definition and boundary between Foundational Supports and other service systems is unclear, and there is little consideration of how supports will be delivered in practice.

Key considerations for DSS include:

- clearly defining Foundational Supports, their intersection and boundaries with other service systems, and how families can access these, while still maintaining scope for Foundational Supports to cover the diverse experiences and needs of people with a disability.
- minimising barriers to participation by ensuring universal eligibility, and outreach.
- ensuring consistency of information and regulating quality of supports.
- ensuring access in every community across Australia, including public provision in areas where a market approach is not feasible.
- clarifying anticipated roles and responsibilities of various service providers, professionals and community organisations with respect to Foundational Supports implementation, including the identification of developmental concerns or delays, and recognising which supports are most appropriate.

- ensuring sufficient resources, funding, support and leadership are put in place to support existing mainstream early childhood workforces to deliver on those identified roles and responsibilities.

It is also important we build on and improve the existing services we already have in place. Not doing so risks further fragmenting the system, and misses the opportunity to build on existing investments, services that are working well, and the deep knowledge of Australia’s early childhood workforce.

Figure 1 below outlines a conceptual model of how tiered services might be delivered through Early Childhood Hubs to respond to the needs of children and families accessing these services.⁷ This model can support Department of Social Services to position Foundational Supports appropriately and consider best to offer a system of support that meets the needs of all children.

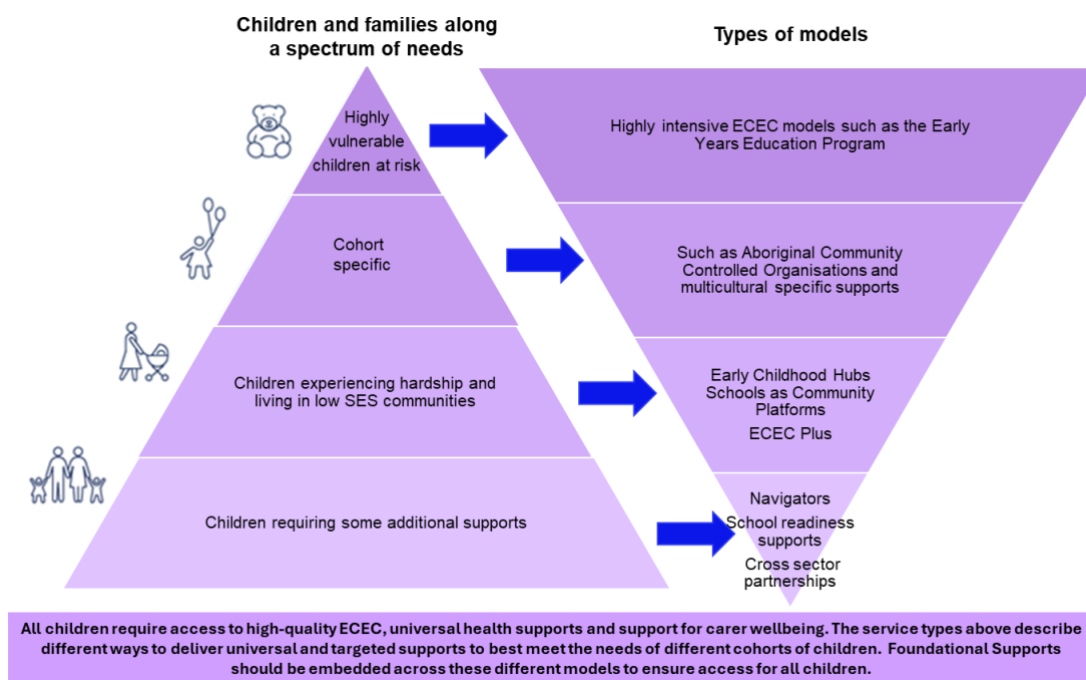


Figure 1 Model of tiered services relevant for children and family needs

For all families, there needs to be a strong and empowering relationship between the child, family and service that supports identification of additional needs and linkages to the required tier of relevant support.

⁷ Adapted from Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Community Child Health, 2021, [Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability](#)

Recommendation 2: Ensure Foundational Supports are designed to meet the needs of children and families facing disadvantage, including through strategies to increase access to mainstream services.

Children in the poorest areas of Australia are three times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than children in the wealthiest areas⁸. These inequities have not shifted in over a decade. As a result, children experiencing disadvantage with developmental concerns aren't getting the support they need.

Children who experience disadvantage often live in communities with fewer available services. This results in poorer access, inclusion and lower participation in services such as early childhood education and care⁹ and health and development checks.¹⁰ Early childhood service availability and accessibility is also poorer in regional, rural and remote areas.

Where services *are* available, families facing disadvantage experience barriers that others typically don't – access to the current support options relies on families' navigating multiple referrals with hidden costs and long wait lists, lack of culturally safe practices, long travel distances and limited transport options.,

For example, Children and Young People with Disability Australia highlight that families who experience disadvantage face inequities accessing support in the current system:

“Even before entering the scheme, families of children and young with disability encounter challenges with the NDIS eligibility criteria and the difficulty in obtaining medical diagnostic reports and assessments to prove the child's disability. This provides significant costs and stress to families, and inequitable access for children living in families experiencing poverty or hardship. Many find it hard to access the scheme without support or advocacy services. Families are also concerned their child only receives support for what is considered the “primary disability” rather than support for the full spectrum of needs.”¹¹

Childrens' wellbeing, development and growth are also determined by a wide range of influences in their family, community and broader social environment. Some children may present with developmental concern or delay as a symptom of broader factors, for example, social and emotional dysregulation due to family distress.¹² Yet it is not clear from the

⁸ Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, [2021 AEDC National report](#)

⁹ Productivity Commission, 2024, [A path to universal early childhood education and care](#)

¹⁰ NSW Government, 2024, [Inquiry into improving access to early childhood health and development checks, NSW Government submission](#)

¹¹ Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2019, [Improving the NDIS for Children and Young People with Disability and their Families](#)

¹² Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2018, [Developmental differences in children who have experienced adversity: threat bias](#)

consultation paper how children's circumstances would be addressed through Foundational Supports.

The shift to the NDIS saw the removal of block funding to states, and services for children and families were closed down. As a result, the NDIS became the only opportunity for families to access supports, when previously these needs may have been met in other ways. The introduction of Foundational Supports is needed, but further consideration is required of how children's holistic needs can be addressed through a joined-up early childhood development system.

With many children experiencing disability, developmental delay and other forms of disadvantage, it is essential the Foundational Supports are sensitive to intersectionality. Without this, critical opportunities for prevention, early identification and support will be missed and high rates of developmental vulnerability and intergenerational disadvantage will continue to be perpetuated.

Given Foundational Supports will be delivered from mainstream services, children and families must be better supported to access and engage with mainstream services. For this reason, Foundational Supports must be universal, non-stigmatising and free of barriers to entry (for example, minimal or no eligibility criteria), and offered at no cost.

Finally, targeted services for children and families should receive capability building which strengthens their understanding of children's developmental concern, delay or disability to ensure all children receive appropriate support that meets their needs.

Recommendation 3: Support integrated Early Childhood Hubs as an ideal setting for delivering Foundational Supports, offering wrap-around services and supporting early identification and support of developmental needs.

Through [Nurture Together](#), SVA explores the need, opportunity, impact and effectiveness of integrated Early Childhood Hubs and other integrated models of early years delivery.¹³ A summary of these publications is provided in *Appendix 1*.

Early Childhood Hubs are service and social hubs where children and families can access a range of child and family services. Services delivered in Early Childhood Hubs typically include: early learning programs, family support, health, allied health and social services. Other components may be activities to build social networks and informally connect to diverse professionals.

Early Childhood Hubs offer safe, welcoming, inclusive and high-quality services for children and families, relevant to community context. A multi-disciplinary 'no-wrong-door' approach and support for collaborative operation overcome barriers to access for families and provide an excellent platform for capacity building across the various mainstream and targeted services

¹³ Social Ventures Australia and Centre for Community Child Health, 2021, [Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability](#)

delivered from Hubs. Early Childhood Hubs are trusted by families, offering many soft entry points and create a space where families don't need to 'come looking' for disability supports.

This work is relevant for DSS to consider in the design of Foundational Supports because:

- the body of evidence on integrated models outlines what is needed to create integrated, joined up early childhood service systems, and
- integrated Early Childhood Hubs are ideal service types to deliver Foundational Supports, particularly for children and families facing disadvantage.

There are currently more than 220 Early Childhood Hubs operating in Australia. This creates an ideal opportunity for the Government to equip these Hubs with resourcing and capacity building to implement Foundational Supports in a service that is well-placed to understand and meet the needs of local families.

SVA has also undertaken work to explore priority locations for new Early Childhood Hubs,¹⁴ to support planning in response to the Productivity Commission's recommendation that new Early Childhood Education and Care services should be considered as potential integrated services.¹⁵

There is substantial alignment between the goals of Nurture Together and DSS goals for Foundational Supports, including:

- supporting children to meet developmental milestones, learn, play and be social (which for the youngest are intertwined deeply), and support for emotional, physical and mental health.
- addressing barriers and increasing enablers to increase children and families, particularly from priority populations, to access and participate in mainstream and targeted services.
- capacity building of early childhood and other community services to improve understanding of developmental concerns and build capacity to meet children's needs
- enabling integration between different service who work with families and children: early childhood health and development services, paediatric allied health, parenting programs, early learning and playgroups, and formal and informal social supports.
- supporting collaboration between staff working in different service types improving cross-disciplinary skills and wellbeing.

The five core features of integrated service models are:

1. **Consistent leadership, staffing and capability** that includes interprofessional competencies, system expertise, emotional intelligence, creativity and flexibility, comfort with ambiguity, strategic nous and courage
2. **Adequate funding** to fully support the breadth of work with dedicated resourcing for the 'glue' (the underlying leadership, administration and coordination), as well as funding that is flexible and responsive to community need

¹⁴ Report awaiting publication – can be shared on request

¹⁵ Productivity Commission, 2024, [A path to universal early childhood education and care](#) – Recommendation 7.8

3. **Clear governance structures** that focus on shared ways of working and trust between service partners, taking in to account regional and community diversity, and intentional mechanisms that give community a voice and decision-making authority
4. **Intentional adaptability** informed by the needs of partners and communities
5. **Physical and digital environments sensitive** to geography, scale of community need, and unique dynamics and priorities of specific places to leverage existing strengths and/or meaningfully filling real gaps – and not duplicating what’s already there or adding to complexity.¹⁶

It is critical that the Australian Government invests in and builds on existing investments in early years reform to expand the number of Early Childhood Hubs and increased support for the integration capacity of existing hub models.

Recommendation 4: Ensure the funding and service delivery model for Foundational Supports is sufficient and sustainable to address community need, communities with high rates of disadvantage at first instance.

Foundational Supports cannot be delivered without sufficient investment in mainstream early childhood services to meet needs of all children in their communities.

There is an opportunity to embed Foundational Supports in the proposed reforms being considered for Early Childhood Education and Care. The Productivity Commission has made relevant recommendations for considering how Foundational Supports could be embedded, including:

- new governance structures to increase stewardship and accountability – via an Early Childhood Development Commission and renewed reform agreements.
- a need to support increased not-for-profit and/or public provision of services in communities where a market approach is failing.
- apply an improved ECEC inclusion funding model to establish the required structures to sustain holistic models where they are needed most.

This only addresses one type of mainstream service. The Government must also consider what models would serve to support inclusion across a range of early childhood service types, such as health and community settings.

DSS should outline how funding and service delivery will ensure appropriate supply of quality Foundational Supports services for every child who needs them. In particular, the Government may need to consider new funding models to deliver services in regional areas where it is not financially viable to use market mechanisms to stimulate supply. This may involve consideration of public provision in these markets.

¹⁶ Social Ventures Australia and the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, 2021, [Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability](#)

Additionally, as the Government considers capability building of early childhood workforces to deliver Foundational Supports, it must also consider how these capabilities will be sustained.

Overall, supports and services better meet the needs of priority populations when they are led or strongly informed by organisations and staff from within these same communities, and are sufficiently funded to deliver, for example, by having staff with dedicated outreach or community development time and remit. SVA's Paying What it Takes Report highlights the type and extent of funding service providers need to effectively deliver services to communities in need.¹⁷

Recommendation 5: Ensure the planning, implementation and monitoring of Foundational Supports is supported by an appropriate data framework of lead indicators, and that providers are equipped with resources and capabilities to routinely collect and act on data at a service level.

The consultation paper lacks clarity on how many children, families and organisations will need Foundational Supports, the required scale of the response and how progress toward the stated outcomes would therefore be improved. Key data would measure:

- the proportion of children that might have their developmental needs addressed through general or targeted, evidence-based quality Foundational Supports
- the proportion of these that are currently missing out on any supports
- the proportion of children currently on the NDIS who would be, in the future, supported by Foundational Supports instead.

Firstly, it is critical that the system is designed to identify and prioritise children and families who face the greatest systemic barriers to Foundational Supports and to monitor the government's progress toward redressing these inequities.

Secondly, this information is essential for government to ensure funding is used effectively and make sure services are making an impact for children who need them most. It can provide Government with a more equitable and evidence-based understanding of what investments in Foundational supports are needed. It can also support further investigation of why families and children are missing out.

Thirdly, having a consistent set of lead indicators that would describe what *good* quality, quantity and participation look like can lead to better performance in existing early childhood services resulting in better quality development support and early identification of developmental concerns. This does not require new measure, but should focus on strengthening what is already in place and embedding continuous quality improvement in these services.

¹⁷ Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact, 2022, [Paying what it takes: funding indirect cost to create long-term impact](#).

[Restacking the Odds](#), a collaboration between the Centre for Community Child Health, SVA and Bain and Company identified a [framework of lead indicators](#) of quality, quantity and participation to ensure equitable children's development outcomes through a stack of early childhood services; parenting programs, sustained nurse home visiting, antenatal care, early childhood education and care and the early years of school.

This framework provides a useful example of what data are needed to enable data-driven decision making, at the service, community and government level. Additionally, these services play a critical role in identifying developmental concerns or broader support needs of the families and in directly delivering support to families and children.

For Foundational Supports to be as effective and efficient as possible, it's critical that universal early childhood services have the right information and support to deliver high-quality services.

Data needs to be complemented by a continuous improvement framework, which supports practitioners and decision-makers to identify where to make change, and understand the impacts of improvements they put in place. When combined with appropriate support to review and act on data for service improvement, the Restacking the Odds indicator framework drives innovation at a service level and across a community, and allows routine monitoring of the impact of these activities.

This is further detailed in the Centre for Community Child Health's submission to this consultation.

Finally, we would welcome any opportunity to discuss the details of this response further with DSS and other departments involved in the development of Foundational Supports.

[The attached response tables provide more detailed recommendations on relevant consultation questions asked by DSS.](#)

Responses to Consultation Questions

Section 1: Scope and Intended Outcomes

1. Is the broad focus and scope in line with what you expected? Are there any gaps?

Overall, increasing Foundational Supports for children, families and community is valuable to improve inclusion and outcomes for children.

As discussed in our introduction, gaps in the consultation paper relate to how Foundational Supports would be implemented, stewarded, integrated and designed to address inequities in the current mainstream system.

Embedding Foundational Supports within the existing early childhood system is critical to promote inclusion, and long overdue. However, this is a substantial undertaking. Attrition across the early years sectors is indicative of an overwhelmed, unsupported and undervalued workforce.

While it's noted that system navigators will be addressed in a separate paper, little is said about what other workforces will be needed to ensure Foundational Supports are delivered well. Clarity is needed on:

- who will deliver group peer support
- who will provide information to families, and to mainstream services
- what qualifications will be required
- what agency/ies will employ and supervise these staff

Some current workforce challenges are mentioned in the consultation paper (for example, workforce gaps in regional areas), however a much more sophisticated and detailed exploration of the support needs – beyond capacity building – is required to support key workers and the successful implementation of Foundational Supports.

The Government also needs to be very clear on what's intended for Foundational Supports and who can access them. While the NDIS review found that 'tier 2' supports were always intended as a critical part of the NDIS, there was insufficient clarity on how to ensure all people and services requiring these supports could access them. To ensure a universal, accessible system, there should be as few barriers to accessing Foundational Supports as feasible.

Clearly setting out the vision for Foundational Supports, and ensuring this is well-communicated with all agencies who might be involved in their implementation and children and families who are eligible to receive them.

2. Are the intended outcomes the right ones? Are there any gaps? How would you measure them or like to see progress and improvements measured?

Outcomes alone are insufficient to demonstrate progress or identify timely, actionable areas for service and system improvement. While the outcomes identified are suited to the goals of Foundational Supports, it's critical that these outcomes are measured by *lead indicators* which measure improvements in participation (including by priority populations), sufficiency of service and workforce availability to community need (quantity), and whether the supports delivered are of good quality.

Restacking the Odds has identified a [framework of lead indicators](#) on quality, quantity and participation across three universal and two targeted early childhood services to ensure services are reaching families who need them most and being delivered to best support children's development.

Further, the outcomes identified have life-changing potential for young children and their future trajectories. The evidence is clear that getting things right for children in their first years has not just social, but economic benefits. Outcomes-based contracting is one approach that can be used to ensure that these outcomes are delivered. SVA, through our impact investing work supports:

- The [Side by Side Social Impact Bond](#) - an outcomes-based contract involving the Victorian Department of Education, Berry Street, Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA), and SVA, where outcome payments are based upon the level of improvement in participating students' attendance and initial investors receive fixed interest payments per annum
- The [Newpin Social Benefit Bond](#) - a payment by outcomes partnership between the NSW Government and UnitingCare Burnside and SVA that supports family restoration, supported by investors who receive an annual coupon linked to the cumulative proportion of children returned to their families

These approaches could be considered by DSS to support the goals of driving quality and achieving the stated outcomes.

Section 2: General Foundational Supports

3. How can existing supports or services better link up to support important transitional life stages or events that families experience like children starting daycare or preschool?

Can you give us some examples of where this is working well?

Evidence shows¹⁸ children and families facing disadvantage need a combination of supports from before birth through to starting school to make sure they are developmentally on track with their peers by age 8.

SVA has contributed to the Australian evidence base on service integration and the extent to which services work together to offer joined up supports to children. This involves increasing levels of cooperation, coordination, information exchange, joint planning, responsibility and accountability and the development of formal partnership structures.

It is critical that any system wide or community level integration initiatives include:

- intentional and strategic decision making
- clarity and alignment on said decisions
- physical and operational design features that are appropriate and proportionate

A key opportunity for leveraging community level initiatives include Early Childhood Hubs that are built on an explicit focus of linkages and transitional support.

Early Childhood Hubs offer:

- a setting where a range of services can be delivered
- a location that facilitates opportunities to improve child and family wellbeing and allow relationships to be formed with other parents and professionals
- improved service linkage because families can access a range of universal and tiered early childhood services

Some Early Childhood Hubs are co-located with Early Childhood Education centres or schools, or have collaborative arrangements with an explicit focus on supporting transition.

For example, the [Our Place](#) approach uses schools as a universal platform to support site partners to implement evidence-based strategies across five core elements. Our Place sites support the education, health, development and social cohesion of children and families in disadvantaged communities to support engagement at all stages of a child's learning and development.

Components of Early Childhood Hubs that further support parental engagement are outlined in responses **2.7** and **3.8**

¹⁸ Molloy et al, 2019, [Potential of 'stacking' early childhood interventions to reduce inequities in early learning](#)

4. How could existing supports or services be better in meeting the needs of:

- families who identify as First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, or other diverse groups
- families who have a range of complex needs
- families who live in regional, rural and remote areas
- families who have more than one child with support needs?

Overall, supports and services better meet the needs of priority populations when they are:

- led or strongly informed by organisations and staff from within these same populations
- are sufficiently funded to do so, for example, having staff with dedicated outreach or community development time and remit. SVA's Pay What it Takes Report¹⁹ highlight the type and extent of funding service providers need to effectively deliver services to communities in need.
- are designed with no-wrong-door and warm referral models built in

Children and families who experience socio-economic disadvantage face barriers to accessing mainstream and targeted early childhood supports.

To enable access to Foundational Supports via mainstream settings, the Government must prioritise accountability for increasing participation in mainstream services such as early childhood education and care, and health and development checks, with a particular focus on children who face disadvantage.

Additionally, the Government should consider how Foundational Supports are offered and incentivised through informal and social settings with stronger attendance by families who are unable to access mainstream services above (further described in response 2.7 below)

Early childhood service availability and accessibility is poorer in regional, rural and remote areas, limiting children and families' access to the supports they need. We found that of 706 communities in need of integrated Early Childhood Hubs, more than two-thirds were regional or rural.²⁰

Longer travel distances and fewer transport options make attending specialised appointments more difficult, so delivering multiple services (for example delivering health services from education settings) becomes increasingly important.

Recent reports²¹ and inquiries²² have pointed to the role the current 'market' model plays in

¹⁹ Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact, 2022, [Paying what it takes: funding indirect cost to create long-term impact.](#)

²⁰ Deloitte Access Economics for Social Ventures Australia, 2023, [Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres](#)

²¹ The Front Project and Mandala, 2024, [Paving the path: addressing market imbalances to achieve quality and affordable childcare in more places.](#)

²² Productivity Commission, 2024, [A path to universal early childhood education and care: Supplementary statement by Professor Brennan: The operation and adequacy of the marketing, including types of care and the roles of for-profit and not-for-profit providers](#)

the under-supply of services in some areas. A reliance on demand-side funding and insufficient supply-side funding has resulted in a lack of quality services in communities with low populations, where families cannot afford large out-of-pocket gap fees or services that aren't able to meet children and families' needs.

Challenges with service delivery in rural and regional areas require strategic, holistic responses and significant and urgent government attention across both early childhood education and care and child health – and adequate funding models to address housing, transport and service gaps. The Government may also need to consider new funding models to deliver services in regional areas where it is not financially viable to use market mechanisms to stimulate supply. This may involve consideration of public provision in these markets, for example by Councils.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs) deliver culturally safe, holistic early years services beyond the mainstream scope of childcare and early education to provide holistic wrap around support for First Nations children and extended families.

SNAICC published a report²³ identifying the vital role of ACCOs to deliver sustainable high-quality, holistic, culturally safe ECEC services that meet the developmental and wellbeing needs of the children and families in their community. The report identifies that ACCOs support a high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with complex, additional needs and that services lack sufficient staff support and funding to ensure best outcomes for children. It also identified that mainstream early childhood services are failing to reflect cultural frameworks and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices.

SVA supports the recommendations outlined by SNAICC in the report for a needs-based funding model that would support the viable operation and sustainable growth of ACCO early years service providers. National roll out of SNAICC Early Years Support division and dedicated resources for new ACCO service establishment are also required for the necessary growth and support of the sector.

7. Are there more effective ways of promoting new and existing supports and services?

Early Childhood Hubs create welcoming environment and provide the opportunity for promoting supports by offering informal social activities and spaces, (such as cooking, play and cultural activities), and ensuring staff are available to connect with families²⁴.

For example, [Our Place](#) uses the universal platform of school settings to provide other

²³ SNAICC, 2024, [Funding model options for ACCO integrated early years services: final report](#)

²⁴ Social Ventures Australia, 2023, [Happy, healthy and thriving children: Enhancing the impact of Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia](#)

community and early childhood supports. Our Place at Doveton College (Victoria), has successfully reduced developmental vulnerabilities, improved children's school readiness and increased family participation in community programs and support in this highly multicultural community.

Strategies used include:

- providing a single, shared entrance for schools and early learning centers, offering stigma-free access to additional services. This means a parent or carer dropping off a child at school can easily attend a playgroup with a younger sibling or take steps to re-enter the workforce by participating in an onsite Work and Learn program.
- providing multilingual signage, child-friendly spaces, and dedicated consultation rooms make it easier for families to engage with the right services.
- using warm referral protocols introduce families to new services with a specific contact point, reducing the need to retell their stories and access multiple services seamlessly.
- delivering high-quality early learning services that monitor children's development, identify risks early, and connect families with appropriate support.
- employing Partnership Managers and Community Facilitators to help to build trust and connect families with schools and the community.
- facilitating partnerships between service providers, ensuring a collaborative approach to addressing families' complex needs and providing timely early interventions

8. What are some of the common barriers to getting supports and services for children with developmental concerns, delay and/or disability and their families (e.g. costs, transport, location or lack of inclusion)?

9. How might these barriers be reduced?

Children and families who experience disadvantage have lower participation in mainstream services that may support identifying developmental concerns, for example, prevented from accessing early childhood education and care due to the childcare subsidy activity test. Additionally, complex eligibility and referral pathways requiring numerous appointments to access support may be out of reach for families experiencing disadvantage.

While it's well-recognised that allied health services are critical for early intervention and child development, integrated service models often lack comprehensive allied health service provision, and therapeutic supports²⁵. There is also currently no systemic way to provide these critical services from Early Childhood Hubs so individual centres and families take on the responsibility for finding, accessing and funding allied health services.

²⁵ Social Ventures Australia, 2023, [Happy, healthy and thriving children: Enhancing the impact of Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia](#)

As outlined in Social Ventures Australia's 2023 submission to the Early Years Strategy²⁶, core principles in supporting child outcomes when planning and implementing system changes include:

- Equity-focus: this means the resourcing and delivering of universal services at a scale and intensity proportion to the degree of need (proportionate universalism) and targeted services and supports for children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage
- Give voice and increased decision making to local communities: communities have a say in local approaches; early years supports are inclusive and culturally appropriate for that community
- Place-based approach to design and delivery of initiatives: services are accessible to families in their local community and have adequate places to meet demand; support for local coordination and integration of services
- Support outreach: Fund community "navigator" role. In addition to helping families connect with available services, dedicated roles are required to pay attention to child wellbeing, improve access for children and families who would benefit from but are not engaging in mainstream early childhood services.

²⁶ Social Ventures Australia, 2023, [Submission to the Early Years Strategy Consultation](#)

Section 3: Targeted Foundational Supports

3. What would make existing supports easier to access or better connected and integrated, so families' experience a streamlined pathway(s) to Targeted Foundational Supports?

See response to question 2.3

4. How could these existing services be made better to meet the needs of:

- families who identify as First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, and other diverse groups
- families who experience a range of complex needs
- families who live in regional, rural and remote areas?

See response to question 2.4

7. What information and advice may help you find the right services or know that you need this kind of support (some families may not be aware if their child has emerging developmental concerns)?

Families should have regular access to skilled workers, with whom they can form trusting relationships and who understands the child's context and circumstances. Qualified child and family health (or maternal and child health) nurses, community health workers or 'navigators' in early childhood education and care settings may be well-placed to support families to identify children's developmental needs and potential concern.

It is critical that these workers are supported with adequate time, training, resources and professional supervision to play this role effectively.

There is currently no nationally-consistent approach to health and development checks in early childhood, nor national overview of children/families' access (or non-access) of these checks. DSS, together with Department of Health, should consider the potential role of nationally consistent universal delivery and monitoring of health and development checks which can support early identification of developmental concern.

'Navigator' (or connector) roles have also been identified by the NDIS review²⁷, and the Productivity Commission into early childhood education and care²⁸ to promote inclusion. To reduce potential fragmentation, DSS must work with the Department of Education and the Department of Health to produce a shared vision and implementation plan for navigators to provide outreach and help ensure families are connected with the supports they need.

²⁷ Australian Government, 2023, [Working together to deliver the NDIS](#) – recommendation 4

²⁸ Productivity Commission, 2024, [A path to universal early childhood education and care](#) – recommendation 7.2

8. How could existing supports in schools and early childhood settings be more accessible for children and families?

- What supports offered through school or early childhood settings have you found to be the most useful?
- How can schools and early childhood settings better inform parents about the supports they offer?

Our latest research paper, [Approaches to integration in the early years: learnings for impact](#) provides a deeper understanding of integration at scale, combining practitioner insights with knowledge of policy and funding settings to scale integration efforts. It also contributes to building the evidence base for a national vision for universal access to high-quality, integrated services.

[Cairns Early Years Place](#) is an example of an integrated early childhood hub working to make supports more accessible to families through:

- offering daily playgroups, including dedicated sessions for children with disabilities and multicultural groups
- delivering parenting support programs, yarn and craft groups
- co-located kinder and school
- providing a welcoming space for families to connect, access drop-in clinics for newborns, child immunisations, and receive targeted family supports for those experiencing family and domestic violence
- on-site/visiting health professionals, including a nurse, occupational therapist, and a speech pathologist, engage in screenings and collaborate with local health services
- offering work experience opportunities for high school students

The hub is funded by the Queensland Department of Education and uses flexible funding to meet community needs, extending its reach through community events and partnerships.

The Our Place approach (also discussed in response 2.7) ensures that all families have access to high-quality early learning, playgroups, child health, and parenting support - emphasising both onsite and at home learning. Early childhood educators foster close relationships with families and engage them directly in their play and learning. This is crucial to promoting service and for actively engaging on children's developmental needs. Services involve families early on, providing targeted support and encouraging play-based learning and promoting consistent attendance in early education.

Being integrated with other early childhood development services provides opportunities for educators to deepen their understanding of child development and learn where to seek help and make referrals. Through coordinated partnership, educators can access capacity-building opportunities that enhance their ability to respond to complex behaviours, support children who have experienced trauma and foster positive learning environments.

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These partnerships also help connect educators with resources and strategies to manage stress and promote their wellbeing.

The approach is effective at ensuring families get the right support through:

- a focus on supporting families by building on their strengths and helping them achieve their goals by coordinating service providers to work together based on the family's needs and preferences, rather than just following what works best for the service system
- development of flexible service delivery models in partnership with local communities, reflecting their specific needs and the best available research

Service coordination and effectiveness is improved through individual and family case management and fostering partnerships among different government and professional groups

Additionally, SVA is working with other sector stakeholders to conceptualise 'ECEC plus' models, where additional services can be delivered from high-quality early childhood education and care.

ECEC-plus would be based on similar principles of integration and holistic service delivery as Early Childhood Hubs, but offer greater ability to scale across communities, or to communities where a full hub model is not feasible. We welcome further discussion with DSS about this work as it develops and to consider how ECEC plus can improve the accessibility of Foundational Supports in early childhood education and care.

Section 4: Community and Workforce

1. How do we build the capacity of the sector and workforce, including their readiness, to support families and children under the General and Targeted Foundational Supports service offering?

- How can existing workforce shortages, including workforce challenges in rural and remote communities, be addressed?
- What types of training are needed to help address capability gaps or potential future market gaps in these types of supports?
- Addressing getting these services to children in rural and remote areas in relation to workforce

Implementing Foundational Supports may look different across the range of mainstream services that support children and families. For example, delivery in early childhood education and care will differ to delivery in community sports coaches and librarians.

It is important for DSS to consider the starting point for these services and their current operational contexts. As flagged in the consultation paper, there is a need to embed Foundational Supports within existing reforms underway in early education and care, and school education so capacity building is embedded. Other community and social services may require other support to develop new skills required to embed Foundational Supports.

Early childhood workforce challenges, particularly those in rural and regional communities, may be compounded by a range of factors including:

- poor remuneration and retention issues for under-appreciated workforces
- high burnout and turnover due to high demands and poor support for employees
- lack of available childcare options preventing women (in the highly feminised early childhood and health care sectors) from returning to the workforce
- migration policies which create barriers for skilled workers to fill gaps
- housing and transport issues in regional and rural communities
- competition between sectors for skilled early childhood services workers
- difficulty attending professional development due to travel required or lack of backfill to take over regular duties

Adequate remuneration and professional support for early childhood educators, leaders of early childhood centres, and broader early years workforce are fundamental to address workforce shortages across the sector.

This requires better pay and conditions and professional supports that recognise the challenging and often psychologically demanding nature of their job, and reduces chance of turnover and maintains continuity.

Early childhood workforces require support to ensure Foundational Supports are embedded with

high quality. This means additional, funded time available to build skills and capacity, work with families and children, and work with other professionals to ensure care.

These structures also require strong leadership support, and a broader operating model that facilitates this. For example, Early Childhood Hubs require an integration 'glue' component that includes the leadership, structures and practices.

Our work highlights that workforces need to be supported with capacity building in the right practice areas to meet the needs of children and families. Aspects which need to be considered when developing services are:

- opportunities to participate in capacity building on site, either through services or informal learning from peers
- staff use relational and family-centred practices, and have training and ongoing support in their use
- multidisciplinary teams (e.g. internal and external) who work in partnership to provide integrated support for families and have dedicated time for coordination
- strong leadership, with staff empowered to be innovative and lead the model to ensure it is high quality and responsive to family needs
- members of the local community engaged and trained as co-workers and trainers
- provision of outreach service to find and build relationships with families who are isolated, marginalised or not connected with services ²⁹

Additionally, DSS may need to consider regional/place-based early years workforce plans which invite local participation to design solutions that address workforce challenges holistically. Rural and regional communities should be prioritised for funding and initiatives that redress the barriers based on their unique needs, goals and desires.

2. How might we encourage innovation, quality and best practice in the delivery of Foundational Supports for children and their families?

To incentivise quality, services and families need clear benchmarks for what quality looks like. For example, since its' development, the National Quality Framework has enabled service quality improvement and demonstratable improvements for children's outcomes.³⁰ There is a need to fund innovation and the generation of high-quality evidence of what best-practice looks like. Embedding a data framework of quality indicators can drive service improvement as outlined in our letter response.

We recommend that DSS set clear benchmarks to assess and regulate quality of Foundational Supports, for example through a multi-sector quality framework to drive service improvement across the system.

²⁹ Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Community Child Health, 2021, [Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability](#)

³⁰ The Front Project and Deloitte Access Economics, 2024, [The NQF works! Implications of AERO's study linking quality and child development](#)

SVA recommends DSS consider how to leverage the rich opportunity Early Childhood Hubs offer to pilot and test innovative approaches for the delivery of Foundational Supports.

Our upcoming report, Targeting Investment Where it Counts: A model to identify communities for priority investment in integrated early learning models³¹ overlays analysis of 'childcare deserts' with significant child and family disadvantage and developmental vulnerability to provide some guidance on where investment is needed first to support improved outcomes for children.

The report recommends investment in integrated Early Childhood Hubs, enhanced early learning models and intensive high quality early learning models based on measures of community disadvantage and developmental vulnerability. We encourage the government to prioritise these locations to fund and deliver Early Childhood Hubs, and strategically test and monitor innovation in Foundational Supports from these centres.

By focusing on communities with high disadvantage in these centres, the Government will be able to design supports that are effective for children and families with the greatest need.

3. What does success look like and what resources, support or contract arrangements do you think service providers need to better communicate achievements and needs, and be able to deliver services such as those outlined in this paper?

Appropriate, sustained funding is also required to ensure quality and best practice. This may include new funding for roles to actively support the implementation of Foundational Supports, incentives for high quality early childhood services to adopt supports and routine monitoring to identify components of best practice that could be scaled up for widespread implementation.

We have explored funding principles³² for Early Childhood Hubs, and makes the following recommendations, which are also relevant for Foundational Supports:

- provide assurance and certainty that funding will be sustained for a sufficient duration to enable long term planning
- respond to changing needs of communities and changing landscape of service delivery
- minimize administrative burden and support integration by streamlining and consolidating funding
- draw on existing, embedded funding streams to sustainably support core service delivery
- support nationally streamlined process of service delivery to meet needs of community
- support quality outcomes through strong accountability and monitoring mechanisms, at both service and leadership level. Be transparent regarding the basis upon which the

³¹ To be supplied directly to this consultation when available

³² Deloitte Access Economics, 2023, [Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres](#)

funding model is designed and funding allocations are determined

- provide assurance that funding will be used efficiently and for its intended purpose

Appendix 1: Social Ventures Australia Nurture Together publications

Please note SVA has updated terminology from 'Integrated Child and Family Centres (ICFCs)' to 'Early Childhood Hubs' in 2024 to align with common usage across the sector. The publications below may use either term, depending on publication date.

A. [Approaches to integration in the early years: learnings for impact](#)

This report provides a deeper understanding of integration at scale, combining practitioner insights with knowledge of policy and funding settings to scale integration efforts. It also contributes to building the evidence base for a national vision for universal access to high-quality, integrated services. *Figure 2* below provides an example of a framework for integration in the early years.

Relevance to Foundational Supports

- discusses the ingredients for successful integration in years services
- identifies clear recommendations for policy makers, service providers and funders
- draws on eight in-depth interviews and a comprehensive literature review

B. [Early Childhood Hubs: exploring need, funding models, and a national approach](#)

The report identifies locations where Early Childhood Hubs are most needed. It also explores a national approach to scale that would see more children able to benefit from one. It unpacks options for funding and how to embed Early Childhood Hubs within the service system.

Relevance to Foundational Supports:

- includes allied health as a core service for integrated hubs
- methodology includes developmentally vulnerable children as a priority population for consideration when investing in new services and centres

C. [Happy, healthy and thriving children: Enhancing the Impact of Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia](#)

This paper examines different integrated child and family centre (early childhood hub) models. It explores the operational, policy and funding structures that are needed to best support outcomes for children and families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

This paper also explores where this need is situated and how it interacts with the existing supply of integrated child and family centres. It unpacks options for how these could be funded under a national approach and options for scaling and embedding within the national early years system.

Relevance to Foundational Supports:

- discusses the role of allied health in integrated child and family centres
- recommends reforming the allied health system to enable systemic provision through

integrated child and family centre

D. Exploring the potential of holistic and integrated early learning services – paper one

This paper outlines the core needs of children, parents and families, the conditions that parents require to meet the needs of their children, and discusses how well the service system is meeting those needs. It uses this evidence to identify what role integrated child and family centres could play in addressing the needs of children and families.

Relevance to Foundational Supports:

- identifies that previous efforts to improve developmental outcomes for young children have largely focused on improving existing services and service systems, and that this has not made significant improvements to child and family outcomes to date.

E. Exploring the potential of holistic and integrated early learning services – paper two

This paper explores the common elements of integrated child and family centres which have the greatest impact for children experiencing socio-economic vulnerability, and what is required for high quality implementation of each of these. It reviews national and international examples of holistic, integrated early learning programs for young children and their families.

Relevance to Foundational Supports:

- identifies children with disabilities as high on the spectrum of needs and recommends supports required need to be further delivered – with strong potential to provide them through a universal service model

F. Submission to the national Early Years Strategy discussion paper

This submission was made on behalf of Restacking the Odds, and calls for an Early Years Guarantee – which would guarantee access to a combination of high quality, evidence informed early years services which have the most impact when ‘stacked’ – whereby multiple evidence-based strategies are combined – to boost healthy development and wellbeing, and address inequities.

Fig.2. A [framework for integration in the early years](#) developed by Social Ventures Australia and dandolopartners

A framework for integration

We developed a framework for understanding how early years integration initiatives' operating context inform design decisions.

