

A large, thick, curved graphic element on the right side of the page. It starts as a blue line at the top left, curves down and to the right, then turns back up and to the left, ending as a red line at the bottom left. The curve is filled with a gradient from blue to red.

Targeting investment where it counts: Identifying communities for priority investment in integrated early learning models

Summary brief – Northern Territory

Introduction

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) is an innovative social impact organisation that works with partners to help solve challenging problems, speeding up innovation and redesigning systems so more people in Australia can live their best life. Within SVA, our early years team works to make sure that children experiencing significant disadvantage and vulnerability have access to the supports they need.

This summary brief is drawn from the report, *Targeting investment where it counts*, released in February 2025 by SVA in collaboration with Deloitte Access Economics and the Mitchell Institute. The report shares two models that identify priority locations for government investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC), and the opportunity that each presents to support better early childhood and lifelong outcomes for children:

1) Priority communities for Early Childhood Hubs

The 131 communities across Australia that sit at the nexus of both high early childhood disadvantage¹ and paucity of ECEC services (childcare desert²) are the areas that would benefit most from an Early Childhood Hub (ECH). The early years service system is complex and fragmented, and children and families with the greatest need often do not receive the services and supports they need. This is often due to the difficulty of navigating this system, marginalisation, distrust in the system and other financial and non-financial barriers. Integrated service delivery through an ECH is a key mechanism to overcoming these barriers and seeing families access the diverse range of services and supports they need to thrive.

What is an Early Childhood Hub (ECH)?

An ECH provides access to high-quality ECEC, developmental checks and child health services, family and parenting supports, allied health and other early intervention supports, as well as providing a space where children and families can come together to build social networks. Increasingly located on school sites, they overcome many barriers to accessing and participating in ECEC, outreaching to families and building trust, identifying and redressing developmental concerns and supporting families.

2) Priority communities for leveraging existing early childhood infrastructure for holistic or intensive ECEC models

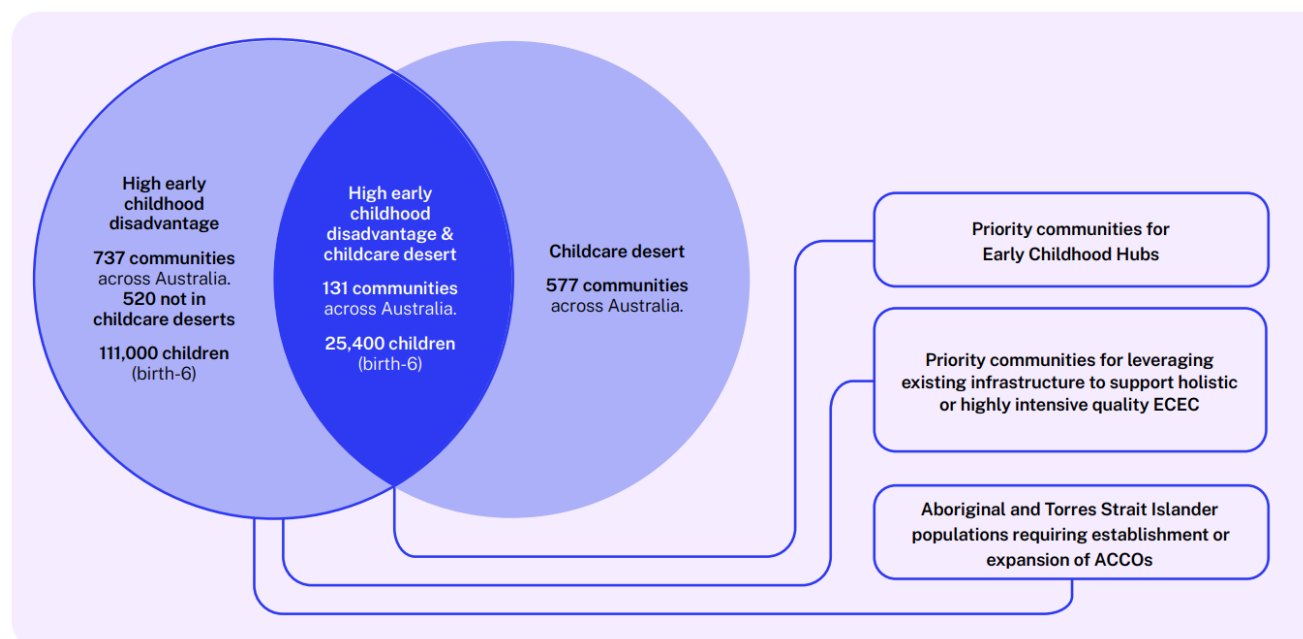
The 520 communities across Australia with high levels of early childhood disadvantage that are not in childcare deserts require attention to better understand and respond to prevailing issues within communities. The response will depend on local need, service availability and the profile of the available ECEC market. Quality is an important element (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander definitions of quality), with data showing that lower quality ECEC services predominate in lower socioeconomic areas.³ Where appropriate, existing ECEC services could be supported to offer a holistic and/or highly intensive quality ECEC model for children.

¹ Early childhood disadvantage is used as a term to describe communities with both high socio-economic disadvantage and early childhood vulnerability. These areas are in SEIFA deciles 1-4 and have over 10% of children developmentally vulnerably on two or more AEDC domains.

² The shortlist of areas was refined to only include areas where the population of children experiencing significant disadvantage is over 50 children. This criterion aims to exclude areas that have a very low population of children in need and therefore may require a different solution. It also does not include areas that contain a 'hot spot' SA1 for childcare supply using the Mitchell Institute's hot and cold spot analysis.

³ Productivity Commission (2024). A path to universal early childhood education and care, Inquiry report no. 106, Vol. 1. June. Retrieved from <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childhood/report/childhood-volume1-report.pdf>

Figure I. Intersection of early childhood disadvantage and childcare deserts in Australia



Note: 86 SA2s do not appear in either list. One SA2 had insufficient data. The remaining 85 are all childcare deserts but were excluded because they contained fewer than 50 children in need or included a hotspot SA1 within the SA2. Further detail on methodology can be found on page 13.

This brief shares some of the state-specific findings from the report. To access the full report, visit: <https://www.socialventures.org.au/about/publications/targeting-investment-where-it-counts/>.

Priority Northern Territory communities for investment

Priority communities for Early Childhood Hubs

In the Northern Territory, six communities sit at the nexus of socio-economic disadvantage and childcare desert and would most benefit from an ECH. Five of these communities are in the top 10 areas of need nationally, demonstrating the severity of early childhood disadvantage in the Northern Territory. All of these communities are in remote parts of the state, highlighting the need for targeted remote infrastructure investment in Early Childhood Hubs to ensure children can access the services and supports they need to thrive.

An additional two communities identified as childcare deserts with significant early childhood disadvantage were excluded from the research findings because they have fewer than 50 children in need. These communities are both in regional or remote areas, and further work is needed to identify how best to support children and families in need in these locations.

Priority communities for leveraging existing early childhood infrastructure for holistic or intensive ECEC models

In the Northern Territory, 18 communities experience high levels of early childhood disadvantage but are not in childcare deserts. These communities still struggle to meet the needs of children experiencing disadvantage. This suggests that simply expanding services is not enough – tailored, high-quality models of support are needed to better respond to community needs.

Disproportionate impact on First Nations communities

All of the highest-need areas in the Northern Territory have a significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. These communities would benefit from an integrated service led by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO). ACCOs play a key role in in meeting a child and family's need for a safe space to build cultural pride, confidence and resilience and to build on the strengths and skills of their children.⁴

Northern Territory Government response

The Northern Territory has a network of 15 Child and Family Centres. six are operated by the Department of Education and nine are Aboriginal community-led Child and Family Centres supported by the Department of Children and Families. There is work happening with community currently to establish two new community-led centres.

There are also four Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Centres.

The Northern Territory Government has recognised the importance of ECEC and provides supports such as the Early Childhood Services Subsidy, given directly ECEC operators to reduce the cost of these services for parents.⁵

The Australian Government has recently announced a partnership with the Northern Territory Government and the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory to strengthen service delivery in remote First Nations communities, representing a commitment of \$842.6 million over six years. This includes funding up to twelve Aboriginal Community Controlled Children and Family Centres to provide coordinated solutions to complex issues relating to family safety and child development.⁶

⁴ Sydenham, E. (2019). Ensuring equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years, SNAICC and ECA.

⁵ NT Government (2025). Information for early childhood service providers. <https://nt.gov.au/learning/early-childhood/information-for-child-care-providers>

⁶ Prime Minister and Cabinet (2025). Partnership Agreement to build Australia's future and Close the Gap in the Northern Territory [Media release]. 7 February. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/mccarthy/2025/partnership-agreement-build-australias-future-and-close-gap-northern-territory>

National recommendations

SVA recommends the Northern Territory Government use this report to guide investment decisions and partner with Commonwealth funding initiatives to ensure every child—no matter where they live—has access to the high-quality early learning support they need to thrive.

For all recommendations, deep engagement with identified communities on needs, priorities and gaps in early years supports is a critical first step to better understand and meet the needs of children and their families. This must include a commitment to shared decision making, self determination and cultural governance, in alignment with Closing the Gap Priority Reform One.

- The Commonwealth Government prioritise investment for new infrastructure in the 131 childcare deserts across Australia with high child and family disadvantage and developmental vulnerability.
- When investing in these areas, we recommend building Early Childhood Hubs or ACCO early years services in areas with high Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander populations. These children and families need more than a place in childcare.
- The Commonwealth Government provide funding for the effective and sustainable operation of these Early Childhood Hubs and ACCOs. Dedicated resources to grow and support the ACCO early years sector are also critical.
- The Commonwealth Government invest in a range of quality integrated early learning models in the 520 communities experiencing high child and family disadvantage and developmental vulnerability that are not childcare deserts. These include:
 - ACCO early years services;
 - holistic high-quality ECEC models; and/or
 - highly intensive, quality ECEC models, as detailed in this report.

Appendix

Northern Territory - Areas that have high early childhood disadvantage and are in a childcare desert

State rank (hub need, n=6)	National rank (hub need, n=131)	SA2	Remoteness classification	Estimated population of 0-6yo children in need	Proportion of population Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
1	2	Sandover - Plenty	Remote	362	84.7%
2	3	Victoria River	Very Remote	376	74.7%
3	4	Daly	Very Remote	174	69.2%
4	5	Tiwi Islands	Remote	227	86.5%
5	7	Elsley	Very Remote	193	70.8%
6	15	Gulf	Very Remote	407	77.5%

Northern Territory - Areas that have high early childhood disadvantage and are in a childcare desert, but have been excluded because they contain fewer than 50 children in need

State rank (Childhood disadvantage, n=26)	SA2	Remoteness classification	Estimated population of 0-6yo children in need
18	Weddell	Outer Regional	27
22	Ross	Remote	43

Northern Territory – All areas that have high early childhood disadvantage but are not classified as childcare deserts

State rank (Childhood disadvantage, n=26)	SA2	Remoteness classification	Estimated population of 0-6yo children in need
4	Moulden	Outer Regional	120
5	Thamarrurr	Remote	222
9	Gray	Outer Regional	98
10	Driver	Outer Regional	50
11	Wagaman	Outer Regional	36
12	Berrimah	Outer Regional	28
13	Karama	Outer Regional	145
14	Malak - Marrara	Outer Regional	116
15	Ludmilla - The Narrows	Outer Regional	71
16	Charles	Remote	86
17	Woodroffe	Outer Regional	55
19	Alligator	Remote	85
20	Katherine	Remote	281
21	Flynn (NT)	Remote	81
23	Coconut Grove	Outer Regional	35
24	Moil	Outer Regional	19
25	Millner	Outer Regional	38
26	East Side	Remote	117



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