

A large, thick, curved graphic element that starts as a solid orange line from the top left, curves downwards and to the right, and then continues as a solid purple line towards the bottom left.

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

Summary brief – South Australia

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

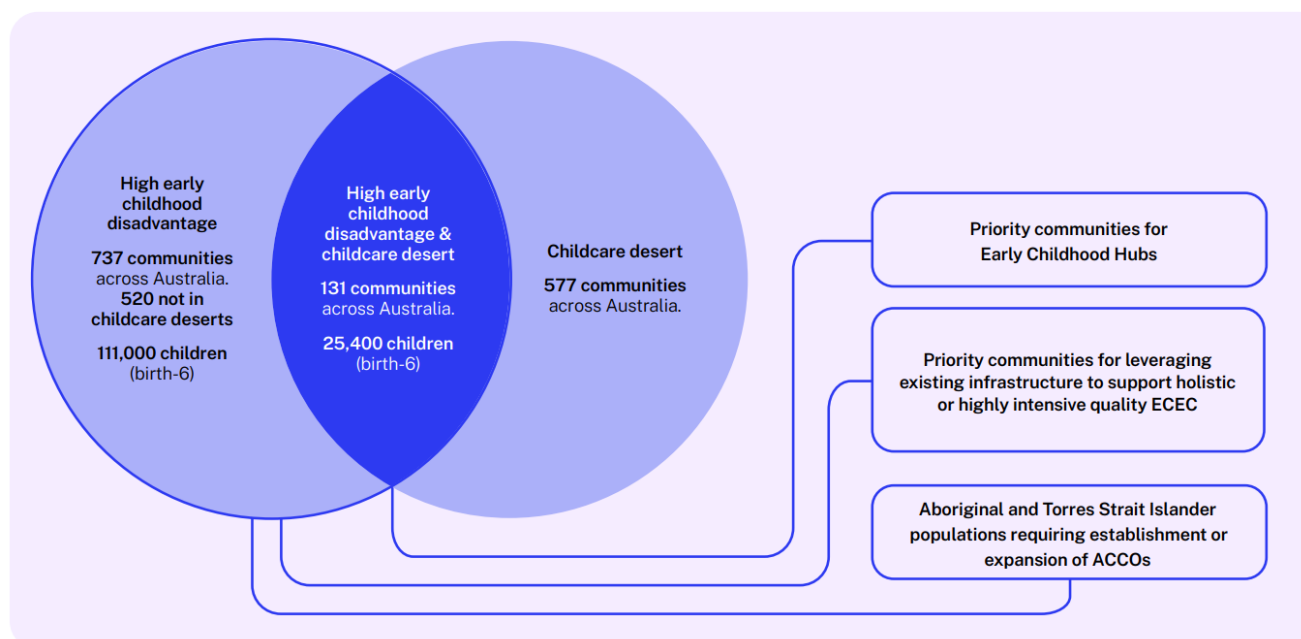
The 520 communities across Australia with high levels of early childhood disadvantage that are not in childcare deserts require attention to better understand and respond to prevailing issues within communities. The response will depend on local need, service availability and the profile of the available 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 South Australian communities for investment

Priority communities for Early Childhood Hubs

In South Australia, eight communities sit at the nexus of early childhood disadvantage and childcare desert and would most benefit from an ECH. Three of these communities are in regional or remote parts of the state, highlighting the need for targeted regional infrastructure investment in ECHs to ensure children can access the services and supports they need to thrive.

An additional eight 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, or contain a 'hot spot' SA1 for childcare supply using the Mitchell Institute's hot and cold spot analysis. All of these communities are regional or remote, and further work is needed to identify how best to support children and families in these locations.

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

In South Australia, 55 communities experience high early childhood disadvantage but are not in a childcare desert. 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

In South Australia, 16 of the communities experiencing high early childhood disadvantage have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of more than 5%. The majority of these communities are located in remote, rural and regional areas. These communities would benefit from an integrated service led by an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO). ACCOs play a key role 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

South Australian Government response

The South Australian Government has recognised the importance of ECEC and has established the Office for Early Childhood Development. The Office will oversee a number of key commitments to early years development,⁵ including:

- Rollout of universal three-year-old preschool program by 2032, with every child having a guaranteed government preschool place in the year before school.
- Up to 30 hours of preschool for up to 2,000 three- and four-year-old children most at risk of developmental vulnerability.
- An investment of \$56 million over four years in the early childhood education and care workforce.

The Office will also oversee a \$127.3 million investment over four years to deliver integrated hubs to bring preschool together with other health, wellbeing and education offerings so families and children can be supported to access the services they need in one place. The Government plans to have two demonstration sites open by the end of 2025, and 20 hubs operating across the state by 2032.⁶

South Australia also has 47 Early Childhood Hubs, called Children's Centres, located in metropolitan and regional areas across the state.⁷ Each centre offers a different range of integrated services responsive to children, family and community needs. These services and programs are offered with a strong focus on partnerships with the local community and other agencies.

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

⁵ Government of South Australia (2024). A new perspective on early childhood development: Government response to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. February. https://www.earlychildhood.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/915178/public-response-to-royal-commission-final-report.pdf

⁶ Government of South Australia (2025). Extra support for children who need it most. <https://www.earlychildhood.sa.gov.au/whats-changing/extra-support-for-children-who-need-it-most>

⁷ Department for Education (2025). Find a children's centre. Last updated 14 March. <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/parents-and-families/child-care-services/childrens-centres/find-childrens-centre>

National recommendations

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

South Australia - Areas that have high early childhood disadvantage and are in a childcare desert

State rank (Hubs need, n=8)	SA2	Remoteness classification	Estimated population of 0-6 year old children in need
1	Elizabeth	Major City	468
2	Smithfield - Elizabeth North	Major City	321
3	Elizabeth East	Major City	291
4	Salisbury North	Major City	367
5	Craigmore - Blakeview	Major City	188
6	Port Pirie	Outer Regional	192
7	Naracoorte	Outer Regional	54
8	Yorke Peninsula - North	Outer Regional	55

South Australia - 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=72)	SA2	Remoteness classification	Estimated population of 0-6yo children in need
8	Barmera	Outer Regional	49
24	Goyder	Outer Regional	47
27	Mannum	Inner Regional	52
28	Gilbert Valley	Inner Regional	19
41	Yorke Peninsula - South	Remote	16
53	Port Pirie Surrounds	Outer Regional	19
60	Moonta	Outer Regional	29
67	Murray Bridge Surrounds	Inner Regional	29

South Australia – Top 30 areas that have high early childhood disadvantage but are not childcare deserts

State rank (Childhood disadvantage, n=72)	SA2	Remoteness classification	Estimated population of 0-6 year old children in need
1	APY Lands	Very Remote	279
4	The Parks	Major City	362
5	Davoren Park	Major City	484
6	Western	Very Remote	5
7	Christie Downs	Major City	171
9	Murray Bridge	Inner Regional	216
10	Paralowie	Major City	239
12	Waikerie	Outer Regional	51
13	Salisbury	Major City	402
14	Renmark	Outer Regional	88
16	Morphett Vale - West	Major City	118
17	Hackham West - Huntfield Heights	Major City	133
19	Parafield Gardens	Major City	330
20	Pooraka - Cavan	Major City	111
21	Wakefield - Barunga West	Inner Regional	74
22	Salisbury East	Major City	182
23	Port Augusta	Outer Regional	253
25	Enfield - Blair Athol	Major City	499
26	Berri	Outer Regional	74
29	Ceduna	Very Remote	60
30	Virginia - Waterloo Corner	Major City	55
31	Morphett Vale - East	Major City	123
32	Mount Gambier - East	Outer Regional	153
34	Goolwa - Port Elliot	Inner Regional	56
35	Victor Harbor	Inner Regional	68
36	Whyalla	Outer Regional	384
37	Para Hills	Major City	151
38	Quorn - Lake Gilles	Outer Regional	28
39	Kadina	Outer Regional	41
40	Christies Beach	Major City	84



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