

Investing in equity through Early Childhood Hubs: The essential requirements for success

The Federal Government's Building Early Education Fund is an opportunity to tackle entrenched disadvantage and lay the foundations for a universal, equitable early childhood system by investing in integrated, community-led services where they are needed most.

The Early Childhood Hubs Working Group of the [National Child and Family Hubs Network](#) has called on the Federal Government to build more than childcare by investing in integrated Early Childhood Hubs (ECHs) for new services in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage and early childhood vulnerability. Please see brief, [Setting up the Building Early Education Fund for success](#). ECHs offer benefits for Government, not only through a significant return on investment by meeting complex needs of children and families, but through more efficient administration, referral processes and better utilisation of government-owned assets.

This briefing note outlines the essential requirements of a high-quality ECH that are needed to support outcomes for children and families. It is intended to support governments and other funders to articulate the essential requirements for the implementation of ECHs.

There are a range of ECHs operating across Australia at different levels of scale and sophistication. We have drawn on the Australian and international evidence on ECHs in developing this briefing note.



What is an ECH?

ECHs are purpose-designed to provide high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care alongside access to wraparound services, such as child and family health nurses, parenting programs, playgroups and toy libraries, allied health and family supports. They also provide a space where families can come together to connect and build social networks. ECHs provide a critical opportunity to engage families from the earliest stages of pregnancy and birth and foster trusted relationships that sustain service connection over time. Their holistic and family-centred approach engages families who may not otherwise attend early education services.

High-quality ECHs go beyond co-location when the 'glue' is properly funded and the conditions for integration embedded in the model. They enable true integration through shared entry points, joint governance, coordinated planning, and connected service delivery, leading to better access, improved quality and safety, and stronger outcomes for children. Key outcomes from existing ECHs include faster identification of developmental vulnerability, increased uptake of referrals and improved child health outcomes; improved school readiness and transition and improved educational outcomes; and improved parent-child relationships. In addition, ECHs also deliver a significant cost benefit to government, with a recent evaluation demonstrating a social return of \$3.50 for every \$1 invested.

Essential requirements of ECHs

The following are essential requirements for government planning and tender processes to establish and operate an ECH. A sufficient level of funding is needed for service providers to operate as a sustainable integrated model with the flexibility to respond to the needs of their community.

The essential requirements for an effective ECH are detailed below.

Establishment process

1. Understanding of existing service and support landscape and scoping of community need to ensure the ECH builds from and does not duplicate or undermine what already exists in the community.
2. Establishment and facilitation of a local engagement group of key stakeholders, including community and service representatives, to determine what an ECH should look like in their community. This group will ensure that the community's voice is heard and that the resulting facilities and services are relevant and effective. The group will inform the planning, design and establishment of an ECH and may have an ongoing role in its governance.

Physical and place-focused design features

3. Design builds from the local engagement process to be responsive to community needs in maximising ECH accessibility, safety, comfort, aesthetics and cultural relevance.
4. A functional, multipurpose design that optimises access for families and collaboration for services, including an inclusive and welcoming communal space for families, private consultation rooms for the delivery of services and supports, shared spaces such as staff rooms, and a shared, accessible single-entry point to welcome families. Play spaces for children separate to service spaces are strongly encouraged.

Integration

5. ECHs must have a clear plan for how services will work together so families can get the help they need, when they need it. This requires stable, flexible funding for the “glue” - the relational and family-centred systems that connect services within and beyond the ECH. Key parts of effective integration include:
 - Dedicated staff who build strong relationships between families, services, and partners – such as community facilitators, navigators, and linkers
 - Operational systems and processes that enable collaboration – such as integrated referral processes and IT platforms, shared data systems and joint case management, and
 - Access to shared evaluation capability to help ECHs define, measure, and continuously improve their integration service dose, quality and participation.
6. ECHs require governance structures and leadership at senior and operational levels that align services to a shared vision, embed family and community voice, support local decision making and enable integration across service providers.

Service provision

7. ECHs should include a core of evidence-based universal early learning, health and social services, as determined by community need. At a minimum, this should include at least 2 services other than long day care offered onsite. Connection with other services offsite is also essential, facilitated by the glue (see point 5 above).
8. Allied health should be provided, ideally as a core service that can be embedded in programs and services across the centre and used to build the capacity of other staff at the centre. Limitations in allied health provision due to workforce shortages and capacity gaps may mean that allied health access is instead facilitated by ECHs through local referral networks.

Systems level implementation

The Building Early Education Fund provides a once in a generation for the government to design, build and evaluate a network of ECHs. We are urging the government to take on a stewardship role in a sector that has flown 'under the radar', and that has enormous, untapped potential to improve health, wellbeing and success for children and families across Australia.

Some key opportunities that could be implemented alongside the infrastructure funding for new services include:

- developing a national approach to integration that considers stewardship, roles of different tiers of governments and a consistent operational model
- partnering with states and territories to develop state-wide plans, priorities, policies and networks to support ECHs that incorporate state delivery of services such as health and education
- growing a sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled (ACCO) sector, including quarantining reasonable funds for ACCO services. Dedicated resources to grow and support the ACCO early years sector are also critical
- developing a national ECH outcomes framework
- developing a national capability building strategy
- establishing a fund to build capability for integrated service delivery
- considering how ECHs can support the implementation of government policies for children and families, including Foundational Supports
- building evaluation capacity across ECHs to help them to define, measure and improve outcomes for children and families
- using data from evaluations to develop a national evidence base to track and continuously improve outcomes over time.

Conclusion

The Building Early Education Fund is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to support equity and transform outcomes for children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. However, this will only be possible if the Fund is allocated to the establishment of services that provide more than just Early Childhood Education and Care. High quality ECHs are an effective way of meeting many of the complex needs of children and families in communities with high early childhood disadvantage. The essential requirements identified in this brief are critical in establishing and operating effective ECHs.