



Response to the *National Food Security Strategy discussion paper*

30 September 2025

To the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry,

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this initial consultation to inform the scope and priorities of *Feeding Australia: National Food Security Strategy* (the Strategy). In particular, we recommend that the Strategy **explicitly considers the link between food security and early childhood development outcomes** and prioritises action to ensure that all children and their families have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious and appropriate food.

The development of the Strategy, together with the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 and commitment to universal access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), provides a critical opportunity to address food insecurity in early childhood at a systems-level to support the health, development and wellbeing of all children in Australia. In doing so, it also offers the potential to bolster Australia's productivity and future social capital.

In developing the Strategy, SVA recommends that the Australian Government, through the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry:

1. Include a specific focus on children in recognition of the disproportionate and detrimental impacts of hunger and food insecurity in childhood, including on participation in ECEC and thereby development and early learning, and prioritise action to ensure that all children and their families in Australia have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious and appropriate food.
2. Draws on contemporary research including lived experience of children and families and the expertise of stakeholders working at the intersect of food insecurity and early childhood development to ensure the Strategy remains responsive to emerging developments.
3. Through a joined-up policy approach, leverages opportunities through the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy 2024-2034, to drive a more systemic approach to ensuring all children have access to nutritious food, helping to break cycles of disadvantage and support population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes.
4. Specifically examines opportunities to harness the potential of ECEC to address food insecurity in early childhood, both through current reform processes to deliver universal access to quality ECEC and consideration of specific measures including changes to the National Quality Framework and a targeted national ECEC food subsidy program.
5. Explores options to support and expand effective, sustainable locally-led solutions to food insecurity that empower parents/carers and families including Early Childhood Hubs.
6. Consider a range of measures to address the affordability of food including mandating ceiling prices for selected essential/healthy food items, increasing the price of unhealthy (i.e. high sugar) foods and addressing income support payments to reflect cost of living pressures.

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7. Includes data collection, monitoring and reporting as a key priority, including the need for the Australian Government to regularly collect population-level data to both inform and assess the impact of initiatives to address food insecurity in childhood.

Our expertise

SVA, a not-for-profit social impact organisation, was created 20 years ago to solve challenging social problems. We influence systems to deliver better social outcomes for people by learning what works in communities, helping organisations be more effective, sharing our perspectives and advocating for change. Our vision is for an Australia where all people and communities can thrive.

SVA has developed a strong body of evidence of what children need to thrive in early childhood, recognising this critical window to change trajectories and alleviate disadvantage. Our work includes [Nurture Together](#), building momentum to scale integrated early childhood models including Early Childhood Hubs that provide access to a range of key services and wrap-around supports (including food relief) as well as a safe space for families to build connections and social networks.

We were also a founding member of the nationally-focused [Early Years Catalyst](#) established to advance a system-wide approach to improving early childhood development outcomes. Among its four major projects, the Early Years Catalyst commissioned an evidence for action report which assessed 'Ensure all children and their families have their basic material needs met' as having the highest potential to transform the early years system and improve early childhood development outcomes for Australia's children. Access to nutritious food is an integral component of this.

In June 2025, SVA hosted a panel discussion at the National Early Years Policy Summit in Brisbane on the urgent need to address hunger and food insecurity in early childhood in Australia. Our response to the Strategy discussion paper draws on the key issues and reform opportunities canvassed at the Summit.

Food insecurity in early childhood

Food insecurity has a disproportionate impact on children, with children under the age of five at greatest risk.¹ In Australia, it is estimated that as many as two in five (42 per cent) households with children and two in three (69 per cent) single parent households experience food insecurity, facing reduced quality, quantity and variety of food, running out of food or being forced to skip meals.²

While hunger and food insecurity have detrimental impacts on health and wellbeing at any age, they are most damaging in childhood and particularly during the first five years of a child's life when 90 per cent of brain development occurs.³ This includes parental food security to support healthy pregnancy and breastfeeding.⁴ Alarming, a recent survey of more than 1,500 women found that more than one in ten expecting mothers had gone hungry during pregnancy.⁵ Hunger and inadequate nutrition in childhood have significant and lasting impacts on physical and mental health, as well as cognitive and emotional development.⁶ For example, childhood food insecurity has been linked to both childhood obesity and tooth decay as well as obesity and lifestyle-related chronic diseases such as type-2 diabetes in adulthood.⁷ Children need positive food experiences - including preparation, exposure to role models and exploring a wide range of healthy foods - in early childhood to establish a foundation for lifelong positive relationships with food.

Hunger and food insecurity also prevent children from both accessing and getting the most out of opportunities for development, learning and play. This includes participation in ECEC and school education. A lack of food can lead to emotional and behavioural changes including low mood, irritability, hyperactivity and increased lethargy while also impacting concentration and sleep.⁸ In turn, this can undermine children's relationships with parents/carers, other family members, peers and educators/teachers.⁹ This can compound in disengagement, impacting education outcomes and thereby limiting future job prospects and further deepening the risk of food insecurity into adulthood.

SVA was recently engaged by the Latrobe Health Assembly to undertake research into the experience of food insecurity by children and young people in educational settings. Our survey of the Latrobe Valley community found that two in five (44 per cent) respondents were at risk of or experiencing food insecurity, the large majority (76 per cent) of which were parents or carers. Through our community consultations we also found that up to one in five (5-20 per cent) children in educational settings were experiencing food insecurity, directly impacting on their educational, health and wellbeing outcomes. As one educator stated, "*Students often become disruptive and disengage from learning tasks when their stomachs are empty*". Latrobe Valley educators often purchase or bring their own food to help students who do not have any food for the school day.

Finally, food insecurity both creates and exacerbates existing family stress and trauma, with parents and carers experiencing shame, isolation and disempowerment as a result of not being able to 'put food on the table' for their children despite their best efforts.¹⁰

Converging policy opportunities

The Australian Government's Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 recognises the fundamental need for all children to have their material basics met - including adequate nutrition - so as to realise the vision that all Australian children thrive in the early years.¹¹ 'Children have nutritious food' is one of three indicators for measuring progress against the 'Basic needs are met' outcome (one of the strategy's eight outcomes).¹² However, neither the Early Years Strategy nor its First Action Plan 2024-2027 outline any specific approaches to addressing food insecurity in early childhood beyond bolstering food and emergency relief. While food relief services play a critical role in alleviating hunger, they are unable to resolve food insecurity for children and their families in the long term. The Australian Government's commitment to developing a National Food Security Strategy and recently released National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities 2025-2035, alongside its vision to support all children and families in the early years including through universal access to quality ECEC, offers an opportunity to drive a more systemic approach to ensuring all children have access to nutritious food, helping to break cycles of disadvantage and support population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes.

In Australia, ECEC settings offer the strongest intervention point to ensure all young children have access to nutritious food. By school entry, 90 per cent of Australian children will attend an ECEC service of some kind, while children can consume between 50 and 75 per cent of their daily nutrition requirements during a typical ECEC day.¹³ Ensuring all children attending ECEC are provided with adequate, nutritious food would also enable children to access the full benefits of participating in quality early learning, helping to support their development, wellbeing and education outcomes.

Currently, the provision of nutritious food is not a requirement under the National Quality Framework (NQF), the regulatory framework for ECEC services in Australia, and therefore not all ECEC

services providing centre-based long day care do so. Worryingly, ECEC services located in communities experiencing high disadvantage are least likely to provide meals, instead requiring families (likely at high risk of food insecurity) to supply their child's food.¹⁴ While this can act as a barrier to ECEC participation for children experiencing household food insecurity, family-provided meals are often inadequate in both quantity and quality, risking poor nutrition and child hunger. Where ECEC services do provide meals, the nutritional quality is also generally low.¹⁵ Although the National Quality Standard (part of the NQF) requires that ECEC services provide food in line with the Australian Dietary Guidelines, this is not regulated and therefore not directly monitored or assessed. ECEC services set their own meal budgets (within market constraints) and menus, with support for menu planning varying between jurisdictions.¹⁶ One Australian survey found that ECEC services spent an average of \$2.15 per child per day on food with some services spending as little as 65 cents – falling below the average expenditure required to ensure children receive at least 50 per cent of their daily nutrition requirements.¹⁷ Finally, while all ECEC services face steadily increasing costs, impacting the nutritional quality of meals provided to children (including for ECEC services who were previously meeting Australian Dietary Guidelines), many ECEC services, particularly in rural and remote areas, face additional complexities in sourcing affordable, fresh food as well as attracting and retaining qualified cooks.¹⁸

The current period of review and reform geared towards building a universal, affordable ECEC system presents a critical opportunity to harness the potential of ECEC to address food insecurity in early childhood in Australia by ensuring all participating children have access to nutritious food. Reforms to both the ECEC funding model and Inclusion Support Program (as recommended by the Productivity Commission)¹⁹ would support increased ECEC participation by children facing adversity - including food insecurity - ensuring equitable access to the benefits of early learning, driving improved early childhood development outcomes and helping to alleviate disadvantage. The current ECEC Service Delivery Price project is an opportunity for the Australian Government to capture data to understand the (dynamic) costs associated with providing adequate, nutritious food in ECEC settings, an important consideration for potential ECEC funding reform.

More directly, changes to the NQF alongside the provision of consistent and targeted national financial and practical support (including menu planning) to ECEC services would ensure all children attending ECEC have access to nutritious food regardless of where they live. Any future review of the NQF should consider amendments to require the provision of nutritious, adequate and appropriate food in ECEC settings (to meet 50-75 per cent of children's daily nutrition requirements), and to embed this requirement as part of the assessment and ratings system monitored by state and territory governments. The Australian Government could also introduce a targeted national food subsidy program for ECEC services in areas with high levels of disadvantage and developmental vulnerability to alleviate the impact of food insecurity on children at no extra cost to families. International examples of targeted meal subsidies in ECEC include the Child and Adult Food Care Program in the US and Free Early Years Meals in the UK.²⁰ Promising evidence from these and school-based meal programs includes improved attendance, behaviour and educational outcomes.²¹ Cost benefit analyses of meal provision in school settings in the US estimates a \$3-10 return on every dollar invested through improved health, education and productivity in adulthood.²²

Providing adequate, nutritious food in settings where children are present, including both early learning centres and schools, was also a key recommendation of the Latrobe Valley community identified through our recent work with the Latrobe Health Assembly. However, while both ECEC

and schools offer significant potential to address food insecurity in childhood given the amount of time that children spend in these settings, these initiatives must be resourced appropriately and sustainably and include programs to strengthen health literacy including nutrition. School educators interviewed by SVA emphasised the lack of school funding and resourcing to implement their own breakfast and lunch programs. Though there are food relief agencies in the Latrobe Valley, few operate within educational settings, and many are not operational outside of working hours.

The role of Early Childhood Hubs

Beyond ECEC and school settings, Early Childhood Hubs (ECHs) offer significant potential to support food equity in communities experiencing high rates of socio-economic disadvantage and developmental vulnerability while also empowering parents, carers and families experiencing food insecurity. ECHs are a local service and social hub where children and families can access key services and connect with other families. They usually take the form of a centre that provides a single location for the delivery of a range of child and family services, including early learning, maternal and child health and family support programs. ECHs also provide wrap-around supports to families facing broader challenges including food insecurity. In addition to providing food to children through early learning programs (where ECEC is offered), many ECHs also provide 'on demand' food relief (such as food hampers, take-home meals, food pantries or bread donations), often through partnerships with food relief organisations, local supermarkets and/or bakeries. Several ECHs also offer education programs, cooking classes and other support for parents and carers to increase their knowledge around healthy food, nutrition and meal preparation.

In our recent research to better understand the lived experience of families that engage with ECHs, we learnt that many families were experiencing food insecurity before connecting with a hub. Families described the impossible trade-offs they faced, such as *"Sometimes I don't eat so my kids can have enough"*, or *"I had to choose between paying the power bills or buying groceries"*. For these families, ECHs became a place they could reliably turn to in times of need. By embedding on-demand food relief into everyday routines, such as a food pantry near kinder drop-off, frozen meals available at playgroup, or a coffee morning that also offers bread to take home, ECHs normalise access to support. Families told us that when these stressors are eased, they can shift from survival mode to focusing on their children's wellbeing, learning and development. In this way, food relief is not only a lifeline but also a gateway to connection, trust and deeper engagement for families.²³

Addressing food affordability

The key drivers of food insecurity in Australia are material hardship and inadequate financial resources, with the current cost-of-living crisis further exacerbating both the prevalence and impacts of food insecurity among children and families.²⁴ Food prices have been increasing since 2020 due to multiple shocks to the global food system such as the COVID-19 pandemic, wars and climate change.²⁵ Four in five (82 per cent) households experiencing food insecurity cite high or increased living expenses as a factor driving their challenge accessing adequate nutritious food.²⁶ When families find themselves unable to access adequate nutritious food, they face impossible choices. Very often, parents and carers choose to go without food to provide for children or give up meals to pay rent or utility bills. Families are squeezed to the point of collapse, with very little room for extras.

In prioritising action to ensure that all children and their families in Australia have access to adequate, nutritious food, the Strategy should consider a range of measures including mandating

ceiling prices for selected essential/healthy food items (such as the Australian Government's commitment to a subsidy scheme in remote communities), increasing the price of unhealthy (i.e. high sugar) foods and addressing income support payments to reflect cost of living pressures.

Data monitoring and reporting

Finally, in considering the impacts of hunger and food insecurity in early childhood, we note the current lack of comprehensive data and regular monitoring and reporting of food insecurity at the national, state/territory and local levels by government. Much of the available data on food insecurity in Australia is captured at the household-level through small/non-representative, point-in-time surveys conducted by non-government organisations. The use of varied survey tools, definitions, and timeframes makes it difficult to compare findings or build a cohesive national picture. This fragmented approach makes it even harder to capture accurate information about the prevalence and impacts of food insecurity as it is experienced by Australia's children.

Systematically tracking food insecurity as a key social determinant of health (as other determinants like housing, income and education are currently captured in various ABS surveys), as well as drawing on the lived experiences of children and families, would support more effective policy making to address and prevent hunger and food insecurity in early childhood, aligned with the priorities under the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy 2024-2034.

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