Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT

Phase Three Consultation Report

Acknowledgement of Country

The Education Directorate acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the ACT and recognise any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. The Government also acknowledges the Wreck Bay peoples as traditional owners and custodians of the lands on which Jervis Bay School is located. The ACT Government respects the continuing culture, and the contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to the life of the region.

We respect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, and their continuing culture and contribution they make to the Canberra region and the life of our city.

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About the Consultation

The ACT Government is continuing to deliver Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT (*Set up for Success*) a 10-year plan for early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Phase Three is the final Phase of *Set up for Success* and spans from 2026 to 2030. It builds on the foundations established in earlier phases and focuses on consolidating key initiatives and system improvements while addressing ongoing and emerging challenges across the early childhood sector.

To inform this work, the Education Directorate undertook a consultation process to gather input from key stakeholders from the ECEC sector, educators, families and the wider community. The consultation sought to capture a broad range of perspectives and experiences to ensure the strategy reflects the diverse needs of children and families in the ACT on the following topics:

- Phase Three of *Set up for Success*
- Expansion of Three-year-old preschool
- Child safety and quality
- Provider models and service sustainability.

Insights gathered through the consultation will help guide the Phase Three Implementation Plan and help ensure that future initiatives are practical and responsive to the current context and lived experience of those delivering and access ECEC in the ACT.

In designing the consultation approach, the Education Directorate was mindful of consultation fatigue across the ECEC sector. Engagement activities were therefore targeted and purposeful, building on information gathered through the ACT's ECEC & Outside of School Hours Care (OSHC) Workforce Survey, Minister's Round Table Forums on Child Safety undertaken in 2025 and the outcomes of National Consultation on child safety (Tranche 1 and 2 Consultation).

This approach aimed to reduce the burden on stakeholders while still ensuring meaningful opportunities for diverse voices to contribute their perspectives and experiences.

The consultation process ran during June 2026, with participation options through written or verbal feedback and an online survey. An in-person workshop was held with members of the Valuing Educators Reference Group (VERG) during the Term 2 meeting.

The ACT ECEC & OSHC sector, including peak bodies and industry unions and the broader community including parents and carers were invited to engage in the consultation. Engagement with the consultation saw:

- 11 ECEC & OSHC representatives participated through the VERG in-person consultation workshop
- 21 respondents to the online survey
- 12 written submissions
- 1 verbal submission

One online survey provided participants the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions and engage with the topics that interested them the most.

This report reflects the feedback and themes captured across all modes of consultation.

About this report

This report provides an overview of the feedback and input shared by participants throughout the consultation process. It brings together key themes and insights drawn from written and verbal feedback and the online survey.

Participant contributions have been presented through a combination of high-level summaries and selected direct quotes, where appropriate, to accurately reflect the views expressed by participants. To protect privacy and confidentiality no quotes have been attributed to individual participants or organisations.

The report reflects perspectives and opinions of those who participated in the consultation. While care has been taken to present feedback accurately, it is acknowledged that the information provided represents individual viewpoints and may not always be factually correct.

When referring to the *'ECEC Sector'* throughout the report, this reference also includes the OSHC sector.

For the purposes of this report the term '*educator*' is used broadly to refer to all educators working in the ECEC sector including degree-qualified teachers, as well as diploma and certificate-qualified educators.

Summary

Through consultation, stakeholders expressed strong support for Phase Three of *Set Up for Success* and its focus on strengthening quality, inclusion, child safety, access and sustainability across the ECEC sector.

Across consultation topics, respondents emphasised that successful implementation would require practical, adequately funded initiatives developed in partnership with the sector and responsive to workforce pressures, increasing child complexity and changing community needs.

Workforce sustainability was the most consistent theme throughout the consultation. Stakeholders identified workforce shortages, retention challenges and increasing workloads as key risks to quality, child safety and long-term sector viability. There was strong support for investment in professional learning, leadership development and career pathways, with many respondents noting that expansion of three-year-old preschool should be matched by support for increased workforce capacity.

Stakeholders highlighted growing demand for developmental, behavioural and additional supports, difficulties accessing assessments and specialist services, and the need for stronger connections between ECEC, health, education and family support systems.

Child safety remained a central focus, with respondents emphasising that safe, high-quality services depend on a capable and stable workforce. While there was support for strong consequences for serious breaches, stakeholders also favoured regulatory approaches that balance accountability with education, guidance and continuous improvement.

Consultation showed support for expanding access to three-year-old preschool, recognising its benefits for children's learning and development. Responses highlighted the importance of an expansion that is carefully planned, adequately funded and supported by workforce capacity and service readiness.

Stakeholders also highlighted the importance of strategic planning to support a sustainable and diverse ECEC sector. Community-based and not-for-profit providers were recognised for their contribution to quality, family choice and community connection. Strong support was also expressed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, culturally safe service delivery and greater investment in Aboriginal led initiatives.

Overall, stakeholders called for a child-centred, inclusive and sustainable ECEC system that strengthens workforce capacity, supports early intervention and inclusion, prioritises child safety and quality, and improves outcomes for children, families and communities.

Consultation topics

A consultation paper was made publicly available for the consultation process. The paper provided an overview of each topic and included key questions to guide participants responses to the topics. A copy of the consultation paper can be found at **Appendix A**.

Phase Three of Set up for Success

As *Set up for Success* enters its final phase, the remaining initiatives will be refined to reflect the evolving needs of children, families, educators and service providers, as well as changes in the broader policy and operating environment. Phase Three provides an opportunity to focus efforts on emerging priorities for the ACT ECEC sector, with particular emphasis on strengthening child safety and wellbeing, and supporting a skilled, sustainable and valued early childhood profession.

Expansion of Three-year-old preschool

The ACT's Three-year-old preschool program currently provides up to 300 hours of free, high-quality early learning each year for eligible children. As the ACT moves into Phase Three of *Set up for Success*, there is an opportunity to consider how the program can evolve to meet the changing needs of children, families and providers. This includes exploring the program's future design, delivery and funding arrangements, and identifying the most effective approach to expanding access while maintaining quality, supporting workforce sustainability and ensuring the program remains accessible and responsive to families.

Child safety and quality

As the ACT moves into Phase Three of *Set up for Success*, there is an opportunity to strengthen the focus on child safety, quality and public confidence across the ECEC sector. Recent national reforms are increasing regulatory oversight and introducing new measures to improve compliance, transparency and the early identification of risk. At the same time, a skilled, supported and accountable workforce remains central to delivering safe, high-quality outcomes for children. Phase Three provides an opportunity to consider how the ACT can build on these reforms through a whole-of-system approach that strengthens child safety, supports continuous improvement and fosters collaboration between government, providers, educators and families.

Provider models and service sustainability

Phase Three provides an opportunity to consider how the ACT can support a sustainable, high-quality ECEC system that prioritises children's outcomes and responds to the needs of communities. This includes exploring the role of planning, infrastructure and other policy settings in maintaining a diverse mix of providers and ensuring services remain viable, accessible and focused on quality. Consistent with the vision of *Set up for Success*, there is an opportunity to consider how government can continue to support community-based and not-for-profit provision, strengthen local service capacity, and encourage reinvestment in workforce development, inclusion and continuous quality improvement.

Consultation findings

Topic 1: Phase Three of Set up for Success

As *Set up for Success* enters its final phase, the ACT Government is seeking stakeholder views on how the strategy should be refined to respond to the evolving needs of children, families, educators and service providers. Consultation focused on key priorities for the future of the ECEC sector, including child safety and wellbeing, workforce sustainability, access to high-quality early learning, and the long-term sustainability of the service system. The following section summarises the key themes and findings raised through consultation.

Workforce capacity, sustainability and sector capability

Workforce challenges were the most prominent theme across consultation. Stakeholders consistently highlighted difficulties attracting and retaining qualified educators and early childhood teachers, workforce shortages across the sector, concerns about workload pressures, and the growing demands being placed on educators and service leaders.

There was recognition across responses that successful implementation of Phase Three would depend on a sustainable and appropriately supported workforce. Respondents identified the need for workforce planning, improved career pathways, scholarships and training opportunities, professional learning and development and leadership development.

Many also noted that increasing compliance requirements and assessment expectations cannot be effectively implemented without corresponding investment in workforce capacity and that implementation of initiatives under Phase Three should acknowledge the realities of workforce shortages, increasing complexity in children's needs, compliance demands, and rising expectations on educators and leaders.

Inclusion, early intervention and integrated family supports

A strong consistent theme across consultation responses was the increasing complexity of children's developmental, behavioural and support needs and the challenges families face in accessing timely support.

Respondents highlighted long wait times for developmental assessments and health services, barriers to accessing early intervention and difficulties navigating education, health and community service systems.

There was broad recognition that improving outcomes for children and families requires stronger coordination across services, more integrated approaches to support and a greater focus on inclusion and early intervention. Strengthening inclusion supports through workforce capability building, inclusive practice initiatives and additional funding for children with additional needs was also identified as a key priority for the sector.

Responses also showed strong support for solutions that are co-designed with the sector, families and communities to ensure services are responsive, connected and capable of meeting emerging needs. Many respondents viewed integrated, inclusive and early intervention-focused approaches as critical to improving long-term outcomes for children.

Child safety, quality and continuous improvement

Child safety and quality emerged as a major theme throughout the consultation. Responses emphasised that safety should be embedded throughout the Phase Three Implementation

Plan and could be supported through adequate staffing, professional learning and staff development, strong governance and further monitoring of services.

Suggested actions included strengthening child safety training, enhancing reporting mechanisms, increasing access to child safety experts and fostering a strong child-safe early childhood sector.

Alongside child safety, respondents highlighted the importance of maintaining quality educational practice and supporting continuous improvement at services. Programs such as the Quality Engagement Program were viewed positively as an example of practical capacity building and coaching support but were considered under-resourced relative to sector demand.

Many responses advocated for greater investment in quality improvement supports that strengthen leadership capability and service performance.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and cultural safety

Consultation feedback strongly supported increased investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development, leadership and culturally safe service delivery. Respondents emphasised the importance of genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Elders, organisations and educators.

Key recommendations included increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation across the workforce, providing dedicated cultural support roles, improving access to language and cultural resources and ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are involved in planning and decision making.

Stakeholders also highlighted the need to recognise cultural load, support culturally safe workplaces and invest in Aboriginal-led organisations and initiatives that strengthen outcomes for children, families and the broader sector.

Topic 2: Expansion of three-year-old preschool

As the ACT considers the expansion of three-year-old preschool, consultation sought stakeholder views on how the program can best support children's learning and development while meeting the needs of families and providers. Consultation focused on the program's design, delivery and funding arrangements, including opportunities to expand access, maintain quality, support workforce sustainability and ensure the program remains accessible, equitable and responsive to community needs. The following section summarises the key themes and findings raised through consultation.

Workforce capacity and service readiness

A key theme from consultation responses was workforce capacity and the sector's ability to deliver an expanded program. Responses noted that educator shortages, difficulties recruiting qualified staff, and limited workforce capacity could be significant barriers to expansion.

Many stakeholders noted that any move to increase the program from 300 to 600 hours should first assess whether services have the staffing and qualifications to maintain quality. There was a strong view that program growth should be staged, tested with the ECEC workforce, and supported by additional investment and support to avoid placing further pressure on an already stretched sector.

Delivery, access, equity and program availability

Stakeholders supported expanding access to three-year-old preschool and viewed it as an important opportunity to improve children's learning and development outcomes. However, many highlighted the need to ensure access is equitable and reflects community needs.

Maintaining quality education was a key consideration raised throughout consultation. Expansion of the three-year-old preschool program should not come at the expense of educational quality, staffing standards or children's experiences. Several submissions suggested greater clarity and information be available for services and families about the objectives of the program and the delivery methods.

There was also support for recognising different service types, including ACT public preschools, playschools and delivery partners that can demonstrate quality outcomes. Consideration of cross-border arrangements for NSW families who use ACT services was raised.

Funding, sustainability and administrative burden

While many respondents supported retaining the current funding model this was often linked to responses raising concerns about minimising administrative burden for providers. Stakeholders consistently stated that any expansion should be fully funded and should not leave services absorbing costs associated with the delivery of the program.

There were responses that called for simpler funding arrangements, reduced reporting requirements and regular review of funding levels to ensure they reflect actual service delivery costs, with concerns also raised about how funding is distributed across different provider types and the need to ensure investment supports educational outcomes.

Inclusion and child development

Many responses highlighted the value of the program as a mechanism for supporting children's development. Stakeholders viewed expanded access as an opportunity to strengthen inclusion and improve developmental outcomes, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability. There was support for greater flexibility to meet diverse learning and developmental needs, alongside stronger links between services, early intervention supports and family services.

Topic 3: Child Safety

As the ACT considers how to strengthen child safety, quality and public confidence in the ECEC sector, consultation sought stakeholder views on the key opportunities and challenges facing the system. Consultation focused on child safety, regulatory oversight, workforce capability, transparency and continuous improvement, as well as the respective roles of government, providers, educators and families in supporting safe, high-quality outcomes for children. The following section summarises the key themes and findings from consultation.

Child Safety, transparency and family confidence

A strong theme was that families are seeking reassurance that services are safe, trustworthy, and well-managed. Responses reported that families want information about child safety policies, supervision practices, staff screening processes, educator qualifications, incident management procedures, and how services comply with child safety requirements.

Many respondents noted that families rely heavily on assessment and rating results, word-of-mouth recommendations and service tours when selecting services. There was also increasing interest in workforce stability, staff turnover, continuity of care, and educator-child

relationships, reflecting growing awareness that children's safety and wellbeing are closely linked to stable and trusted relationships with educators.

Several responses suggested families would benefit from clearer and more accessible information about what quality ECEC looks like, including how workforce conditions, educator retention, leadership quality, and service culture contribute to both child safety and quality outcomes.

Workforce quality, stability and service capability

A recurring theme in consultation responses was the connection between workforce conditions and quality outcomes. Respondents emphasised that educator qualifications, retention, professional development, leadership support, and workforce wellbeing are vital contributors to child safety and service quality, yet these factors are often not well understood by families.

Responses highlighted concerns that increasing complexity in children's developmental and behavioural needs is placing additional pressure on educators and services. There was strong support for maintaining and strengthening inclusion supports, specialist coaching, professional learning, and practical workforce capability building initiatives. Some stakeholders also highlighted the role of integrated family support services and inclusion programs as important components of both child safety and quality service delivery.

Accountability, compliance and regulatory enforcement

Most respondents supported stronger accountability measures for serious or repeated child safety breaches. There was broad agreement that enforcement action, including fines, could improve compliance, strengthen public confidence, and reinforce the importance of child safety responsibilities.

However, responses also suggested that enforcement should be applied consistently across all service types. Some respondents argued that accountability should extend beyond providers and nominated supervisors to include individual staff where appropriate. Others cautioned that financial penalties could have unintended consequences for financially vulnerable services, particularly not-for-profit providers, and recommended that enforcement approaches consider service context and proportionality.

There was also support for greater transparency regarding compliance outcomes and stronger mechanisms to ensure all staff working with children meet child safety requirements.

Supportive regulation and continuous improvement

A strong theme across responses was the need for a regulatory approach that balances accountability with support, capacity building, and continuous quality improvement. While stakeholders agreed that child safety must remain the highest priority, many expressed concern that regulatory processes can sometimes place too much emphasis on documentation and administrative compliance that does not necessarily improve outcomes for children.

Respondents advocated for a more collaborative relationship between regulators and services, with greater emphasis on coaching, mentoring, practical guidance, and timely feedback to support quality improvement. Many supported initiatives that strengthen workforce and leadership capability, as well as risk based regulatory approaches that focus enforcement on serious breaches while addressing lower-risk issues through education and support.

Programs such as the Quality Engagement Program were highlighted as positive examples of supportive regulation that helps services improve quality while maintaining strong child safety

and compliance standards. Overall, stakeholders favoured a regulatory approach that combines accountability with continuous improvement, recognising that quality outcomes are best achieved when services are supported as well as monitored.

Topic 4: Provider models and service sustainability

As the ACT considers how to support a sustainable, high-quality ECEC system into the future, consultation sought stakeholder views on the policies, settings and investments needed to ensure services remain accessible, viable and focused on children's outcomes. Consultation explored the role of planning, infrastructure and service delivery models in meeting community needs, as well as opportunities to support community based and not-for-profit providers, strengthen local capacity and encourage ongoing investment in workforce development, inclusion and quality improvement. The following section summarises the key themes and findings from consultation.

Strategic planning and community-based service protection

A strong theme was the need for more strategic planning of the location of ECEC services to ensure supply aligns with community need. Stakeholders highlighted concerns about oversupply in some areas and undersupply in others, suggesting planning decisions should be informed by population growth, demand forecasts, workforce availability and local community needs.

Many respondents supported reserving land for ECEC services in new developments, particularly where services are co-located with schools, community facilities, health services and family support hubs. Co-location was viewed as supporting smoother transitions to school, stronger community connections and better service integration.

Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of ensuring suitable physical environments, with concerns raised about services operating in commercial buildings or locations with limited outdoor play spaces.

Service sustainability

There was strong support for community-based and not-for-profit ECEC providers, which many respondents viewed as delivering significant educational and community benefits. Stakeholders highlighted concerns about the financial pressures facing these services, including rising operating costs, workforce shortages, increasing compliance requirements, and limited financial reserves.

Many respondents suggested that targeted government support is needed to ensure the long-term viability of not-for-profit services. This included access to affordable land and lease arrangements, capital and operational funding, workforce development initiatives, and reduced administrative burdens. Responses also called for fairer funding and procurement processes, as well as greater access to existing government facilities to support service delivery.

Overall, respondents emphasised the importance of maintaining a diverse provider market and ensuring community-based and not-for-profit services remain sustainable alongside larger providers, given their role in supporting quality outcomes, family choice, and community connection.

Workforce, quality and child safety

Responses consistently identified workforce sustainability as fundamental to service quality, child safety and the long-term viability of the ECEC sector. Stakeholders emphasised that

planning for service growth or expansion must be supported by strategies to attract, retain and develop the workforce needed to deliver high-quality services.

Key priorities included improving educator wages and working conditions, strengthening recruitment and retention, investing in education and professional learning, and supporting leadership development and career progression pathways. Many respondents cautioned against expanding services or releasing additional ECEC sites without sufficient workforce capacity, noting that workforce shortages remain a significant challenge across the sector.

There was broad agreement that service sustainability, sector diversity, quality and child safety are closely interconnected and should be considered together in future reforms. While stakeholders supported maintaining a diverse mix of public, community-based, not-for-profit and private providers, views differed on the role of for-profit services. Regardless of provider type, respondents consistently emphasised that quality outcomes, workforce capability and child safety should remain the primary objectives of the system, recognising that financial viability and service sustainability should support not compromise these outcomes.

Investment and provider accountability

The role of for-profit providers emerged as a significant theme throughout the consultation. Many respondents emphasised that funding investment in ECEC service should primarily support outcomes for children and families, including workforce development, inclusion, child safety and service quality.

There was strong support for ensuring service profits are reinvested into educator wages, professional learning, inclusion supports and service quality. While some stakeholders favoured prioritising not-for-profit provision, others argued that the focus should be on quality outcomes, community benefit and demonstrated reinvestment regardless of provider type.

Aboriginal community-controlled services

Responses regarding Aboriginal community-controlled services highlighted the importance of self-determination, long-term funding, workforce development, culturally safe service models and strong partnerships with Aboriginal organisations and communities. Consultation responses suggested support for capacity building, leadership development and navigation of regulatory and funding requirements.

Some respondents noted challenges associated with the ACT's population distribution, suggesting that careful planning would be required to ensure sufficient demand and accessibility while avoiding unintended clustering of services.

Thank you and next steps

The ACT Government is committed to ensuring that *Set up for Success* is shaped by experiences, expertise and priorities of the ECEC sector. Throughout the consultation process stakeholders shared valuable insights on the opportunities, challenges and practical considerations that will influence the next stage of the strategy.

The findings from consultation will guide the development of the Phase Three Implementation Plan and help ensure the next stage is practical, achievable and responsive.

Over the past year, the ACT ECEC sector has shown extraordinary commitment, generosity and resilience. The willingness to participate in consultation activities often on top of already demanding workloads is shaping every step of this journey.

Through roundtable forums, surveys, workshops and targeted discussions, stakeholders have continued to engage with honesty, expertise and deep care for children, families and the whole ECEC sector.

This contribution is not taken for granted, and the ACT Government recognises that consultation fatigue is real and that the pace of change has been significant. Most importantly, these contributions will ensure that Phase Three remains grounded in the lived realities of the sector.

Thank you to everyone who contributed their time, expertise and experience throughout this process, which is helping to deliver positive outcomes for children, families and the ECEC profession in the ACT.

Appendix A: Consultation Paper



Set up for Success: Phase Three

Consultation Paper – May 2026

Overview

Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT (*Set up for Success*) is the ACT Government's 10-year plan for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and aims to strengthen outcomes for children and families.

Phase Three is the final Phase of *Set up for Success* and spans from 2026 to 2030. It builds on the foundations established in earlier phases and focuses on consolidating key initiatives and system improvements while addressing ongoing and emerging challenges across the early childhood sector. There will be a continued emphasis on supporting culturally safe and responsive early learning environments and strengthening partnerships with the community-controlled sector. Phase Three will include a focus on supporting child safety and ensuring a sustainable early childhood system that is able to meet the needs of children, families and educators now and into the future.

This consultation paper seeks stakeholder feedback on the implementation of Phase Three initiatives including the expansion of Three-year-old preschool to 600 hours per year from 2028. Furthermore, the consultation seeks feedback on a range of issues relating to early childhood regulation and safety, service quality and land use planning. This consultation builds on information gathered through the ACT's ECEC & Outside of School Hours Care (OSHC) Workforce Survey, Minister's Round Table Forums on Child Safety undertaken in 2025 and the outcomes of National consultation on child safety (Tranche 1 and 2 Consultation). It recognises the views, experiences and time already contributed and is intended to minimise consultation fatigue and support further engagement in a way that is flexible and meaningful.

Input gathered through this consultation will inform development of the Phase Three Implementation Plan and will help ensure that future initiatives are practical and responsive to the current context and lived experience of those delivering and accessing ECEC in the ACT.

How to engage

The consultation process has been designed to allow stakeholders to engage with the topics in ways that suit them. This paper provides an overview of the key topics we are seeking insights and feedback on and includes key questions to guide responses. There is no need to respond to all of the topics and questions, you can select to respond to the topics that interest you most.

Once you have read the paper, you can:

- Access the online survey via this link to provide your views and input; or
- Email more comprehensive written responses to earlychildhoodpolicy@act.gov.au; or
- Email earlychildhoodpolicy@act.gov.au to organise a time to provide your input verbally over the phone to a member of the team.

Consultation will close on Friday 26 June 2026.

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Phase Three of Set up for Success

When *Set up for Success* was released in 2020, a range of Phase Three initiatives were included in the strategy. These initiatives are outlined on page 16 of the strategy document and include:

- Continue the roll-out of universal preschool for three-year olds
- Explore/enhance multi-agency support services for very young children
- Develop flexible options for accessing extended hours to early childhood education
- Investigate providing learning and planning support for less formal environments
- Explore establishing 'Educational Leader' career pathways
- Explore embedding Prep for Pre (Preschool Pathways) and other related programs
- Investigate system-wide policy and resource allocation through child-oriented outcomes
- Implement the structured capacity planning framework for ECEC.

Progress has already been made towards the following initiatives outlined in Phase Three:

- Explore options for professionalising and increasing the pay and conditions for the ECEC workforce – through national efforts resulting in wage increases and worker retention payments
- Explore increasing paid parental leave in the ACT public service – improvements to paid parental leave provisions have been made under consecutive enterprise agreements, including extended paid leave (from 12 to 18 weeks), gender-neutral access, superannuation contributions, flexible working and shared care arrangements.

The strategy document highlights that as the strategy is implemented, initiatives in the third phase will be refined, taking into consideration the changing context and emerging needs of the sector and stakeholders in the ACT. With this in mind, Phase Three will include a renewed focus on safety in early childhood settings and on supporting the early childhood profession.

Key consultation questions

- What should be considered in relation to implementation of existing initiatives?
- What additional initiatives could be considered as part of Phase Three?
- How can Phase Three better support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, and support improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?
- What challenges are families facing in accessing supports and information about children's development and neurodevelopmental difference?
- How could child safety be better reflected in Set up for Success through the Phase Three Implementation Plan?



Expansion of Three-year-old preschool

The Three-year-old preschool program currently provides up to 300 hours per calendar year of free quality early learning for eligible three-year-old children living in the ACT.

The program is delivered:

- by partnered ECEC services who are *Meeting* or *Exceeding* overall against the National Quality Standards (referred to as Partner Providers)
- for up to 300 hours, delivered either as 6 hours per week over 50 weeks, or 7.5 hours per week over 40 weeks
- by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher (through a phased approach, acknowledging workforce shortages).

More information on the current program, including child and service eligibility criteria is available on the ACT Government website and in the Program Guidelines.

Jurisdictions that have implemented three year-old preschool programs have adopted different funding models, reflecting local delivery systems, workforce conditions and policy priorities. The ACT's current funding model uses the Commonwealth's Child Care Subsidy (CCS) as the base funding, with the ACT Government covering the full Gap Fee for program hours, after CCS has been applied (referred to as 'Fee Relief'). This means that the program hours are completely free for all families, regardless of their CCS. Families continue to pay for any wrap-around hours accessed outside of the program.

Funding is provided to services quarterly as a per child amount. Any remaining funding leftover after Fee Relief has been applied for families can then be used as 'Program Funding' towards quality uplift initiatives such as incursions or excursions, program resources, employment of early childhood teachers or incentives for staff.

Phase Three provides an opportunity to consider the policy parameters of the program and the best approach to an expanded program that best suits the needs of providers and families.

Key consultation questions

- Are any changes or enhancements to the program model required?
- Are any changes to eligibility requirements or partnering arrangements required?
- What support would be required for Partner Providers to implement an expanded program?
- Should the ACT continue with its existing funding model to scale to 600 hours, or should a different approach be adopted? For example, should CCS remain the basis of the program funding model or should the funding amount be capped for families?



Child Safety and Quality

Children's Education and Care Assurance (CECA) is the ACT regulatory authority ECEC and OSHC services. It is responsible for administering and enforcing the National Quality Framework (NQF) in the ACT and working with providers to support quality and continuous improvement.

Child safety is foundational to a high-quality ECEC system. The ACT Government recognises the professionalism and commitment of educators across the sector, while also acknowledging concerns raised in the media and in the Legislative Assembly about instances of poor practice that have compromised children's safety and wellbeing.

Reforms to the Education and Care Services National Law (National Law), agreed by Education Ministers require all jurisdictions to substantially uplift regulatory oversight. These reforms intend to strengthen compliance, improve early identification of risk and ensure regulators have appropriate tools to respond promptly to non-compliance and include:

- Reforms to the Education and Care Services National Law to better support child safety
- Development of policies and procedures for safe use of digital devices in ECEC settings
- Establishment of a National Early Childhood Workforce Register
- Introduction of mandatory child safety training for all individuals working in ECEC
- ACT implementation of a "no-card, no-start" approach, ensuring a Working with Vulnerable People (WWVP) check is undertaken prior to commencing work at a service
- Increased penalties and expanded infringement offences and regulatory penalties
- Enhanced transparency for families through the publishing of information on enforcement actions and compliance concerns.

A capable, well-supported profession is essential to child safety and quality outcomes. Strengthening child safety requires a whole-of-system approach that supports continuous improvement, accountability and collaboration between government, providers and families.

Phase Three provides an opportunity to place a stronger, more explicit emphasis on child safety and quality, supported by National Reform initiatives.

Key consultation questions

- What information are families seeking to support them to understand child safety and quality, and to select quality ECEC services for their children?
- What impact could the implementation of CECA enforcing fines against ECEC providers for egregious and repeated child safety breaches have?
- How could regulatory approaches and processes better support continuous improvement in service quality while maintaining strong child safety and compliance outcomes?



Provider Models and Service Sustainability

The long-term sustainability of a safe, high-quality ECEC system depends on service viability, appropriate infrastructure and a diverse range of providers that reflect community needs. The Legislative Assembly has highlighted concerns about increasing corporatisation, land-use pressures and the impacts of planning settings on community run and not-for-profit services.

The ACT Government has long championed community-based provision of ECEC. *Set up for Success* includes specific reference to "ensuring that services in the ACT prioritise child outcomes over profits" and remains committed to supporting not-for-profit organisations. These services are often embedded within their communities and are well placed to reinvest revenue into workforce development, inclusive practices and continuous quality improvement.

Consistent with this, the ACT Government has committed to appointing not-for-profit providers to operate all new ECEC services co-located with ACT public schools, as well to deliver the targeted 3 year-old initiative program for children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage.

Phase Three provides an opportunity to consider how land-use planning and other policy levers can support child-centred outcomes and reinvestment in service quality.

Key consultation questions

- How can planning and land-use settings better support community-based and sustainable ECEC services?
- Should land release for ECEC services be provided, similar to the provision of schools and other community facilities in major developments?
- What additional measures are needed to support community-based and not-for-profit service providers?
- How could the ACT Government support the growth and sustainability of Aboriginal community-controlled early childhood services? What barriers exist in establishing and operating early learning services and how could these be addressed?
- How can service sustainability and sector diversity be balanced with quality, workforce and child safety objectives?
- Should surplus revenue be capped for for-profit services to ensure reinvestment in quality, the profession and the community?

Contact

For further information about the consultation process please contact the Early Childhood Policy team via earlychildhoodpolicy@act.gov.au.