

SUBMISSION TO NSW ECEC REVIEW

The Hive, Mt Druitt (United Way Australia)

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The Hive, Mt DrUITT

The Hive, Mt DrUITT (United Way Australia) welcomes the opportunity to present a submission for the review of the accessibility and affordability of the Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) sector in NSW based upon our learnings and experiences working alongside families and ECEC services in the suburbs of Mt DrUITT in Western Sydney.

The Hive, Mt DrUITT (United Way Australia) is a place-based, Collective Impact initiative operating in the suburbs of the Mount DrUITT postcode in Western Sydney, NSW. The goal of The Hive is for all children in Mt DrUITT to start school well, with equal opportunity to learn, be healthy and participate in quality community life.

The Hive's involvement with the ECEC sector

The Hive work individually with families to overcome barriers in accessing early education and care, as well as investing in early education centres and educators across the postcode through professional development opportunities and mentoring to ensure children can access a high-quality education, and that educators are more equipped to support children who enter their service. The specific work that The Hive undertakes specifically regarding ECEC includes:

- *An Early Learning Linker* role to support families to overcome barriers to access early education for their child. This includes working with families to seek information of early education options, navigating the childcare subsidy process, access birth certificates, provide brokerage support for bonds and any support to overcome any other barriers to ECEC access and sustaining enrolment.
- *A Child Health Linker* role to support families who have a child with a developmental delay or disability, access the necessary diagnostic assessments, disability supports within ECEC services, access the NDIS, and connect to necessary specialists and allied health professionals. This includes providing information, referrals, brokerage, transport, advocacy and partnering with ECEC services to support children in their care.
- *Quality training & professional development* for early childhood educators and leaders. The Hive have organized professional development and mentoring opportunities through a range of partners for early learning services in the 2770 postcode.
- *Early Childhood Educators' Network*. The Hive have also established an Early Childhood Educators' Network 2770 in collaboration with Western Sydney University for professional development and networking opportunities for educators across the postcode. It gives early childhood educators an opportunity to leave their services to engage in collaborative learning, sharing funds of knowledge and taking with them new ideas and strategies to implement in their respective services.
- *Specialized Support*. The Hive enable a speech therapist, occupational therapist, and other early intervention specialists to attend ECEC services to observe and provide capacity building strategies for early childhood educators to support children experiencing developmental challenges.

The Hive have produced our Insight Series which highlights our learnings from our successes and consultations in Mt DrUITT. Our Insight Paper 'An Early Learning System that makes a difference for Mount DrUITT's children and families' may be of interest to IPART in this review and can be found on our website: <https://thehivemtdrUITT.com.au/our-approach/our-learnings/>

Challenges within the ECEC sector

Research demonstrates that access to 600 hours of quality preschool before starting school is instrumental in ensuring children are developmentally on track and ready to commence primary school. In disadvantaged communities such as the Mt DrUITT area, many families face barriers to accessing early education including the cost of bonds or enrolment fees, financial hardship, a lack of available spaces in services, lack of services who can meet the needs of children with developmental delays or disabilities, transport barriers, access to birth certificates, and other family complexities they may be experiencing. There is also a shortage of educators in the ECEC sector which is impacting the availability of child spaces in the community, with some centres closing their doors on days they do not have enough staff.

Quality of care rather than quantity must also be considered as research demonstrates that the provision of high-quality care in early childhood has positive impacts on children's developmental outcomes and children who have experienced high quality care programs are most likely to exhibit school readiness abilities and become successful adults.

Many services in low socioeconomic areas do not meet national quality standards as they are under resourced and lack support. The children in these communities need the highest quality of care due to the adversity they are often facing, and investment must be made to ensure ECEC services in these areas are of high quality. Increased funding for early childhood centres based in vulnerable communities is essential to enable them to provide equitable and high-quality support for all children. Funding for additional early childhood educators and allied health specific programs is needed in early learning classrooms in order to provide inclusive education for all children.

Whether children start school developmentally on track, have accessed ECEC, or have access to the services they require is often dependant on their geographical location, their cultural background or their income level. Not all children in NSW have the equal opportunity to thrive. A review of the ECEC sector must consider as a key priority the children who are in marginalised communities or population groups. Programs and policies devised from the review should be equitable and involve deep consultation with communities and local stakeholders at a local level. These programs and policies should be equitable in their resource distribution and consider unique needs of groups such as First Nation children, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children from rural areas and children from low socioeconomic communities. Too often programs are created with these groups not consulted or considered, and these 'universal' programs are inaccessible for many children.



Barriers & Gaps

From our experience working with families and early educators in the Mt Druitt area, we have witnessed the following barriers and gaps in the ECEC sector:

Barriers families face in accessing early education and care:

- The cost of a bond is often too expensive for parents to afford. While daily fees are subsidized and manageable for families, the bond is calculated at the full un-subsidized fees which can be hundreds or thousands of dollars required to confirm the enrolment.
- The Child Care Subsidy process is overwhelming for families, and this can be considered “too hard” and prevent families from considering childcare.
- Limited access to information about the childcare enrolment process and understanding which subsidies families are entitled to. The process can be complicated, and families can get overwhelmed, particularly if literacy is also a concern.
- Transport is a barrier as not all families have access to a car and public transport is often unreliable and inconsistent. It is also considered stressful to take children on public transport, and the financial cost of transporting the family is also a barrier.
- Children often don't have a birth certificate or weren't registered at birth. Families don't know the process to get a birth certificate, and the registration process is complex and requires access to the internet and technology. The cost of paying for a birth certificate is also a barrier for families.
- Sustaining an enrolment can be challenging due to wider concerns in the family unit which can result in arrears, financial stress and the child being excluded from the service. A family is often unaware or misinformed of the financial hardship options to sustain the enrolment, and centres do not implement trauma-informed practices to assist the family.
- Lack of knowledge of the importance of attending preschool or when they should start attending, having the common belief that teaching children can wait until Primary School.

Barriers and gaps in the ECEC sector:

- Many services in low socioeconomic areas do not meet the National Quality Standards as they are under resourced, with a high number of children enrolled with additional needs or vulnerabilities and receive a lack of support from the sector. Children in vulnerable communities need the highest quality of care due to the adversity they are often facing, and investment must be made to ensure ECEC services in these areas are of high quality.
- The expectations set by the NQS is too high considering the minimal support extended to the educators.
- Staffing ratios are inadequate to achieve high quality standard for centres with children with vulnerabilities or additional needs. At current, a preschool room only requires two educators for 20 children which is insufficient to provide high quality of education and care.
- The administrative load is excessive and complex, particularly when applying for additional educators and other resources when the sector is understaffed. Completing additional administrative work is often unachievable, and with centres unequipped, we have witnessed services turn children with additional needs away from their service as they have not been able to meet their needs.
- There is a shortage of educators in the ECEC sector which is impacting the availability of child spaces in the community, with some centres closing their doors on the days they do not have enough staff.

Response to Recommendations

In considering the Hive's learnings and experience working with families experiencing disadvantage, the following reflections and actions are presented in response to the draft recommendations made by IPART.

1. Accessibility & Choice of Services.

Availability & Choice

The Hive agrees with the recommendation to design Department preschool hours to suit the needs of the community. We repeatedly hear from families that the limited hours of DoE preschools limit parent's employment or education possibilities, particularly in areas such as Mt Druitt where there are inadequate options for before and after school care. We would also take this recommendation further and suggest that those parents who send their children to a long day-care service for the benefits of these longer hours, should not be excluded from the free preschool fee structure. All preschool programs for the two years prior to school should be free for all parents regardless of service.

Regarding availability & choice we also present the following reflections and recommendations:

- **Getting the right documentation can be difficult.** A birth certificate is not a legal requirement for enrolment in early learning services in NSW – but some services insist that families provide them before a child can enroll and many families face this as a barrier.
 - *Commonwealth/NSW governments should issue clear guidance to ECEC services on how to enrol a child who does not have a birth certificate.*
 - *Birth Certificates should be free for low-income families to access.*
 - *ECEC Services should permit families to enrol children without a birth certificate using alternative documentation.*
- **Services are under pressure and do not have the capacity to foster relationships with families who have high needs.** Support options are limited – services are usually too stretched to provide the level of assistance needed for families e.g., trauma-informed. MyGov access rules limit the way support can be offered to families – providers are unable to call the Centrelink support line or sit with them during the process to help families apply to an early learning centre. Early learning Linkers provide one-on-one support to help children and families experiencing multiple and complex challenges overcome barriers to early learning. They are a proven model that increases access for the children most likely to miss out on early learning.
 - *Fund Linker roles embedded within ECEC services to meet levels of need in target communities and overcome barriers to enrolment.*
- **Families often do not have access to transport.** Proximity to home, school or work is important to families. However, preschools are not required to take children from their local area, meaning parents may have to travel far to take their child to early learning. Families may not have access to a car or have a license and the public transport network in Mount Druitt is unreliable – buses do not come frequently, and public transport does not always provide a quick or simple route to early learning.
 - *Funding for services in areas of developmental disadvantage for community or ECEC buses for pick up/drop off should be provided.*

Inclusion

The Hive recognise the valuable early intervention support that early educators provide to children; however they are under resourced, and are not trained or equipped to handle high levels of developmental delay or disability. ECEC services are a trusted location where families turn to for support with their child's development and have the opportunity to bring allied health services to be embedded in their service. We welcome the recommendation to develop a model for wrap around support for families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability & also looking at including allied health services onsite however implore the government to consider how ECEC services and educators will be funded and supported to deliver services to promote inclusion.

Regarding inclusion we also present the following reflections and recommendations:

- **There are fewer places for children with developmental challenges.** Children with developmental challenges are much more likely to be turned away from services - as services feel ill-equipped to provide the support they need. Often parents of children with disability need to try multiple centres before they can find one willing to enroll their child – and that they trust.
- **The paperwork to gain additional resources can be overwhelming – for families and for services.** The Inclusion Support Program (ISP) has further admin processes that can be difficult for families to navigate. ISP staff are unable to work with centres until the child is enrolled. Centres are hesitant to take the child if they don't know they will get support from the ISP, leaving families in limbo.
- **An increase in equity funding should occur to equip services to invest in specialist family engagement staff.** Supporting preschool and long day care services to appoint a part-time family engagement specialist would give them the resources, capacity and skills to work effectively and sensitively with their families. The scope of the role would need to be co-designed but could include community outreach, building and maintaining relationships with families, supporting referrals and connecting with the NDIS, specialists and allied health supports, and ensuring early learning can be accessed in a positive and child-centred way.
- **Increased resources for ECEC services to support educators in meeting the needs of children with learning and developmental delays.** This includes but not limited to professional development, physical resources for the classroom, additional staff to support students in their learning environments.
- **Families in Mt Druitt can't always attend clinic-based early intervention services – and need access to place-based services that are embedded in early learning or community settings.** Accessing early intervention within a clinic-based service can be challenging for families – and those who most need support are also most likely to miss out. We know from our work in Mt Druitt that embedding early intervention within early learning works by reducing many of the barriers and leveraging the relationships that services have with families.
- **Early learning can serve as the 'backbone' for early childhood development services, leveraging existing trust structures.** Early learning is often the first 'door' families access in a service delivery context – which provides a gateway for accessing other supports for their children as necessary. Early learning services build strong relationships with other child development providers - such as community and allied health, making them well-placed to connect families with the supports they need.

Information

To access early learning, there is a lot that families need to navigate:

- *The difference between preschool and long day care* – what the difference is, where to go, and what’s best for their circumstances.
- *What service to go to and if there are places available* – what the options are, which service is best for their family, if there will be a place for their children (especially for children with disability).
- *How much it will cost* – the difference between the standard fee and their family’s out-of-pocket cost, whether they are eligible for Additional Child Care Subsidy (CCS), what bonds and enrolment fees are. Plus, fees are different in each service.
- *What they need to do* – the process for applying for CCS, what information is needed, what children need to take to early learning, if they need to provide food/nappies.

We welcome the recommendation to focus on making information easily available through digital means and at Service NSW. Simple factsheets available online, at ECEC services and in public places could assist to overcome these knowledge gaps and promote the benefits of ECEC and how to access.

We find families are often very confused, and for families with low technology literacy or access, we would encourage that an in-person option for support regarding all areas of ECEC access, including subsidies, quality standards, availability, birth certificates, should be available at central locations such as Service NSW.

We have found the Early Learning Linker role to be highly effective as a support for families navigating this process and who can provide short term family support to provide information and overcome barriers. We highly recommend the NSW Government consider this approach, particularly for disadvantaged areas and embed these roles in childcare centres, or in Service NSW.

Funding arrangements

The Hive supports multiple early learning services to connect with early intervention professionals through a range of funding options available from the Department of Education, including the disability and inclusion program. These existing funding options allow services to bring an early intervention professional– such as a speech pathologist or occupational therapist into a service to provide specialist support for educators, building their capacity to educate and care for children with additional needs.

But, the current application process is complex, places a considerable administrative burden on early learning services, and constrained to registered preschools

- Long day cares are eligible for inclusion support, however it is scarce and inadequate in supporting children’s needs.
- Services report significant administrative burdens seeking support through existing funding processes – which can take several days to gather evidence and compile for each child who requires additional supports
- Current funding models don’t reflect sufficient time for educators and allied health professionals to engage in reflective conversations and plan for opportunities to support

children’s learning. The time they are funded for usually only covers the hours they spend in the classroom – and not planning together outside of session times.

- Strong interprofessional relationships are key to improving practice and developing effective strategies. Current funding models don’t reflect this – and are often short-term engagements rather than longer term opportunities to build on practice.

Linkers are an effective solution for families with the most complex needs but can only ever reach a small proportion of families who would benefit – building capacity within and across the whole system is critical. Services in communities like ours with high socioeconomic and developmental disadvantage are often too stretched to build and sustain the kinds of relationships and flexible approaches that we know are most effective at engaging our families and sustaining their participation.

Case Study: Effectiveness of the Hive Linker Program

Jenny is an Aboriginal mother to three children under the age of five. Jenny has expressed that she wants her children to have the support they need and is eager to find employment to support her family. Jenny has no car, no family support, no internet, no computer, low literacy and cannot afford regular credit on her phone to be able to make calls. Jenny wants to find employment but first needs to find childcare for her children. Due to Jenny’s low literacy and family stressors, she did not register the children at birth and they are without birth certificates which is required for enrolling. The process for a late birth registration is overwhelming, as is applying for Child Care Subsidies. Jenny’s low literacy also presents a barrier to understand the information given to her by preschools and services. The lack of reliable public transport in the Mt Druitt area limits the services that she can access.

In responding to challenges families face in accessing support, The Hive have developed their **Linker program**, with workers who work relationally in a place-based way as ‘Linkers’ to support families experiencing barriers and challenges accessing early education and developmental services for their children. The Early Learning Linker supports Jenny to apply and pay for birth certificates for the children, find a childcare in her area with vacancies, complete enrolment paperwork, and apply for the childcare subsidies. This childcare soon identifies two of the children have undiagnosed developmental disabilities, and Jenny accesses the Hive’s Child Health Linker to access paediatricians to receive diagnosis’ for the children, apply for and access the NDIS and local allied health services.

2. Affordability of Services

The Hive agree with the recommendation that the Commonwealth Government should consider additional support and financial relief for families experiencing disadvantage and the review of the CCS process and activity requirements. The benefits of attending high quality early education are well documented, and children from low socio-economic households should be prioritised for this, not excluded due to financial barriers or limitations from Centrelink subsidies.

Early learning can be very expensive

- Families are often unaware that subsidies are available and assume early learning is unaffordable for them.

Paying a bond or enrolment fee can be an insurmountable barrier

- A bond is often required to secure enrolment.
- The bond is based on the daily fee before subsidies are applied – meaning the bond is the same for all families regardless of their income, the size of their subsidy or whether they are in financial hardship.

Establish equitable bond and enrolment fee policies

NSW Government and the Australian Government should establish a bond and enrolment fee policy to ensure these do not create a financial barrier for families.

Options include bonds / enrolment fees that are:

- Removed altogether
- Calculated on a sliding scale / according to income
- Calculated on fees once CCS is applied
- Waived for Health Care Card holders or on a discretionary basis in cases of financial hardship

Making subsidies easier to understand and access

Governments and service providers should provide and promote easier to understand information about the subsidies available – including cameos that set out typical scenarios for families and making the fee calculator more accessible.

The Federal Government should change the ACCS application process, allowing families to apply for both the CCS and ACCS at the same time.

Ensure all children can access a minimum of two days of early learning in the two years before school

The activity test waiver for preschool is not working as intended - to enable children in long day care to attend two days a week.

All families should have access to enough hours to allow their children to attend two days a week – prioritizing preschool-aged children but ideally extended to all children in communities experiencing disadvantage.

3. Supply of Services

There is a concerning lack of childcare services in certain communities with there being too great a demand for the available providers, resulting in children not being able to access early education. Particularly, there is a concerning lack of high-quality ECEC services of 'exceeding' ratings or above in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, which is where children need the highest of quality education and care as a protective factor.

There is a shortage of educators in the ECEC sector, with educators feeling overwhelmed and underappreciated, and thus leaving the sector at rates that are not keeping up with new trainees.

The shortage of educators in the ECEC sector means less support for families. The ECEC staff shortage impacts the availability of child spaces in early learning, with some centres closing their doors on days they do not have enough staff. This directly impacts families' ability to access support from ECEC in building awareness, navigating the system and receiving support.

Increase investment in infrastructure to ensure there is enough ECEC services and educators for every community and ensuring these educators have received adequate training to provide a high-quality education and care for children.

Increase investment in First Nation early educators to encourage First Nation families to enrol in care.



Conclusion

We thank IPART for the opportunity for The Hive to make a contribution to the draft recommendations made regarding NSW's ECEC sector. We hope that our reflections from our work in Western Sydney can have an impact on accessibility, affordability and sustainability of the ECEC sector, particularly for areas of disadvantage. We welcome any opportunity to discuss our learnings and suggestions further with IPART or the NSW Government.



Insights paper

An early learning system that makes a difference for Mount
Druitt's children and families

March 2022

This paper has been developed with contributions from the Hive's Collective Partners of Together in 2770: Jesuit Social Services, Connect Child and Family Services, Yenu Allowah, Community Junction and Tregear Presbyterian Preschool



About The Hive and our Insights paper series

We at The Hive, a place-based initiative, are developing policy Insights Series to drive an advocacy agenda and contribute to systemic change that improves outcomes for Mount Druitt.

The Hive is one of Australia's most established and effective place-based collective impact initiatives



The Hive has a goal for all children in Mount Druitt to start school well, with equal opportunity to learn, be healthy and participate in quality community life.

Since 2015, we have been embedded in the Mount Druitt community, helping bring community aspirations to life. Our staff live and work in and around the community and are committed to long-term change. The Hive is part of United Way Australia (UWA).

The Hive provides a community backbone that identifies local priorities, collaborates on innovative solutions and advocates for system-wide change.

What we do:

Collaboration and partnership building

- Facilitating collaboration between all stakeholders to drive a shared purpose and "collective impact"
- Capability building with partners
- Convening working groups on early education and health

Planning and innovation

- Management and incubation of on-the-ground delivery projects
- Project and resource planning

Leadership and advocacy

- Advocating for change at a local, state, federal and sector level
- Leading strategy and securing investment

Learning

- Collecting data, commissioning independent evaluations and leading continuous quality improvement

Our approach is centred in our connection with community

Sustained change only happens when communities are empowered, and initiatives are driven by what really matters to people.

Our community development informs and drives all our work.

We facilitate collective impact work across key suburbs to create the conditions for change.

Community events to build trust, provide positive environments for children and access to support for families.

Suburb-level working groups that bring together service providers and community members.

Community conversations that focus on local aspirations.

Enabling local projects initiated and/or run by the community.

We go to families rather than asking them to come to us and we're consistently present in community, in the places and with the people the community trust.



Our Insights Series

Working on the ground in Mount Druitt, we hear consistent themes from the community and our partners. We want to capture and share what we've learned and contribute to sustainable systemic change. Our Insights Series will:

- Distill our knowledge and insights about what works to increase access to services and help grow empowered families and communities.
- Be evidence-based and solutions oriented.
- Build a case for system-level change and support real change – so all children in Mount Druitt are supported to start school well.

Executive summary

Improving access to quality early learning will make a real difference for our children and families

We have a shared aspiration for how our families *should* experience the early learning system:



Awareness of early learning

- **Families know and value early learning:** Families are aware of early learning centres and understand the value of early learning. They feel confident and safe to use it.
- **Information about early learning is easily accessible:** Families can easily access information about early learning centres such as how much it costs and the nearest location.



Enrolling in early learning

- **Places are available locally:** There is sufficient supply of high-quality early learning places to meet demand and family/community needs.
- **Enrolment is smooth and trauma informed:** The administration process for enrolment is streamlined, accessible and assistance is available when needed.



Sustaining enrolment in early learning

- **Early learning is affordable:** The cost of early learning is not be a barrier to access and bond costs are reasonable and fair.
- **Early learning is accessible:** Families have access to transport to send their children to an early learning centre.
- **Families trust their teachers and educators:** High quality early learning services build trust with families and provide culturally safe and inclusive learning environments in which children thrive.



Currently, families experience barriers at every stage. This contributes to rates of developmental vulnerability that are more than double the national average

And we have a clear ideas about how to get there

There are cross-cutting solutions that address multiple barriers



Sustain and scale the use of Linkers to meet levels of need in target communities: Early learning Linkers provide one-on-one support to help children and families experiencing multiple and complex challenges overcome barriers to early learning. They are a proven model that increases access for the children most likely to miss out on early learning.



Resource and equip early learning services to engage with families: Services in communities like ours are often too stretched to build and sustain the kinds of relationships and flexible approaches that we know are most effective at engaging our families and sustaining their participation. We are seeking:

- ✓ A trial increase in equity funding to equip services to invest in specialist family engagement staff.
- ✓ A scoping study on the full cost of delivering quality early childhood education in communities experiencing disadvantage – to inform future funding model development.

... and a number of quick wins that would remove or reduce specific barriers



Affordability



Admin



Accessibility



Trust

- ✓ Adopt a flexible approach to birth certificate requirements
- ✓ Make subsidies easier to understand and access
- ✓ Ensure all children can access a minimum of two days of early learning
- ✓ Establish equitable bond and enrolment fee policies
- ✓ Develop sensitive and flexible arrears policies and practices
- ✓ Design an effective community transport solution
- ✓ Local councils take up a leadership role in early learning planning and delivery
- ✓ Grow the number of Aboriginal early childhood teachers and educators through a targeted, local Aboriginal employment strategy
- ✓ Develop professional learning networks for early childhood leaders, teacher and educators
- ✓ Develop micro-credentials and online training on key issues relevant to early learning in communities experiencing disadvantage

Early learning matters for the children of Mount Druitt



Early learning matters for the children of Mount Druitt

Early learning changes children’s trajectories

High-quality early learning is a proven strategy for strengthening children’s learning and development.

Evidence is clear that it helps build the core skills that children need to thrive at school and throughout life. Early learning benefits all children but has the greatest impact on children experiencing disadvantage.

When children start school with the foundational skills they need, they’re more able to engage in the classroom, be confident learners and develop strong relationships.

Starting school well puts children on a positive trajectory that is sustained into adulthood. Australian and international research shows this results in improved achievement, more young people finishing Year 12, higher rates of post-school qualifications – and improved financial security, health and wellbeing as a result.

And it helps create economic security for families

Access to affordable, flexible early learning is a critical enabler of a family’s economic security. It equips parents to seek and sustain employment, and to pursue further education and training.

For the families we work with, access to early learning can mean:

- The ability to get a job that pays the rent and bills, groceries and clothing
- The ability to take on an extra shift or casual work opportunities to help them get ahead or meet an unexpected cost
- Time to learn English, get a qualification or go back to study to get a better job
- The ability to attend appointments, work through visa applications, and take care of their own wellbeing

This is vital for a family’s financial security in the short-term – providing the resources and security children need to thrive. It’s also necessary for shifting the dial on intergenerational poverty and equipping families to pursue their aspirations for the future.

Access to high-quality early learning generates multiple benefits



In early learning

Children build core skills

- Communication, social skills, emotional regulation and the foundations of literacy and numeracy
- Developmental delays are identified and addressed early

Parents are able to work -

- Improving their economic security – which helps with housing stability, nutrition and family wellbeing



At school

Children start school with the skills they need to thrive

- Confidence as learners, the ability to regulate emotions and focus on tasks, get along with their peers and being independent and resilient
- Developmental delays are already addressed, and allied health supports are in place (e.g., speech therapy)

Young people have improved wellbeing and achievement through school

- Score higher on NAPLAN and PISA
- More likely to graduate Year 12 or equivalent
- More likely to do post-school qualifications



Throughout life

As adults, they have improved life chances

- Higher employment rates and increased income
- Better health and mental health
- Less likely to be involved in the justice system



For governments

For government, this means

- A stronger school system and improved education outcomes
- Increased tax revenue
- Reduced spending on health, welfare and justice
- Improved community wellbeing and cohesion
- A reduction in the \$250k per-child spend on vulnerable children



Source:

Lifting Our Game - <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/LiftingOurGame.PDF>; The Current State of Knowledge on the Impact of Pre-k- https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/duke_prekstudy_final_4-4-17_hires.pdf; Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia - <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO%20ANALYSIS%20Full%20Report.pdf>

Access and quality gaps in Mount Druitt

Many children and families in Mount Druitt are missing out on the opportunity to benefit from quality early learning, intensifying children's vulnerability.

There are significant early learning access and quality gaps in Mount Druitt

The benefits of early learning depend on children attending regularly and having access to a high-quality learning environment. But in Mount Druitt:



Fewer children in Mount Druitt are attending early learning than other parts of Australia

- **A quarter of children are not attending preschool – and of those who are, we believe many aren't attending the recommended 15 hours a week.** Our experience is that the children who would benefit most are the least likely to attend.
- There are far fewer early learning services available in the suburbs with the highest levels of need. Those that are available are often not as affordable or lack capacity to support children with additional needs.
- Our families experience multiple barriers and delays in accessing early learning.
- Despite the high level of need for early intervention services, Mount Druitt currently only has two early intervention classes available.



The quality of early learning is lower than average

- **28%** of services are not yet meeting the National Quality Standard (compared with 13% nationally)
- **86%** of teachers identified supporting children with challenging behaviors as a professional learning priority, and **76%** identified support pathways for children and families experiencing additional challenges as a priority.

Quality and access gaps contribute to rates of developmental vulnerability at the start of school that far exceed the national average.



1 in 3 children in Mount Druitt are developmentally vulnerable when they start school, compared to 1 in 5 nationally.



Rates of vulnerability are especially high in the suburbs we work intensively in. For example, **over half** of children in Willmot, **40%** of children in Lethbridge Park and **36%** of children in Bidwill are vulnerable on one or more domains – compared with 22% of children nationally.



The number of children “developmentally at risk” in Mount Druitt is **more than double** the NSW average. Over 5% of children are at Risk of Significant Harm, more than double more advantaged areas.



A high proportion of children have additional needs, including language and developmental delays, experiences of trauma and complex behaviours.

Source:

Australian Government, The Australian Early Development Census Data Explorer - <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data/data-explorer?id=135830>; ACECQA Find Child Care, <https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/find-child-care/>; ACECQA NQS Snapshot, <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/snapshots>; The Hive, Survey of Mount Druitt Teachers and Educators (internal data); NSW Government, Western Sydney District Data Profile, https://facs-web.squid.cloud/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/725857/Western-Sydney-District-Data-Profile.pdf

The perspective of First Nation families in Mount Druitt

We listened to First Nations early childhood teachers and educators to understand their experience of what works, and what doesn't, for First Nations children and families in Mount Druitt.

Embedding First Nations perspectives and voices creates high quality, culturally safe early learning services.

First Nations teachers and educators in Mount Druitt commented on the importance of earning and growing trust and belonging by:

- **Integrating Aboriginal knowledge and language in early learning services** –displaying culture in the space and embedding Aboriginal perspectives/language in what and how children are taught
- **Helping First Nations families feel at home in the service** – building relationships, including giving them a voice in key decisions and the opportunity to participate and contribute to children's learning
- **Employing Aboriginal teachers, educators and elders** – who can relate to local families, understand their perspective and experiences, and be role models for children
- **Growing cultural competence of non-Indigenous teachers and educators** – especially building their knowledge of local cultures and experiences
- **Making it easy to access additional support** – removing stigma and streamlining access to specialist support when its needed, including for speech and occupational therapists and paediatricians

“Trust is a big thing for Indigenous people. If you don't have the trust, parents might think we will take their child away or think we're judging them. We need break down those barriers with them.” – Teacher

“Lots of kids don't know who their mob is, they're with non-Indigenous carers. We need to bring in aunts, uncles for them.” – Teacher

“Our waitlist is years long. It's huge. By the time we have a spot, the kid is already in school.” – Teacher at an Aboriginal-led service

First Nations children and families benefit from culturally safe services

When early learning services are culturally safe ...

- **Families feel a sense of belonging at the centre**, feel like it's a place for them and are more comfortable and confident to send their children
- **Children feel pride** because their culture and identity is recognised and valued and they are supported to learn language and culture.
- **Children build safe and trusting relationships with teachers and educators**, who become aunts and uncles providing ongoing love and support. This is particularly important for children who have experienced trauma.
- **Children learn from teachers and educators with shared lived experiences** and lives that are relatable

However, there are barriers that get in the way of families enrolling in early learning and attend the services regularly.

- There are long waitlists for Aboriginal-led services in Mount Druitt
- Families don't always feel a sense of belonging at local services, struggle with tokenistic/shallow recognition of their culture, and can fear judgement, that children will be taken away
- Enrolment processes are often complex and confusing, particularly for families with low literacy, limited access to technology, a history difficult experiences with government agencies like Centrelink
- Access to transport is difficult for many families. While some services are able to find enough funding for a bus service, this is difficult to sustain and isn't available for all children and families who would benefit.

“Aboriginal families shouldn't feel excluded because of transport or finance.” – Teacher

First Nations educators identified key areas for improvement:

- More understanding and better processes around fees and debts.
- A focus on employing more Aboriginal educators and elders.
- Additional support for services in connecting children and families to extra support when required.

Our aspiration and the barriers to achieving it



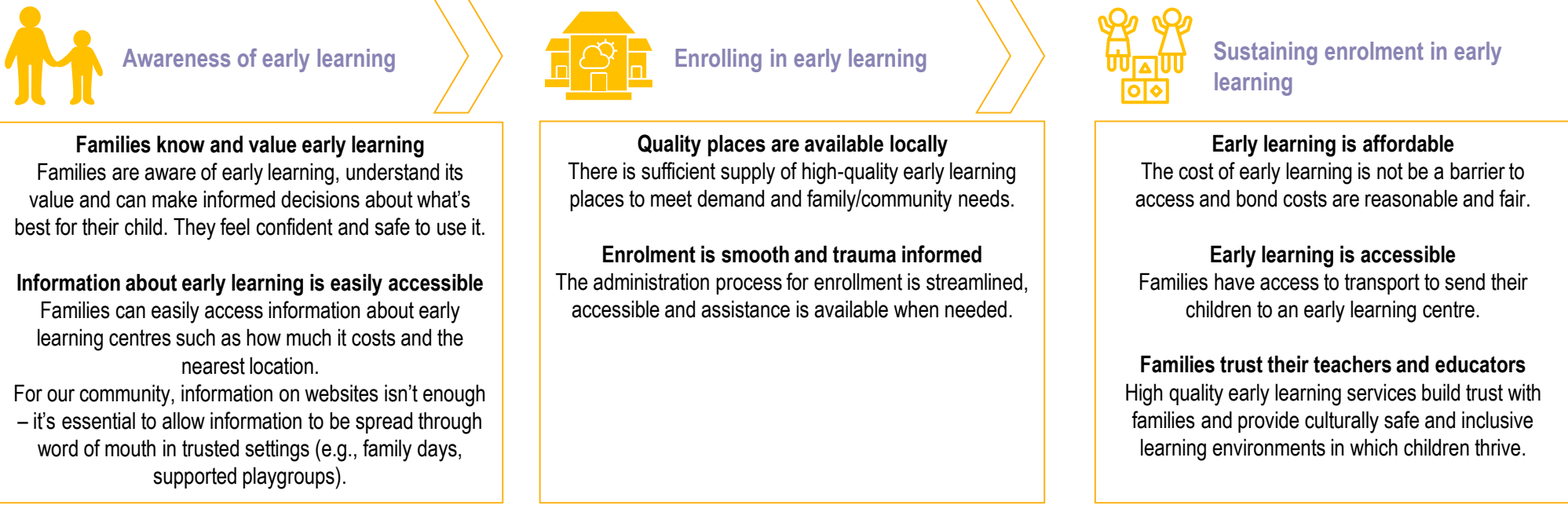
Our aspiration

Our aspiration is an early learning system built around the needs and priorities of the children and families in our community.

We want the design and delivery of early learning in Mount Druitt to be grounded in core principles:

- A commitment to equity – support, resources and investment that is proportionate to need, so our children have the same opportunity as others to thrive
- A trauma-informed approach – systems with soft boundaries, not sharp edges, which do not re-traumatise children and families who have experienced trauma
- Cultural safety – services and staff that create cultural safety for all families and embed First Nations perspectives and voices across the service
- Flexibility and responsiveness – a baked-in ability to respond to individual family circumstances and needs rather than rigid rules and boundaries

The Hive is working towards a system that responds to the needs and priorities of our families at every stage:



Awareness of early learning



Enrolling in early learning



Sustaining enrolment in early learning

Families know and value early learning

Families are aware of early learning, understand its value and can make informed decisions about what's best for their child. They feel confident and safe to use it.

Information about early learning is easily accessible

Families can easily access information about early learning centres such as how much it costs and the nearest location.
For our community, information on websites isn't enough – it's essential to allow information to be spread through word of mouth in trusted settings (e.g., family days, supported playgroups).

Quality places are available locally

There is sufficient supply of high-quality early learning places to meet demand and family/community needs.

Enrolment is smooth and trauma informed

The administration process for enrollment is streamlined, accessible and assistance is available when needed.

Early learning is affordable

The cost of early learning is not be a barrier to access and bond costs are reasonable and fair.

Early learning is accessible

Families have access to transport to send their children to an early learning centre.

Families trust their teachers and educators

High quality early learning services build trust with families and provide culturally safe and inclusive learning environments in which children thrive.

Children and families have equitable access to early learning

Children experience high-quality learning environments that support them to progress
Parents and carers can work, study and care for their own wellbeing

Fewer children start school developmentally vulnerable
Families have improved economic security and cycles of intergenerational disadvantage are disrupted

Access and quality gaps driven by structure of early learning

There are well-established systemic issues known to exacerbate access and quality challenges – especially for communities experiencing disadvantage

The access and quality gaps experienced in Mount Druitt are created and exacerbated by structural challenges with the early learning system. These challenges include:

Mixed responsibilities



All levels of government are involved in early learning – resulting in different funding models between different settings, unclear lines of responsibility for action, and some key gaps in policy responsibility (i.e., aligning supply and demand).

For example:

- There are different eligibility, enrolment and funding requirements between state and community preschools and centre-based day care, creating confusion for families.
- Its not always clear who is responsible for developing solutions to systemic issues – and diffused responsibility can lead to inaction.

Adequacy of funding models



Funding models for early learning don't sufficiently account for the additional costs of providing quality education in communities experiencing high levels of disadvantage.

- Key activities are not fully accounted for, including additional time required to build trust with families, effective ways of working in rooms with a high proportion of children with additional needs, additional support for teachers and educators working children with complex behaviors.

Mixed incentives and varied capability



Diverse services with different incentives, levels of capacity and flexibility to effectively support children and families experiencing disadvantage.

- A high proportion of services do not have access to central office assistance to manage complex administrative requirements, to get advice and support about how to support a family under pressure, or for leaders to access support.
- Mixed-market provision can create misaligned incentives for services – with financial viability and effective support for families experiencing disadvantage not always aligned.

Costs that are high and often opaque



The costs of preschool and childcare for families are not transparent and are difficult to calculate – and often unaffordable for families experiencing disadvantage.

- The cost of early learning depends on whether a family attends a stand-alone preschool or long day care, on their household income, on whether / how many hours they are working, and how many children they have.

A workforce under pressure



Early childhood teachers and educators are often paid less than other similar professions, and don't have access to the kind of professional learning and supports that school educators do.

- There may not be an adequate level of resources and training for teachers and educators to be able to work with vulnerable families appropriately e.g. a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice

Barriers to achieving this aspiration in Mount Druitt

We are clear about the experience we want our families to have when accessing early learning – but there are barriers at every step.



Awareness of early learning



Enrolling in early learning



Sustaining enrolment in early learning

- There is a lot of complex information that families need to navigate when considering early learning:
 - The difference between preschool and long day care.
 - What service to go to and if there are places available.
 - How much it will cost.
 - What they need to do to enrol in early learning.
- Information around early learning is hard to find and understand.

See Slide 11

- Families may not be able to find a place at a high-quality service that they trust and that meets their needs, especially if their child has developmental challenges or is not culturally safe and inclusive for First Nations families.
- The enrolment processes assume a level of agency, literacy and mobility that are extremely challenging for some of our families.
- Services are under pressure and do not always have the time, capacity or skills to foster trusting relationships with families who are experiencing complex life circumstances.

See Slide 12

- Early learning can be very expensive – and information about the cost is hard to decipher.
- Easy access and trusting relationships are key to sustaining enrolment – but are often hard to achieve.
- Services do not always have the skills, knowledge or resources to embed First Nations knowledge and language or to include families, elders or teachers and educators appropriately

See Slide 13

The cumulative effect of these barriers is that children miss out on early learning – because the system is simply too complex to navigate

Barriers to awareness of early learning

The complexity of the early learning system means it can be overwhelming for families to understand what services are available, what they cost, if they are eligible, and which services are the best fit for their circumstances.

Families know and value early learning



Barriers

We know that families in Mount Druitt want the best opportunities for their children – however, not all are aware of the importance and value of early learning, or how to start the enrolment process.

- Many families:
 - Don't know that their child is eligible for early learning
 - Don't understand the difference between 'childcare' and 'preschool'
 - Feel that children should be home with family in the early years or think 'childcare' is only for parents who are working
 - Have had negative experiences of school themselves and are anxious about enrolling their children
 - Don't trust that their child's developmental challenges will be supported appropriately

- Families who are socially isolated, disconnected from services or experiencing challenges may not think of early learning or know where to start - and may fear they will be reported to child protection.

Prioritising early learning can be challenging for our families

- For families experiencing complex life circumstances, it can be hard to find the headspace to think about early learning and to prioritise it when getting by day-to-day takes all their focus.

"I have supported a mum who was feeling anxious about the enrolment process. She shared with me that she was hesitant to send her two children to preschool because her son was experiencing developmental challenges and she was afraid that he would be bullied at preschool, but she didn't know how to share that with the educators." - Early Learning Linker

Information about early learning is easily accessible



Barriers

To access early learning, there is a lot that families need to navigate:

- *The difference between preschool and long day care* – what the difference is, where to go, and what's best for their circumstances.
- *What service to go to and if there are places available* – what the options are, which service is best for their family, if there will be a place for their children (especially for children with disability).
- *How much it will cost* – the difference between the standard fee and their family's out-of-pocket cost, whether they are eligible for Additional Child Care Subsidy (CCS), what bonds and enrolment fees are. Plus, fees are different in each service.
- *What they need to do* – the process for applying for CCS, what information is needed, what children need to take to early learning, if they need to provide food/nappies.

Information is hard to find and understand

- Most local services do not provide transparent information about fees – parents and carers frequently tell us the cost is too high, but they don't know what financial support is available.
- Although Australian Government and NSW Department of Education websites attempt to explain early learning, the complexity of the system means they are often confusing, use jargon and are inaccessible to our families.
- Many of our families do not speak English as a first language and most websites are in English only.
- Many families have low literacy, exacerbating this challenge.
- Many of our families feel overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of the information.

"We worked with a mum who was worried about her son's behaviour and language – she hadn't realised preschool might help and was open to enrolling him. We reached out to her regularly over a number of months, but she was pregnant with her eighth child and found it hard to make time. Once we raised the idea, she enrolled her son – with the encouragement of other family members and lots of practical support to liaise with the preschool, find a place, and navigate the enrolment process. ." – Early Learning Linker

Barriers to enrolment in early learning

The process of enrolling in early learning is often complicated and the quality of services vary. Enrolling often requires complex and repetitive paperwork that may be difficult to understand, deterring families from continuing with the enrolment process.

Quality places are available locally



Barriers

Services are often quite far away

- There are more than 30 early learning services around Mount Druitt and the majority have places available – but they aren't equally distributed. There are fewer services in the suburbs with the highest levels of disadvantage.
- The majority of families do not live within 'pram-pushing distance' of an early learning service.

Although there have been improvements, the quality of our services is variable

- The majority of services around Mount Druitt are "Working Towards" or "Meeting the National Quality Standard" (although there has been significant improvement in recent years).
- For most families in the more disadvantaged suburbs, the nearest "Exceeding" long day care service is a 90-minute walk or a 40-minute bus ride away.
- Aboriginal-led services are already at capacity, and have long waitlists

There are fewer places for children with developmental challenges

- Children with developmental challenges are much more likely to be turned away from services - as services feel ill-equipped to provide the support they need. Often parents of children with disability need to try multiple centres before they can find one willing to enrol their child – and that they trust.
- The paperwork to gain additional resources can be overwhelming – for families and for services.
 - The Inclusion Support Program (ISP) have further admin processes that can be difficult for families to navigate.
 - ISP staff are unable to work with centres until the child is enrolled. Centres are hesitant to take the child if they don't know they will get support from the ISP, leaving families in limbo.

Enrolment is smooth and trauma-informed



Barriers

Enrolment processes assume a level of agency, literacy, and mobility that is extremely challenging for some of our families, especially those who have experienced trauma:

- Family may have trouble getting online to set up or access MyGov and apply for CCS (e.g., low digital literacy and access to technology).
- Filling out complex forms can be a barrier in and of itself:
 - A lack of proficiency in English prevents families from obtaining the information they need on what preschool options are available.
 - Information is often not available in a preferred language.

Getting the right documentation can be difficult

- Families often do not have birth certificates for their children – which they usually need for enrolment in early learning and school. This can be due to confusion around the process for applying for a birth certificate, the cost of ordering a birth certificate, difficulty figuring out the right processes, or because children have been placed in care and their carers do not have access to their birth certificate.
- Some services can enrol children while waiting – but others won't.

Services are under pressure and do not have the capacity to foster relationships with families who have high needs

- Support options are limited – services are usually too stretched to provide the level of assistance needed for families e.g., trauma-informed.
- MyGov access rules limit the way support can be offered to families – providers are unable to call the Centrelink support line or sit with them during the process to help families apply to an early learning centre.

"We will often work with families who feel overwhelmed by the paperwork. One family I worked with shared that she cannot read and write and felt unable to complete the paperwork required for enrolment. Once I assured her we would be supporting her along the way she was keen to start the process" – Early Learning Linker

Barriers to sustaining enrolment in early learning

Sustaining enrolment in early learning is difficult due to high fees, inaccessible transport options, and a lack of trust between families and educators.

Early learning is affordable



Barriers

Early learning can be very expensive

- Local council-run services charge up to \$2,000 for a family to enrol their two children at a service for 5 days a week.
- The average cost for early learning around Mount Druitt is \$97 / day.
- Families are often unaware that subsidies are available and assume early learning is unaffordable for them.

Paying a bond can be an insurmountable barrier

- A bond is often required to secure enrolment.
- The bond is based on the daily fee before subsidies are applied – meaning the bond is the same for all families regardless of their income, the size of their subsidy or whether they are in financial hardship.

If families get into arrears, not all services work with them sensitively to develop a plan

- Families in financial stress often fall into arrears
- However, services do not always take a relationship-based approach with families to produce a solution – like achievable repayment plans.
- If parents feel shame or pressure to pay, they may withdraw their child

Early learning is accessible



Barriers

For most families, early learning is not within walking distance

- Proximity to home, school or work is important to families. However, preschools are not required to take children from their local area, meaning parents may have to travel far to take their child to early learning.

Families often do not have access to transport

- Families may not have access to a car or have a license.
- The public transport network in Mount Druitt is unreliable – buses do not come frequently, and public transport does not always provide a quick or simple route to early learning.
- For families with more than one young child, or children with additional needs, a lengthy bus trip every day is an enormous challenge.

Families trust their teachers and educators



Barriers

Families want to feel respected and culturally safe to enable a trusting relationship with educators

- Families may fear being misunderstood, particularly those that come from a culturally diverse background or who did not have a positive experience of education themselves.
- Families can feel fear and sensitivity to judgement about their parenting, lifestyle, or government intervention (e.g. being reported to child protection).
- First Nations families value culturally safe services – where there are Aboriginal teachers, educators or elders working at or with the service, Aboriginal knowledge and language is integrated into children’s learning, and non-Indigenous teachers and educators are culturally competent and understand local histories and experiences. However, they do not consistently experience this at mainstream services, and local Aboriginal-led services are at capacity.

“We assisted M with the start-up costs for the bonds so that the children could immediately commence care. Within the first 4 weeks of care M found herself behind in her fees by over \$300 and the children were at risk of exclusion. Despite being victims of family violence, which had been recorded by NSW Police, the centre M was attending had not proactively communicated her eligibility for additional subsidies for a short-term fee waiver.” - Early Learning Linker

“We see a lot of families who are not keen to enrol at preschool because they fear judgment from the educators. They are afraid to be reported to DCJ and fear that little issues might cost them their children.” - Early Learning Linker

Practical solutions and quick wins

Overview of solutions

From our work in Mount Druitt, we know that simple solutions can overcome barriers to early learning. We are proposing four targeted interventions to address specific barriers, and two cross-cutting interventions that address multiple barriers.

Cross-cutting solutions



Initiatives that address multiple barriers to early learning



Sustain and scale the use of Linkers to meet levels of need in target communities

Early learning Linkers provide one-on-one support to help children and families experiencing multiple and complex challenges overcome barriers to early learning. They are a proven model that increases access for the children most likely to miss out on early learning.

See Slide 14

Impact

The children who need early learning the most are enrolled and supported to stay enrolled.

Resource and equip early learning services to engage with families

Linkers are an effective solution for families with the most complex needs but can only ever reach a small proportion of families who would benefit – building capacity within and across the whole system is critical. Services in communities like ours are often too stretched to build and sustain the kinds of relationships and flexible approaches that we know are most effective at engaging our families and sustaining their participation.

We are seeking:

- A trial increase in equity funding to equip services to invest in specialist family engagement staff.
- A scoping study on the full cost of delivering quality early childhood education in communities experiencing disadvantage – to inform future funding model development.

See Slide 15

Enhanced capacity within all early learning services.

Increased enrolment and attendance in early learning.

Quick wins for specific barriers - Initiatives that remove or reduce existing barriers



Early learning is affordable

- Ensure all children can access a minimum of two days of early learning
- Establish equitable bond and enrolment fee policies
- Develop sensitive and flexible arrears policies and practices

See Slide 16



Enrolment is smooth and trauma-informed

- Adopt a flexible approach to birth certificate requirements
- Make subsidies easier to understand and access

See Slide 16



Early learning is accessible

- Design an effective community transport solution
- Local councils take up a leadership role in early learning planning and delivery

See Slide 17



Families trust their teachers and educators

- Support to employ local Aboriginal educators
- Develop professional learning networks for early childhood leaders, teacher and educators
- Develop micro-credentials and online training on key issues relevant to early learning in communities experiencing disadvantage

See Slide 17

Parents are supported to overcome affordability challenges

Admin issues don't prevent children attending early learning

Families are more likely to enrol their children, and enrolment is more likely to be sustained

Teachers and educators are better equipped to support and build relationships with children and families experiencing disadvantage

Cross-cutting solution: Sustain and scale the use of linkers

Linker models are a proven strategy for increasing access to early learning for the children who stand to benefit the most, but are at the greatest risk of missing out. They should be sustainably funded and scaled up.

The problem we are solving

Families experiencing complex challenges need individualised support to navigate the early learning system

- Mount Druitt has a higher proportion of families with complex needs than more advantaged communities – and more intensive support is needed.
- Without additional support, these children are the ones who will "fall through the cracks", missing out on valuable months and years of early learning.

Linker models have been shown to be highly effective – but they aren't yet a core part of the service system

- While the service system remains complex and opaque, Linker models will be needed. Yet there's no sustained, ongoing funding for this approach, and recent pilots in NSW dilute some of the core features we believe are required for impact.

Linker programs: Evidence of Impact

- An ARTD evaluation found that The Hive had supported 110 children in Mount Druitt into early childhood education, and confirmed that "families often need long-term holistic support in order to overcome barriers and address challenges".
- An evaluation of a similar model found that around 80% of families engaged in the program enrolled their children in early learning, with the majority of these unlikely to have accessed ECEC if not for the program.
- Access to Early Learning (AEL), a Victorian Government program seeking to deliver linker-like inclusive and responsive services to ensure children could access early learning, resulted in 99% of children being enrolled in an ECEC service.

The way forward

Sustainable funding and scale up of Linker models in priority communities

A linker provides direct, individualised support to families to identify and address barriers, in order to support them to access early learning services. They provide "wraparound"-style one-on-one services that can span a family's whole journey through early learning (from helping them understand the benefits of early learning, assisting with enrolment, and making sure a child is able to stay enrolled). This approach is grounded in trusting, strengths-focused relationships.

What does a good model look like?

The use of linkers is not unique to The Hive, and different organisations have different approaches. Our experience identifies some critical success factors:



Caseloads: Many Mount Druitt families require high levels of support. The Hive's experience suggests that an appropriate caseload for a full-time linker is not more than ~25 families.



Timeframes: Helping a family to overcome barriers to accessing early learning can take time, especially in cases where trust needs to be built before a family is willing to enrol their child. Successful models should ensure timeframes are flexible and engagement should be sustained until school-entry.



Flexibility: Linkers have decision-making autonomy and discretionary funding to address the practical barriers stopping a child from attending early learning (e.g., Helping a family apply for a birth certificate; buying a child shoes if they don't have any; covering enrolment fees if the family cannot afford to do so).



Community engagement: To be successful, a linker can't sit behind a desk. They have to be resourced to spend time out in the community, making connections and building trust with families that would benefit from linker support. This requires a place-based focus.

Who needs to act?

Stakeholders should work together to co-design sustainable models for funding and delivery

Cross-cutting solution: Resource and equip services for family engagement

Early learning services are too stretched to provide the intensive, relationship-based engagement our families need to support and sustain their enrolment. This capability needs to be embedded in the system and reflected in funding models.

The problem we are solving

Families in our community are overwhelmed by the complexity of the early learning system. As a result,

- Children are missing out on critical learning opportunities – at least a quarter of our children aren't attending preschool and we suspect many aren't accessing the full 15 hours.
- Parents are also missing out on opportunities for work and study.

Family engagement is an evidence-based strategy, but early learning

services are already stretched. They are often not resourced and equipped to provide the personalised, trauma-informed and active engagement required to support our families to enrol and stay engaged.

- Services are under significant pressure, are grappling with workforce shortages, and tend to focus their resources on support for children on the floor. These challenges have intensified during the pandemic.
- Teachers and educators often feel ill-equipped to engage effectively with families.

We need to build capacity across the system so that every service has the capacity to engage effectively with families.

- Linker models should be targeted at the families experiencing multiple and complex challenges – another solution is needed for the other ~80% of families in our community.
- Delivering quality early learning in communities experiencing disadvantage costs more. But this additional effort is not fully factored into the funding model.

Who needs to act

- Both state and federal governments stand to benefit from a more effective and accessible early learning system – and solutions need to work across preschools and long day care settings.
- Providers are critical partners – and need to commit to supporting and resourcing specialist engagement staff and sharing sensitive data on the cost of delivery.

The way forward

Trial an increase in equity funding to equip services to invest in specialist family engagement staff

Supporting preschool and long day care services to appoint a part-time family engagement specialist would give them the resources, capacity and skills to work effectively and sensitively with their families. The scope of the role would need to be co-designed but could include:

- Community outreach
- Building and maintaining relationships with families
- Support with administration and enrolment processes
- Working sensitively with families to manage arrears
- Active follow-up for children who are not attending
- Supporting referrals and connecting with Linkers
- Ensuring early learning can be accessed in a way that is not triggering or re-traumatising for our families

Given workforce shortages in early learning, it may be appropriate that these roles are administrators, community liaison officers or community workers, rather than teachers and educators. The trial should be well evaluated, and the insights used to inform future funding model development.

Commission a study on the full cost of delivering quality early childhood education in communities experiencing disadvantage – to inform future funding model development

The preschool funding model includes some loadings for disadvantage, but the Child Care Subsidy does not. Neither funding model fully accounts for the additional costs of providing quality early learning in communities like Mount Druitt.

However, there is little data or transparency about the true cost of quality delivery in communities like ours, and insufficient information to build an adequate needs-based funding model. A critical starting point is building that transparency – across different service types and incorporating the full range of activities services do / should undertake to provide quality early learning.

Quick wins: Enrolment is smooth and trauma-informed

Our goal is an early learning system that is simple to access where cost isn't a barrier. This requires fundamental changes to the way the system currently operates, but there are some quick wins that would substantially reduce barriers for families.



Our goal: A simplified process accessing early learning with less complicated processes for accessing subsidies.

Changes that would make a difference in the short-term

Adopting a flexible approach to birth certificate requirements

A birth certificate is not a legal requirement for enrolment in early learning services in NSW – but some services insist that families provide them before a child can enrol. In order to implement a more flexible approach:

- **Commonwealth / NSW Governments** should issue clear guidance to long daycare services / preschool services on how to enrol a child who does not have a birth certificate (as is done in NSW for school enrolment).
- **NSW Births Deaths and Marriages** should introduce a waiver system that is clearly communicated on its website, allowing families experiencing financial hardship to have the \$60 application fee for a birth certificate waived (while working toward a system in which birth certificates are automatically provided free-of-charge when a child is born).
- **Early learning services** should adopt flexible documentation requirements, e.g.
 - Rely on secondary information such as blue books, where available
 - Allow a child to provisionally enrol while waiting for their birth certificate; allow statutory declarations where no documentation is available.

Making subsidies easier to understand and access

Governments and service providers should provide and promote easier to understand information about the subsidies available – including cameos that set out typical scenarios for families and making the fee calculator more accessible.

The Federal Government should change the ACCS application process, allowing families to apply for both the CCS and ACCS at the same time.

Quick wins: Early learning is affordable

Our goal is an early learning system that is simple to access where cost isn't a barrier. This requires fundamental changes to the way the system currently operates, but there are some quick wins that would substantially reduce barriers for families.



Our goal: An early learning system where a family's income does not determine a child's access to education and care – with a minimum of two free days of early learning for all children

Changes that would make a difference in the short-term

Ensure all children can access a minimum of two days of early learning

The activity test waiver for preschool is not working as intended - to enable children in long day care to attend two days a week.

All families should have access to enough hours to allow their children to attend two days a week – prioritising preschool-aged children but ideally extended to all children in communities experiencing disadvantage.

Establish equitable bond and enrolment fee policies

NSW Government and the Australian Government should establish a bond and enrolment fee policy to ensure these do not create a financial barrier for families.

Options include bonds / enrolment fees that are:

- Removed altogether
- Calculated on a sliding scale / according to income
- Calculated on fees once CCS is applied
- Waived for Health Care Card holders or on a discretionary basis in cases of financial hardship

Develop sensitive and flexible arrears policies and practices

NSW Government and the Australian Government should require services to accept Centrepay arrangements to manage arrears.

Services should be encouraged to take a relationship-based approach to working with families in arrears, including working with families to develop achievable repayment plans.

Quick wins: Early Learning is accessible

Accessibility and trusting relationships are core enablers of both access and quality, and there are targeted and achievable solutions that would make a significant difference



Our goal: Quality early learning services within ‘pram pushing distance’ of all families in Mount Druitt.

Changes that would make a difference in the short-term

Design an effective community transport solution

There are a number of community transport providers in Mount Druitt – but they all have very specific target cohorts and are not suitable for families accessing early learning.

A safe, accessible, daily bus that picks up children in our priority suburbs and drops them off at local early learning services would address a significant barrier to access. Some local Aboriginal-led services already fund a bus out of their own resources – it has been a highly effective approach but is difficult to sustain financially and does not reach all the children and families who would benefit.

This model would need to be carefully designed to ensure children’s safety. Employing staff (e.g., educators or community workers) to travel on the bus – to be able to care for children and connect with families – is a critical component of this approach.

To increase utilisation and maximise efficiency, the bus could be used for related purposes at other times of the day (e.g., transporting families to children’s allied health appointments).

Local councils take up a leadership role in early learning planning and delivery

Local councils play two key roles in early learning – as social and infrastructure planners and in direct delivery. In both roles, they have the opportunity to play a significant leadership role:

- **As a social and infrastructure planner** – to ensure early learning services are available in every community, increasing co-location with other services and taking a leadership role with other services (i.e., operating professional learning networks and encouraging policies that support access, quality and equity)
- **As a model provider** – ensuring the highest quality services are provided for the children and families most in need.

Quick wins: Families trust their teachers and educators

Accessibility and trusting relationships are core enablers of both access and quality, and there are targeted and achievable solutions that would make a significant difference



Our goal: Teachers and educators consistently access quality professional learning that is embedded across their service and sustained over time – and sufficient backfill resources are available.

Changes that would make a difference in the short-term

Create early childhood employment pathways for local First Nations people

Employing First Nations staff – as teachers, educators and/or as additional support staff is one of the most powerful ways to ensure early learning services are culturally safe. It is a key strategy for sustaining and supporting enrolment of First Nations children.

An effective approach to this would involve a targeted Aboriginal early childhood employment strategy in Mount Druitt that included:

- Promoting early childhood as a career
- Roles for elders, aunties and uncles to be in services, in paid roles, sharing culture and language – also as a pathway into early childhood qualifications
- Targeted scholarships and wrap-around support for Aboriginal traineeships, Certificate III, Diploma and Bachelor programs – including placements in centres and sufficient time off the floor for study
- Paid mentoring programs so existing Aboriginal teachers and educators can mentor and support new entrants

Develop micro-credentials and online training on key issues relevant to early learning in communities experiencing disadvantage

A key action in the National Workforce Strategy is increasing access to training. Topics for online training and micro-credentials could prioritise the skills and knowledge that support effective practice in communities experiencing disadvantage, including:

- Working with children who have experienced trauma
- Trauma-informed practices for building relationships with families
- Effective practice in inclusion support
- Cultural awareness and strategies for including Aboriginal knowledge/language in programming

Develop professional learning networks for early childhood leaders, teacher and educators

Teachers and educators have varied levels of confidence and capability in building relationships with families. However, access to professional learning for early childhood leaders, teachers and educators is inconsistent, of variable quality and often not embedded and sustained in practice.

Professional networks are an effective and affordable way of giving early childhood teachers and educators sustained access to professional learning opportunities. We have engaged most local services in a network over the past few years, and in that time, 14 services have gone from “working towards” the National Quality Standard to “meeting or exceeding” it. But to be delivered at scale and fully sustainable going forward, ongoing investment is required.

These networks should become embedded in the system through:

- Investing in local leadership to coordinate and build the network, identify local priorities, develop the agenda and manage the logistics
- A fund to support backfill for teachers and educators working in disadvantaged communities

Insights paper

An early intervention system that makes a difference for Mount
Druitt's children and families

June 2023

This paper has been developed with contributions from the Hive's Collective Partners: Yawarra Community and Childcare Centre, Yenu Allowah Aboriginal Child & Family Centre, Tregear Presbyterian Preschool, Gulyangarri (Community Junction), Western Sydney Local Health District, SDN Children's Services, Willmot Public School, Jesuit Social Services, Ambrose Early Learning Holy Family Emerton, Nepean Speech and Occupational Therapy and Request Therapy & Consulting.



About The Hive and our Insights paper series

We at The Hive, a place-based initiative, are developing a policy insights series to drive an advocacy agenda and contribute to systemic change that improves outcomes for Mount Druitt.

The Hive is one of Australia's most established and effective place-based collective impact initiatives



The Hive has a goal for all children in Mount Druitt to start school well, with equal opportunity to learn, be healthy and participate in quality community life.

Since 2015, we have been embedded in the Mount Druitt community, helping bring community aspirations to life. Our staff live and work in and around the community and are committed to long-term change. The Hive is part of United Way Australia (UWA).

The Hive provides a community backbone that identifies local priorities, collaborates on innovative solutions and advocates for system-wide change.

What we do:

Collaboration and partnership building

- Facilitating collaboration between all stakeholders to drive a shared purpose and “collective impact”
- Capability building with partners
- Convening working groups on early education and health

Planning and innovation

- Management and incubation of on-the-ground delivery projects
- Project and resource planning

Leadership and advocacy

- Advocating for change at a local, state, federal and sector level
- Leading strategy and securing investment

Learning

- Collecting data, commissioning independent evaluations and leading continuous quality improvement

Our approach is centred in our connection with community

Sustained change only happens when communities are empowered, and initiatives are driven by what really matters to people.

Our community development informs and drives all our work.

We facilitate collective impact work across key suburbs to create the conditions for change.

Community events to build trust, provide positive environments for children and access to support for families.

Suburb-level working groups that bring together service providers and community members.

Community conversations that focus on local aspirations.

Enabling local projects initiated and/or run by the community.

We go to families rather than asking them to come to us and we're consistently present in community, in the places and with the people the community trust.



Our Insights Series


Working on the ground in Mount Druitt, we hear consistent themes from the community and our partners. We want to capture and share what we've learned and contribute to sustainable systemic change. Our Insights Series will:

- Distill our knowledge and insights about what works to increase access to services and help grow empowered families and communities.
- Be evidence based and solutions oriented.
- Build a case for system-level change and support real change – so all children in Mount Druitt are supported to start school well.


Executive summary

Early intervention involves high-quality specialist supports provided by a range of professionals that respond to individual children's needs in the early years. Improving access to quality early intervention support will make a real difference for our children, families and community.

Educators, service providers, and families identify a need for increased early intervention services in Mt Druitt.

 Educators in early learning and schools, and early intervention professionals have identified that there has been an increase in the complexity and number of children coming through their services with developmental concerns and additional needs.

Mount Druitt is experiencing a shortage of early intervention professionals and services.

 The combination of high rates of developmental vulnerability in the Mount Druitt community mean that demand for early intervention services is outstripping supply.


We have a shared aspiration for how our families *should* experience early intervention.

Families are aware of and have equitable access to early intervention

All families have access to the information and supports they need – within systems that have soft boundaries rather than hard edges. There is no 'wrong door' through which families can access supports, which are accessible, affordable and coordinated.

Children experience high-quality, culturally safe early intervention

Children experience best practice early intervention that responds to them as individuals, is flexible to family needs and priorities, and builds on their strengths.

 **Children start school well**
All children have the opportunity to learn, and start school with the supports they need to thrive.

Currently, families experience barriers at every stage.



- **Getting access to early intervention:** A lack of information, not knowing what supports are available, navigating a complicated system, the lack of availability and long waitlists for appointments in addition to practical concerns such as affordability or transport to appointments make accessing early intervention challenging.
- **Staying in the system and receiving support:** When children are diagnosed with a disability or developmental delay, practical concerns can make it challenging to get and sustain access to specialist supports – and coordinate the multiple services they receive. Not all practitioners are equipped to meet the needs of families and children, causing families to disengage.
- **Seeing results:** If families overcome these barriers and get into the system to receive support, children need to receive best practice early intervention that is culturally safe, trauma informed, and family centered in order to improve outcomes for families and children.

Many families and children don't have the support to overcome these barriers and fall through the cracks in the system. This contributes to rates of developmental vulnerability far higher than the national average.

Because the barriers are complex, multifaceted and exist at every stage of the journey for families, we need to think holistically in order to address them.

There are a spectrum of holistic solutions which overcome these multifaceted barriers and achieve our shared aspiration.



Building awareness – factsheets, information, videos and workshops. Families in Mt Druitt need simple, easy to access and easy to understand information about early intervention – what it is, how it supports children's learning, and how to access it.



Sustaining and scaling linker models. Linkers provide one-on-one support to help families navigate complex systems. They are a proven model to increasing access to early intervention.



Building capacity. Early childhood educators and early intervention professionals leverage their interprofessional relationships to build each others' skills, knowledge and understanding of children and families in Mt Druitt and support outcomes.



Place-based wrap around models. Integrated community hubs and networks reduce barriers for families and support strong relationships and a sense of trust within the community.

Early intervention matters for the children of Mount Druitt



Early intervention changes children's trajectories and can significantly reduce the demand and intensity of services over time.



During the early years, children learn and develop at a rapid pace and build a foundation from which to thrive. Early intervention helps children develop the skills they need to participate and learn in everyday activities.

Early intervention enables children with a disability, developmental delay and / or other additional challenges to start school well. By offering support during a critical period of a child's development, early intervention creates a unique opportunity to achieve the highest impact in promoting child health, wellbeing and growth.

Early intervention is a phrase with various definitions. In this paper we are referring to high-quality specialist supports that respond to children's needs, and their families, in the early years.



A range of professionals and specialist supports that assist families to respond to the developmental needs of children are included in this definition, such as:

- **Paediatricians** – who provide specialist care to young children to conduct developmental and diagnostic assessments
- **Early Intervention Teachers** – with expertise in inclusive education, they work with children by implementing useful classroom strategies
- **Allied health professionals** – such as Occupational Therapists, Speech Pathologists, Physiotherapists and Psychologists
- **Other supports** – early childhood educators, Linkers and other community / case workers who help families get access to early intervention.



Getting a diagnosis and specialist supports in place early can:

- Build the capacity of parents / caregivers in fostering the skills to support their child's needs.
- Leverage young children's capabilities to learn and develop new skills quickly.
- Reduce the impact of a developmental delay and / or disability by strengthening protective factors and removing barriers to learning and development.
- Increase the overall effectiveness of the intervention and decrease costs over time.
- Improve children's outcomes across multiple developmental domains.
- Open doors to supports through the education system throughout their schooling.



There are multiple systems set up to support access to early intervention, including:

- The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI)
- Medicare
- Department of Education Early Intervention classes and resource support, transition to school programs and schools for specific purpose
- Disability and Inclusion funding for preschools.

Given the importance of early intervention, it is important that systems are:

- **Flexible and adaptable** to individual child and family needs.
- **Inclusive and easy to navigate.**
- **Support collaboration** across multiple professionals working with a child and their family.

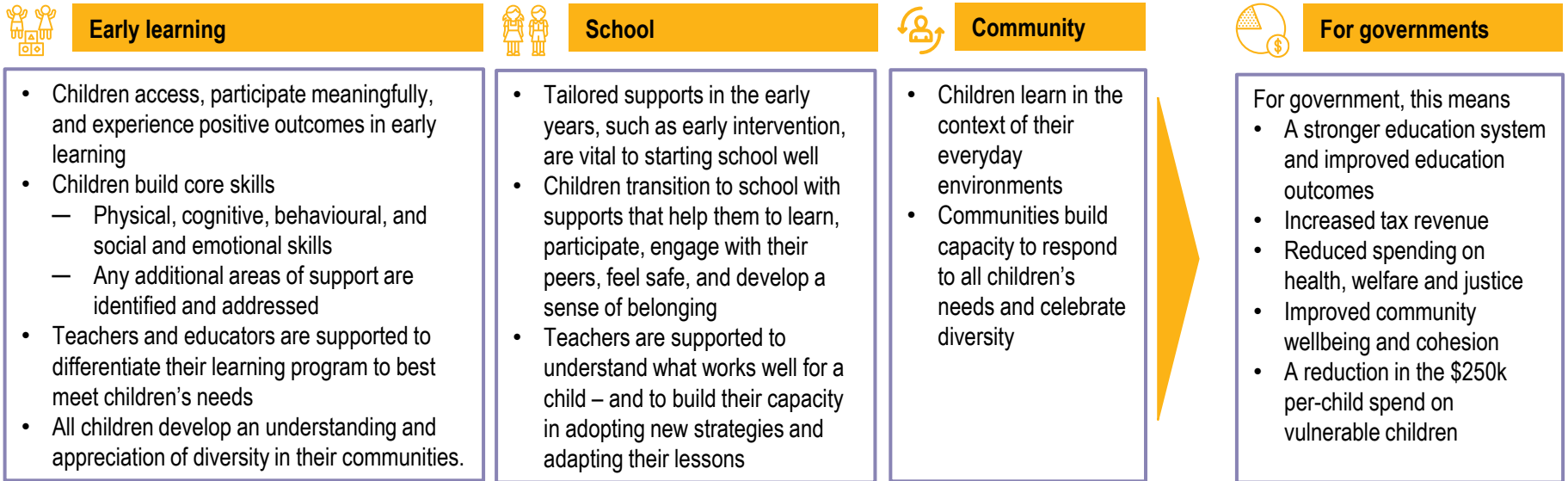
High-quality early intervention sets children up to thrive – across multiple settings.

Best practice early intervention is...

- **Family centred** – working in partnership with families, engaging with family priorities and choices to drive what happens in early intervention
- **Strengths based** – building on child and family strengths and supporting families to develop formal and informal networks
- **Culturally safe** – creating welcoming and culturally inclusive environments that are respectful of diversity, responsive, and flexible
- **Inclusive** – recognising children’s right to meaningfully participate in their family and community life, and have the same choices, opportunities and experiences as all children
- **Collaborative** – families and professionals work together in partnership as an integrated team around the child, sharing knowledge, information and skills
- **Capacity building** – building knowledge, skills and abilities of the individuals who spend the most time with the child to have as great an impact as possible
- **Evidence based** – engaging in practices and strategies that are grounded in research and sound clinical reasoning to ensure services are high-quality and committed to continuous improvement
- **Outcomes focused** – focussing on the outcomes families want for their child, identifying and supporting the skills needed to achieve these outcomes

Source: Best Practice in Early Intervention National Guidelines (ECIA, 2016)

... and can generate multiple benefits across different settings



There is an increased need for early intervention services in Mount Druitt due high levels of developmental vulnerability in the community.

The level of developmental vulnerability in Mount Druitt far exceeds the national average.



1 in 3 children in Mount Druitt are developmentally vulnerable when they start school, compared to 1 in 5 nationally (AEDC, 2021).



The percentage of children in Mount Druitt who are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains has **increased between 2018 and 2021** – and the gap between Mount Druitt and NSW has also increased (AEDC, 2018; 2021).

Analysis suggests that developmental vulnerability increased across the board during the COVID period – but that this was more pronounced in areas with high levels of disadvantage. This could be because of social isolation during COVID-19 lockdowns, possibly as a result of reduced access to early childhood education and the limits placed on social interaction.



Rates of vulnerability are especially high in the suburbs in which we work intensively. For example, **63%** of children in Willmot, **38%** of children in Bidwill, **33%** of children in Tregear and **30%** of children in Lethbridge Park are vulnerable on one or more domains – compared with **22%** of children nationally (AEDC, 2021).



A high proportion of children have additional needs, including language and developmental delays, experiences of trauma and complex behaviours.



Given the levels of developmental vulnerability, there is an increased need for early intervention support in Mount Druitt.



Services and schools report increasing numbers of children requiring additional support

ECECs report an increased number of children experiencing additional developmental challenges and barriers for children to access early intervention supports (SEER, 2022)

Schools also report a range of developmental concerns in high numbers of their Kindergarten cohort (Health Linker Overview 2021).

Principals from the Public Schools of Willmot, Bidwill & Lethbridge Park reported high numbers of children (up to 80%) displaying a delay in speech development (Health Linker Overview 2021).



The demand for The Hive's early intervention and health linker programs highlights a sustained need in the community

The level of demand for the Check Ups Before School (CUBS) program exceeded The Hive's annual targets, and remained consistently strong throughout the program's history, indicating the significant unmet need for developmental assessments in the Mount Druitt community.

The Hive's Child Health Linker program, that assists families to overcome barriers and navigate the health system, has also had consistent high levels of demand.

The significant demand for the CUBS and Health Linker programs shows the need for a flexible, equitable and place-based approach to accessing health services including allied health as an early intervention.

The perspective of First Nations practitioners in Mount Druitt

Early intervention matters

Barriers

Solutions

We listened to First Nations early learning and health professionals to understand their experience of what works, and what doesn't, for First Nations children and families in Mount Druitt in accessing early intervention.



First Nations children and families benefit from culturally safe services

When early intervention services are culturally safe ...

- **Families feel a sense of belonging**
- **Children feel pride** because their culture and identity is recognised and valued and they are supported to learn language and culture
- **Children build safe and trusting relationships with professionals**
- **Families trust professionals** and can share their stories, goals and aspirations for their children
- **Children learn from professionals with shared lived experiences** and lives that are relatable

'We definitely need culturally safe spaces for yarning and spaces where mob feel safe asking for help'
First Nations Community Programs Manager

'[early intervention professionals] should have cultural awareness training, to understand people's behaviour and why people don't ask for help' – First Nations ECEC educator

'We have been working with an OT from the Hive and she has trauma informed training and it's been amazing...if [early intervention professionals] are going to be working with communities it is so important that they have the training and are required to do it.' - First Nations ECEC Director



However, there are barriers that get in the way of families accessing early intervention supports

- **Given the history of harm caused by the system, First Nations families are afraid to ask for help**, fear judgement of their parenting, and that their children will be taken away
- **There are not enough culturally safe spaces for First Nations families** to access information and across all the services First Nations families interact with
- **There's a lack of First Nations allied health professionals and services** – so families are forced to engage with professionals who may not have cultural awareness or trauma informed training
- **Processes are often complex and confusing**, particularly for families with low literacy, limited access to technology, and a history of challenging experiences with government agencies
- **Access to transport is difficult for many First Nations families**. While some services offer support within early learning centres, at school, or in the home environment, others require families to travel to attend appointments

'Mob aren't feeling culturally safe to ask for help...due to the historic experience of the system... they are afraid they're going to be reported if they ask for help' - First Nations Community Programs Manager



Embedding First Nations perspectives and voices creates high quality, culturally safe early intervention services.

First Nations early learning and health professionals in Mount Druitt highlighted the importance of building trust with community by:

- **Supporting families to understand what services are available**
- **Make it easy to access supports** – by meeting families where they are rather than expecting families to navigate complex systems
- **Building cultural safety** – where First Nations knowledge, language and culture is valued and integrated into strategies to support children's learning and development
- **Helping First Nations families feel at home in the service**
- **Employing First Nations professionals** – who can relate to local families, understand their perspective and experiences, and be role models for children
- **Growing cultural competence of non-First Nations professionals** – in particular building their knowledge of local cultures and experiences
- **Supporting and sustaining reciprocal relationships** between First Nations professionals and non-First Nations professionals to leverage knowledge, strengths, and understanding.

First Nations professionals identified key areas for improvement:

- Ongoing cultural competency and safety training for early intervention professionals in understanding how to support First Nations families and communities
- Additional education for early intervention professionals in how trauma impacts behaviour and child development
- Recruit First Nations ECEC educators and early intervention professionals

Our aspiration and the barriers to achieving it



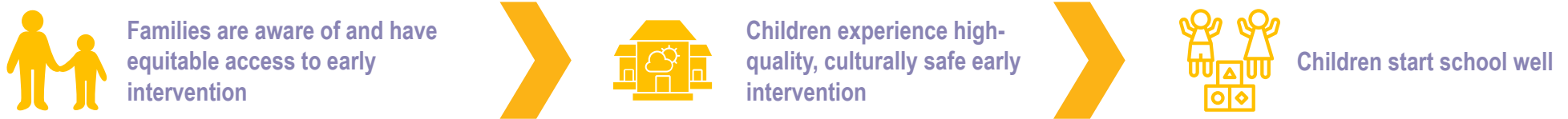
Our aspiration

Our aspiration is an early intervention system built around the needs and priorities of the children and families in our community.

We want the design and delivery of a placed-based approach to early intervention in Mount Druitt to be grounded in our core principles so that services are:

- **Equitable** – support, resources and investment that is proportionate to need, so our children have the same opportunity as others to thrive
- **Trauma-informed** – systems with soft boundaries, not sharp edges, which do not re-traumatise children and families
- **Relational** – services that recognise the need to work ‘at the speed of trust’ and allow time for slow, intention relationship building with families and community
- **Accessible** – a baked-in ability to respond to individual family circumstances and needs rather than rigid rules and boundaries

The Hive is working towards a system that responds to the needs and priorities of our families at every stage:



Families understand and value early intervention

All families have access to the information they need to help them make informed decisions about supports for their child. Families are brought along the journey to understand the supports and strategies they can implement.

Families have access to early intervention

All families have access to the supports they need – within systems that have soft boundaries rather than hard edges. Families who face barriers are assisted to access place-based supports, shorter waitlists and low-cost services.

Families experience quality services

Children experience best practice early intervention that responds to them as individuals, is flexible to family needs and priorities, and builds on their strengths.

Early intervention is delivered by a strong and supported workforce

Early intervention professionals provide culturally safe, trauma informed services and have expertise in working with young children and their families in communities experiencing high rates of disadvantage.

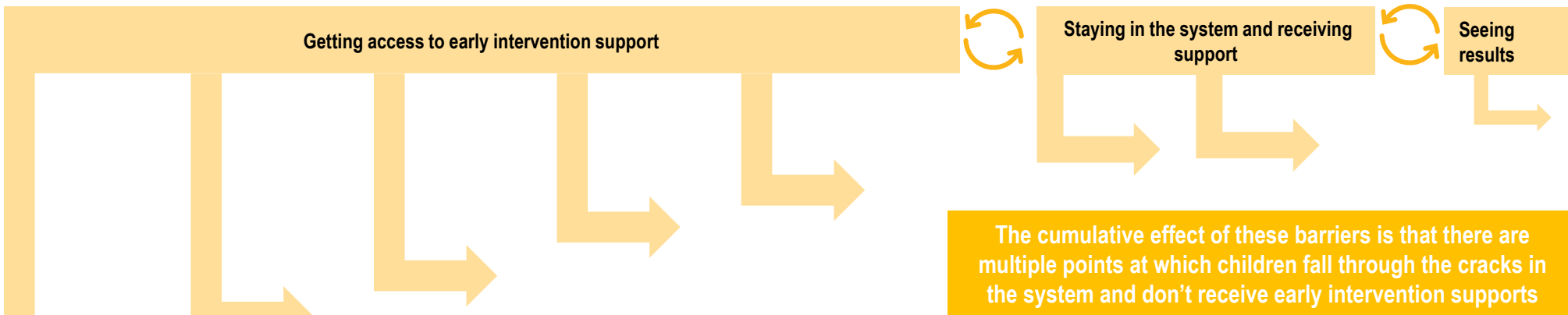
Children are supported to build the skills they need to thrive

All children learn and participate in their communities alongside their peers.

Children’s transition to school includes the supports that enable them to succeed. For example, collaboration between early learning, school and allied health professionals.

Barriers along the journey towards accessing early intervention

The journey for families to access early intervention for their children involves multiple steps – and currently there are barriers at every step along the way that result in children falling through the cracks in the system.



Awareness and identification

Families aren't always aware of potential developmental concerns, or what supports are available and how to access them.

Awareness and identification of developmental concerns



Barriers

We know that families in Mount Druitt want the best opportunities for their children – but don't always have access to information and resources to know that their child may require additional support.

Families who are socially isolated, disconnected from services or experiencing challenges may not be aware of early intervention or know where to start. If a child is not socialising with other children and families are not engaged with ECEC they may not have access to information about child development, the knowledge and experience of ECEC educators and the health checks including visits from early intervention professionals that take place in ECECs, and therefore may not be aware if their child is delayed.

Information is hard to find and understand. It is difficult to access and understand information about child development and early intervention pathways.

There can be a normalisation of developmental delays. Developmental delays can be normalised due to the high rates of developmental vulnerability in Mount Druitt.

What impact does this have?

Families are not aware that their child could have a developmental delay or disability, or the supports they could be eligible for, which hinders access to early intervention to help build their child's skills.

'[Parents may say] 'I know what they are saying', but when they socialise with other children then it becomes clear no one else can understand what they are saying' – First Nations ECEC educator

'There is a lack of information in the community' - First Nations ECEC educator

'Families don't know what to look for, they don't know where to find that information' - Speech Pathologist

'If all children have speech problems it is hard to identify it as an issue.' - Teacher

Awareness of support options



Barriers

When families have identified that their child may require additional support, there is a lack of information and guidance about what is available.

ECECs play a crucial role in connecting children to early intervention, but what if children aren't in ECEC?

ECECs are often the first step towards early intervention. ECEC educators know children well – and have a strong understanding of child development. They are often the first person to identify if a child may have developmental delays and connect families to additional support. If families aren't engaged with an ECEC, they may not have access to information and support to know what support is available. Many children only access ECEC in the year before school, which can delay access to supports and services which they may have benefitted from earlier.

Families don't know where to access support – and there are significant misunderstandings about the available options

Families are often unaware of the support available to access a diagnosis for their children, including bulk-billed paediatricians, allied health services or connection with the NDIS. Even if they are engaged with ECEC, families often don't have the contacts or resources to facilitate awareness of the support options available, and to know how to access them.

What impact does this have?

Families don't have access to the information and resources necessary to know what supports are available if their child needs additional support, particularly if they aren't in ECEC. This means children who need early intervention are not able to access it.

'Children have a piece of paper and nowhere to go with it' – First Nations ECEC Director

'If they don't have the contacts or resources, parents are not being informed about what is out there...it's not from a lack of parents caring' – First Nations ECEC educator

'The services and NDIS exist, and I have heard of some of them but no idea how to access them, or if I'm eligible' –Mt Druitt family

Feeling safe to ask for help and seek support

A lack of cultural safety, high-levels of fear, and the stigma associated with asking for help gets in the way of accessing support.

Cultural safety



Barriers

There is a lack of cultural safety across all services families engage with. Families do not always feel culturally safe when engaging with services, and there are a lack of culturally safe spaces families can go to access information.

The Mount Druitt community is culturally and linguistically diverse with 60% of the community born outside of Australia and a higher proportion of the community identifying as Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander (3.7% in Mount Druitt compared with 2.8% nationally) (ABS, 2016; 2021). Services in Western Sydney need to understand their community and how to work in a culturally safe way in order to build trust and strong relationships with families.

Many early intervention practitioners are not supported with training to build cultural competence. There is a need for cultural competency training in how to engage and work with community – in particular First Nations, CALD and families and children who have experienced trauma.

First Nations families value culturally safe services – where there are First Nations staff and early intervention professionals that are culturally competent in working with First Nations families, children and communities understand local histories and experiences. However, they do not consistently experience this in all services. It is important early intervention professionals know how to work in a culturally safe, strengths-based way with First Nations families and their children.

What impact does this have?

First Nations and CALD families do not feel safe asking for help and seeking support.

Source: ABS Mount Druitt Census All persons Quickstats 2016; 2021

‘Mob don’t feel safe asking for help with their children due to the historic experience of the system... they’re afraid they’re going to be reported if they ask for help’ – First Nations Community Programs Manager

‘Its all about knowing different cultures, because Western Sydney has multiple different cultures and not letting people feel shame about their different cultures, making sure people feel wanted, and heard’ – First Nations ECEC Educator

Fear and stigma



Barriers

Families also experience fear and stigma around asking for help and seeking support. Even if families do identify that their child may need support, they may experience fear and stigma gets in the way.

Families, in particular First Nations families, can feel fear and experience judgement about their parenting, lifestyle, or culture. Due to historical institutional failure and trauma, families in Mt Druitt are hesitant to trust organisations (including Health services) due to fear of child protection reports, personal judgement or prior negative experiences. This can prevent families from seeking support.

Asking for help requires overcoming significant stigma surrounding disability and developmental delay. As well as a mistrust of the system and services, families also may feel that their child needing additional support means that they have done something ‘wrong’. This may prevent families from asking for help or may even deter families from engaging with ECECs and other services due to the fear of judgement and the stigma that their child may not be accepted.

What impact does this have?

Families are afraid of asking for help due to the stigma, that their child may not be developmentally ‘normal’, they do not seek help or support.

“Fear for asking for help comes from generation after generation” – First Nations ECEC educator

‘Families are too afraid to ask’ – Speech Pathologist

‘It’s scary, admitting that your child is delayed.’ – First Nations ECEC educator

‘There’s always the fear, that they’ll be looking at other things than just the health issue the child is in for’ – First Nations ECEC educator

Navigating the system

A bewildering service environment and the number and complexity of administrative tasks that families must understand and complete to gain support is a significant barrier to accessing early intervention.

Navigating the system



Barriers

The early intervention system assumes a level of agency, literacy, social capital and mobility that is extremely challenging for some families in Mount Druitt.

Lack of awareness of the services available, low literacy levels, lack of access to technology or internet, and a complex system means that families facing disadvantage are left struggling to navigate a bewildering service environment.

Community have expressed that the ‘system’ doesn’t currently meet the needs of children families. Paediatricians, allied health therapists, health professionals, ECEC and early intervention support classes operate across multiple systems and funding streams – with very little coordination between them, contributing to the complexity and confusion families experience.

Often ECEC services need to support families to navigate the system. ECEC educators work hard to build trust and strong relationships with families. They are acutely aware the difficulties families face in trying to access allied health, and often go above and beyond to support them to navigate the system. However this work often goes unrecognised, unacknowledged and definitely unfunded.

What impact does this have?
The system is incredibly challenging for families, who may be unable to navigate through to getting the supports they need, or who may disengage due to the complexity and demands it places on them.

‘How the current system is set up is to provide a diverse set of available options, but at the moment requires a fair bit from families which they aren’t coping with’ – Occupational Therapist

‘Families struggle to navigate the system.’ – Occupational Therapist

‘The system is currently, let’s fund the therapy for the child, but there is no support for families to help the child access the support’ – Occupational Therapist

For example: Navigating the NDIS Early Childhood Approach



Barriers

The NDIS is a particular example of an incredibly complicated system that families are required to navigate to receive support for their children.

‘I’ve been trying to work with a child, the school has got a plan, but the parent didn’t understand the different types of plans, they didn’t understand they needed a plan manager to sign off on things, they didn’t know they needed to fill out forms. School helped support this. But then the plan manager has a whole other set of forms’ – Speech Pathologist

When it comes to accessing the NDIS, or using their NDIS packages, families don’t know who to go to, what to do, or how to manage a plan. NDIS plans are often written in a way that is confusing, doesn’t meet their child’s needs or reflect their priorities as a family. Families also experience significant challenges finding a service and managing waitlists.

Some families experience limited support from NDIS ECEI coordinators in the practical implementation of their plan or supports – and the majority of support is offered over the phone which can be challenging for families.

What impact does this have?
The NDIS is incredibly challenging for families to understand and navigate, and without sufficient support from ECEC and other services, families may drop out due to the complexities in operating within this system.

‘A lot of the mob aren’t aware of the NDIS process’ – First Nations Community Programs Manager

‘The NDIS is just a big, complicated process’ – First Nations ECEC educator

‘It can be incredibly overwhelming’ – Occupational Therapist

‘By the fourth or fifth person then you might be able to get your foot in the door to be assessed’ - First Nations Community Programs Manager

Availability of support

Access to early intervention is severely constrained by a lack of availability due to staff shortages and extensive waitlists.

Severe staff shortages in both early intervention and ECEC



Barriers

There is a lack of staff in both early intervention and ECEC meaning families are not getting the support they need.

The lack of early intervention professionals means demand is not being met. There are a lack of clinicians and early intervention professionals in Western Sydney. Western Sydney Health are struggling to fill vacancies meaning that positions remain unfilled. The lack of early intervention professionals results in extensive waitlists which can be as long as 12-18 months for some services.

The shortage of educators in the ECEC sector means less support for families. The ECEC staff shortage impacts the availability of child spaces in early learning, with some centres closing their doors on days they do not have enough staff. This directly impacts families' ability to access support from ECEC in building awareness, navigating the system and receiving support.

'Extreme staff shortages are the biggest barrier....We are repeatedly advertising the same positions, and not getting even one application, even when we're happy to develop people's skills and get them to the point they need to be. It's a huge challenge.' - Child & Family Health at Western Sydney Local Health District

'There are none of us' –
Speech Pathologist

'Finding anyone at the moment is a challenge.' -
Child & Family Health at
Western Sydney Local
Health District

'There is a lack of clinicians in Western Sydney, including doctors and allied health' - First Nations Community Programs Manager

What impact does this have?

There are not enough early intervention professionals to meet demand combined, with ECEC staff shortages, which means children and families are missing out on receiving support before they start school. Children transitioning to school without supports in place can experience significant challenges due to lack of effective strategies in place – and this can cause delays in accessing inclusion funding.

Waitlists



Barriers

Children are being left waiting for months or even years to access early intervention services due to extensive waitlists. To access support, first children are put on a waitlist to see a pediatrician to receive a diagnosis, then on a waitlist to access the NDIS, and then on a waitlist to receive therapy with that funding. These waitlists are currently extremely long, and often leave families in limbo.

Children are missing out on early intervention while sitting on waiting lists. Waitlists mean children aren't receiving therapy, families don't know how to best support their child and ECEC educators don't have the information to best support children's education and care. If children wait months or years to receive early intervention, this can have a significant impact on their learning and development.

Waitlists may also cause families to become disillusioned and disengage from the system. Long waitlists turn families away from trying to access support. Families may lose faith that their child will eventually see an early intervention professional and may choose to disengage from the system. This may mean their child never receives allied health support.

What impact does this have?

Even when children are in the system they are left waiting for months, or even years before receiving support, and families may lose faith and disengage causing children to miss out on engaging with early intervention.

'The waitlists are really long' - Child & Family Health at Western Sydney Local Health District







'Waitlists leave parents in limbo' -
First Nations
Community Programs
Manager

'It is hard to get into a service, and then when they do get there, they are told there is a 12- or 18-month waiting list' –
Occupational
Therapist

'By the time child needs it at 3.5 they don't get support until they are 5' – First Nations ECEC educator

Practical barriers

Families experience many practical concerns that exacerbate existing barriers accessing early intervention.

| Practical concerns | What we heard | What impact does this have? |
|---|---|---|
|  <p>Affordability</p> <p>There are significant out-of-pocket costs associated with allied health services. Assessments to diagnose children with a disability or developmental delay are costly, and often not covered by Medicare. Families are unsure where they can get financial support.</p> | <p><i>'It's a whole week or two weeks rent for an assessment...funding is a barrier for families'</i> - First Nations Community Programs Manager</p> | <p>The costs for diagnosis and ongoing support are not affordable to families, so children may miss out on receiving a diagnosis and subsequent therapy due to financial constraints.</p> |
|  <p>Communication</p> <p>Families may not have access to a phone or internet making arranging referrals, appointments and communicating with allied health very challenging.</p> | <p><i>'Then the challenge of getting a referral, challenge of contacting families, either because they don't answer their phones or do not have access to a phone'</i> - Teacher</p> | <p>If early intervention professionals and other services supporting families (e.g. ECECs, schools, social workers) can't contact families then they struggle to navigate the system and their children may miss out getting into or staying in the system.</p> |
|  <p>Care for other children</p> <p>For children to receive early intervention support families must often attend multiple appointments which can be challenging for families with multiple children.</p> | <p><i>'I know a parent who needs to get to Penrith for a follow up for one child but has other children and needs someone to care for other children to get to the appointment'</i> - First Nations ECEC Director</p> | <p>If families can't arrange care for their other children, then they are often unable to attend appointments and their child doesn't receive support.</p> |
|  <p>Family stressors</p> <p>Families may be experiencing multiple stressors in addition to seeking support for their child. The additional stressors may create barriers to seeking support.</p> | <p><i>'What happens when a parent struggles with their mental health and they have two or three weeks when they aren't coping - what happens then'</i> - Occupational Therapist</p> | <p>If the additional stressors families are experiencing are too great, then families may not have the capacity to support their child to engage with early intervention, meaning their child may miss out on support.</p> |
|  <p>Transport</p> <p>Many families don't have access to public transport, don't own a car or are unable to afford petrol. This is challenging when early intervention support often requires multiple appointments / distances to travel.</p> | <p><i>'Transport is a big issue'</i> - First Nations ECEC Director</p> | <p>Families can't attend appointments they have to travel to, meaning children don't access allied health, or become 'do not attends' which can cause private allied health services to stop offering services.</p> |
|  <p>Medicare and NDIS eligibility</p> <p>Migrant and refugee families who aren't Australian citizens may not be eligible for Medicare or NDIS, making it exceptionally challenging for these families to access funding for ongoing therapy.</p> | <p><i>'I'm not a citizen so I can't access the NDIS for my son with Autism but I can't afford to pay for therapy. Am I just meant to do nothing while he gets further behind?'</i> - Mount Druitt family</p> | <p>Families who aren't citizens have to navigate the immigration and visa process in order to get the right visa to be eligible for Medicare, many still aren't eligible for NDIS. Without the right support, many fall through the cracks and their child does not receive early intervention.</p> |

Breaking down the barriers to accessing early intervention in Mt Druitt

The multiple barriers to accessing early intervention are complex and multifaceted – requiring holistic solutions that place children and families at the centre.

Getting access to early intervention support



- Awareness and identification of developmental concerns
- Awareness of support options
- Feeling safe to ask for help and seek support
- Navigating the system
- Availability of support
- Practical barriers

Staying in the system and receiving support

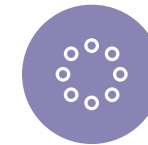


- Practical barriers
- Access to best practice early intervention

Seeing results



- Achieving outcomes for children and families



Because the barriers are complex, multifaceted and exist at every stage of the journey for families, we need to think holistically in order to address them.

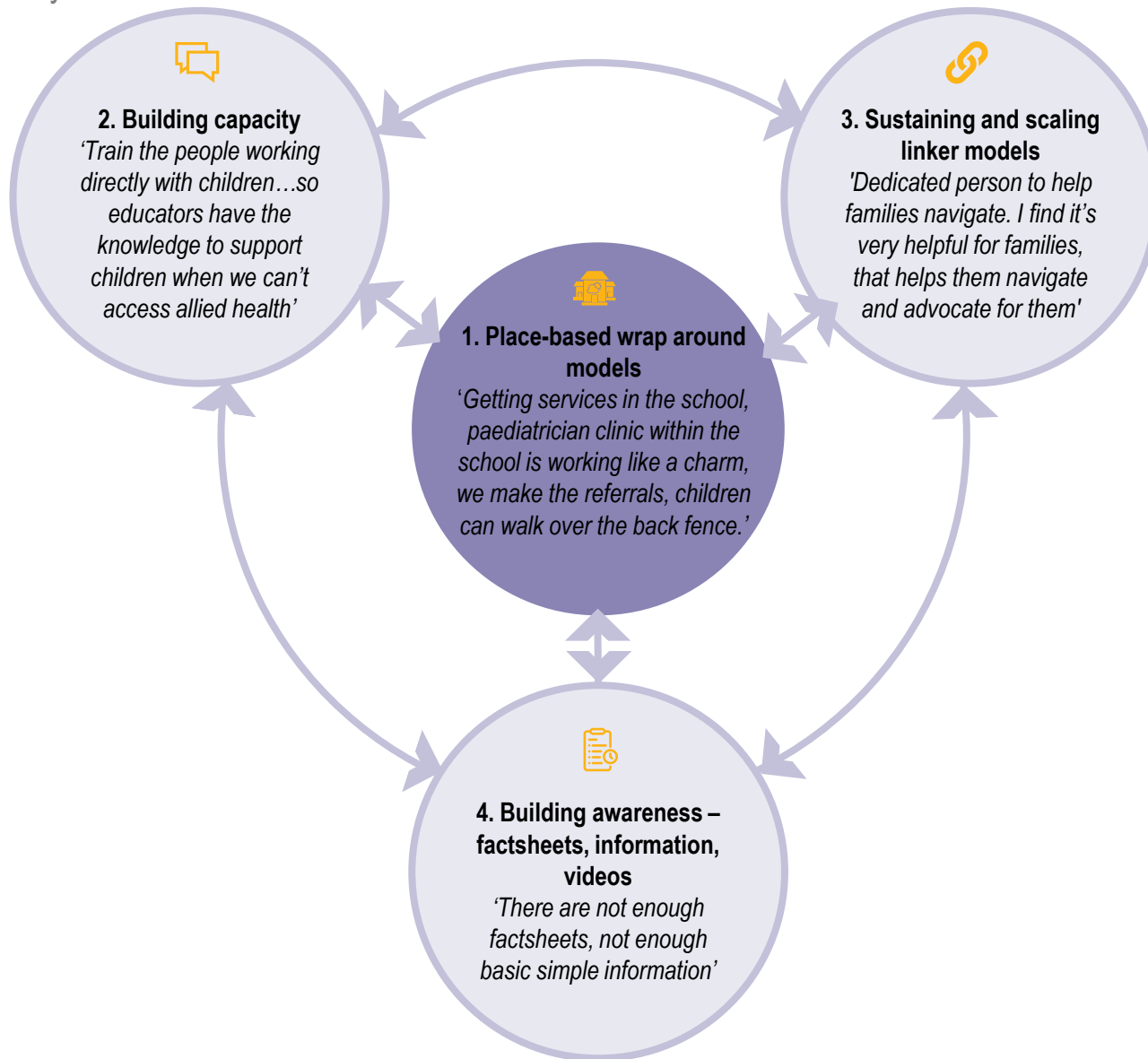
We're proposing a spectrum of solutions that target these barriers by delivering strengths-based, collaborative support that is delivered in place.

Solutions







Solutions

We're proposing multiple integrated solutions, with place-based wrap around models at the core, to target the wide-ranging barriers to accessing early intervention in Mt Druitt.



Solutions

We're proposing multiple integrated solutions, with place-based wrap around models at the core, to target the wide-ranging barriers to accessing early intervention in Mt Druiitt.

| | What we heard... | What impact will this have? | Overcoming barriers by... |
|---|--|---|--|
|  <p>1. Place-based wrap around models</p> | <p>Integrated community hubs and networks reduce barriers for families and support strong relationships and a sense of trust within the community.</p> | <p><i>There is no 'wrong door' for families seeking support. Educators, early intervention professionals and families work together as a team around the child.</i></p> | <p>Providing wraparound support for all families in a culturally safe environment.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">See page 21</p> |
|  <p>2. Building capacity</p> | <p>Early childhood educators and early intervention professionals leverage their interprofessional relationships to build skills, knowledge and understanding of children and families in Mt Druiitt.</p> | <p><i>Enhanced capacity within every early learning service.</i></p> | <p>Providing children with access to early intervention while overcoming practical barriers of transport, waitlists and affordability, including children without individual funding packages.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">See page 22</p> |
|  <p>3. Sustaining and scaling linker models</p> | <p>Linkers provide one-on-one support to help families navigate multiple complex systems involved in early intervention. They are a proven model to increasing access to supports and preventing families from falling through the cracks.</p> | <p><i>Children who need additional support are supported to access early intervention. Children participate and learn throughout their everyday routines.</i></p> | <p>Supporting families to navigate the system, while also building awareness, capacity, relationships and trust so that families feel safe asking for and accessing help.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">See page 23</p> |
|  <p>4. Building awareness – factsheets, information, videos</p> | <p>Families in Mt Druiitt would benefit from simple, easy to access and understand information about early intervention.</p> | <p><i>Families are supported with clear, concise information that helps them make decisions and understand the systems around early intervention.</i></p> | <p>Building awareness of child development milestones and allied health and early intervention pathways available including step by step guides of how to access services such as the NDIS, Medicare and support for a diagnosis.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">See page 24</p> |

Place-based wrap around models

Realising the potential for early intervention must consider options for incentivising and sustainably funding more wrap-around, integrated hubs and networks in Mt Druitt.

The problem we are solving

Families need access to early intervention but there are multiple barriers getting in the way of families accessing early intervention services in Mt Druitt.

- Families experience barriers ranging from awareness and identification of developmental concerns, through to the lack of availability of services due to long waitlists coupled with practical barriers such as lack of access to transport.
- Even if families have managed to navigate an extremely complex service system – they still face multiple practical concerns that stop them from staying connected to the system and receiving high-quality supports.

Families in Mt Druitt are seeking services that are:

- Culturally safe
 - Trauma-informed
- And that have paediatric expertise and knowledge of working using family centred approaches, and in community contexts such as hubs or early learning services.

Place-based wrap around models – evidence of impact

- Reviews of wrap around models demonstrate their ability to deliver individualised support through working flexibly with families and building strong relationships (Schurer Coldiron et al. 2017). This supports cultural safety and evidence-based approaches to working with families.
- Wrap around models are shown to break down barriers for families experiencing disadvantage by working across systems – bringing support to families rather than expecting them to navigate siloed and fragmented pathways to seeking support (Cumming et al., 2014)
- Wrap around hubs support better child and family outcomes (Honisett et al., 2022) and can deliver significant returns on investment for governments (Maier et al. 2017).

Every point along the way is a barrier for our families'

- Community Programs Manager

The way forward

Place-based wrap around models put the needs of children and families at the center...

- Place-based wrap around models recognise and respond to children and families holistically
- They leverage relationships to collaborate with communities towards achieving better outcomes
- Support feelings of belonging and connectedness

... and integrate a wide range of supports and services from across the service system to improve access.

- Place-based wrap around models can connect education, health, family support, allied health and employment services to provide pathways from universal services into more targeted supports for complex challenges – bringing these services into community hubs or locations where families can easily access and engage

What does a good place-based wrap around model look like?



Individualised, relationship-based support

Professionals build strong relationships with children and families, working to understand their priorities and needs.



Strengths-based and culturally safe

Supports leverage family and child strengths and capabilities to help meet their aspirations and goals.



Family-centred

Families are at the centre of decision-making. Services build family agency and capacity to participate and engage in the activities that are important to them.



Multi-systemic

Supports cut across multiple systems and sectors, wrapping around families and children who experience multifaceted and complex challenges.



Ongoing and responsive to need

Building strong and trusted relationships with children and families is the key to breaking cycles of intergenerational disadvantage.

Who needs to act?

- Stakeholders should work together to co-design sustainable place-based models for funding and delivery that include paediatricians and allied health services.
- Both state and federal governments stand to benefit from families getting access to early intervention within wrap around models of support.

Building capacity and effective collaboration

When educators, playgroup facilitators, and early intervention professionals are resourced to work in collaboration, they support better outcomes for children and families. This capability needs to be embedded in the system and reflected in funding models.

The problem we are solving

Families in Mt Druitt can't always attend clinic-based early intervention services – and need access to place-based services that are embedded in early learning or community settings

- Accessing early intervention within a clinic-based service can be challenging for families – and those who most need support are also most likely to miss out.
- Early intervention support classes and resource support offered by the NSW Department of Education have limited spaces, and constrained eligibility criteria.
- We know from our work in Mt Druitt that embedding early intervention within early learning – including ECEC services, early intervention classes and playgroups – works well by reducing many of the barriers and leveraging the relationships that services have with families.

Early learning can serve as the 'backbone' for early childhood development services, leveraging existing trust structures

- Early learning is often the first 'door' families access in a service delivery context – which provides a gateway for accessing other supports for their children as necessary.
- Early learning services build strong relationships with other child development providers - such as community and allied health, making them well-placed to connect families with the supports they need.

Early learning needs to be resourced to collaborate with early intervention professionals effectively

- Embedding early intervention within early learning places additional demands on leaders, educators and facilitators – which is currently not recognised in existing funding arrangements.

'Working at the ELC is amazing, the kids that needed it that probably wouldn't have gotten it, and now have'
- Occupational Therapist

'Educators just don't have the time...support is needed and staff need time off the floor so everyone is on the same page.'
- ECEC Director

The way forward

Improve processes for accessing existing opportunities for funding

The Hive supports multiple early learning services to connect with early intervention professionals through a range of funding options available from the Department of Education, including the disability and inclusion program. These existing funding options allow services to bring an early intervention professionals– such as a speech pathologist or occupational therapist into a service to provide specialist support for educators, building their capacity to educate and care for children with additional needs .

But, the current application process is complex, places a considerable administrative burden on early learning services, and constrained to registered preschools

- Long day cares are eligible for inclusion support, however it is scarce and inadequate in supporting children's needs.
- Services report significant administrative burdens seeking support through existing funding processes – which can take several days to gather evidence and compile for each child who requires additional supports
- Current funding models don't reflect sufficient time for educators and allied health professionals to engage in reflective conversations and plan for opportunities to support children's learning. The time they are funded for usually only covers the hours they spend in the classroom – and not planning together outside of session times.
- Strong interprofessional relationships are key to improving practice and developing effective strategies. Current funding models don't reflect this – and are often short-term engagements rather than longer term opportunities to build on practice.

Funding models need to be revised to reduce the burden on services, streamline processes and reflect the value of relationships.

Pilot approaches to including early intervention professionals as staff in early learning services and place-based locations, such as playgroups

We know that a high proportion of children attending early learning services in Mt Druitt have additional needs which require specialist support. Our services should be resourced to respond to children's needs effectively – by having early intervention professionals working as part of the team to strengthen capacity.

Who needs to act

- Stakeholders should work together to co-design sustainable models for funding and delivery – including increasing supports / resources for ECEC services, Department of Education early intervention classes, and supported playgroups.

Sustaining and scaling the use of linkers

Linker models are a proven strategy for increasing access to early intervention for the children who stand to benefit the most, but are at the greatest risk of missing out. They should be sustainably funded and scaled up.

The problem we are solving

Families experiencing complex challenges need individualised support to navigate the systems involved in early intervention

Mount Druitt has a higher proportion of families with complex needs than more advantaged communities – and more intensive support is needed.

- Without additional support, these children are the ones who will "fall through the cracks", missing out on valuable months and years of early learning.

"We need to support parents as much as we're supporting the child, helping families to navigate the system"
- Occupational Therapist

Linker models in other sectors have been shown to be highly effective – but they aren't yet a core part of the health or early learning system

- While the service system remains complex and opaque, Linker models will be needed. Apart from the Hive's Child Health Linker, there's no sustained, ongoing funding for Linkers that focus on supporting children to access early intervention. There is a need to transfer learnings and current evidence to expand health Linker models.

Linker programs: Evidence of Impact

- An ARTD evaluation found that The Hive's Child Health Linker had supported 110 children in Mount Druitt into early childhood education, and confirmed that "families often need long-term holistic support in order to overcome barriers and address challenges".
- Access to Early Learning (AEL), a Victorian Government program seeking to deliver linker-like inclusive and responsive services to ensure children could access early learning, resulted in 99% of children being enrolled in an ECEC service.
- The Hive's Health Linker Program directly addresses inequitable health access for families in the wider Mt Druitt suburb, and provides a place-based solution for supporting families to access developmental services before they start school.

The way forward

Sustainable funding and scale up of Linker models in priority communities

A linker provides direct, individualised support to families to identify and address barriers, in order to support them to access early intervention. They provide "wraparound"-style one-on-one services that can span a family's whole journey through early intervention (from helping them understand the benefits of early intervention for their child, assisting with access and funding options, and supporting communication across early learning and early intervention services). This approach is grounded in trusting, strengths-focused relationships.

What does a good model look like?

The use of linkers is not unique to The Hive, and different organisations have different approaches. Our experience identifies some critical success factors:



Caseloads: Many Mount Druitt families require high levels of support. The Hive's experience suggests that an appropriate caseload for a full-time linker is not more than ~25 families.



Timeframes: Helping a family to overcome barriers to accessing early intervention can take time, especially in cases where trust needs to be built before a family is willing to seek support. Successful models should ensure timeframes are flexible and engagement should be sustained.



Flexibility: Linkers have decision-making autonomy and discretionary funding to address the practical barriers stopping a child from attending early intervention (e.g., Helping a family navigate the NDIS; supporting families to find allied health services with availability; working through practical considerations such as transport to appointments, including providing access to brokerage funds when there are no other options family can access).



Community engagement: To be successful, a Linker can't sit behind a desk. They must be resourced to spend time out in the community, making connections and building trust with families that would benefit from Linker support. This requires a place-based focus.

Who needs to act?

Stakeholders should work together to co-design sustainable models for funding and delivery.

Building awareness and sharing information

Families should have access to easy to understand information that leaves them confident to access and navigate early intervention services, and understand the benefits for their child via the trusted people and places they already know.

The problem we are solving

Families need easy to understand information and resources

- Families in Mt Druitt want the best outcomes for their children – but don't always know when or where to seek support.
- Rates of developmental vulnerability are high in the community – contributing to developmental delay becoming 'normalised' and not knowing when to seek help.
- For children who cannot access early education, some may miss out on accessing early intervention during the foundational years of early learning – with many instances where developmental concerns are only identified at the start of school.
- Children who start school behind their peers often stay behind – with the gaps growing wider as children progress in their learning and development.

'If I'd like to get help for my daughter, what is the process for that' – Mt Druitt family

Families find the system complex – and information on how to navigate it difficult to access, confusing, full of jargon and text heavy

- Accessing early intervention supports can be extremely challenging and complex for families – who may find themselves having to navigate through the NDIS, health and education to get the supports they need without information that helps make the steps they need to take clear and unpacks what they are eligible for.
- Families are often coping with multiple life stressors – and working through the demands of the system to access early intervention becomes too difficult.

We need to resource families with the information and supports they need to make decisions about their children's learning and development

- Families need access to clear, concise information via the platforms and existing trust structures they already know and use to help them make decisions and understand the systems around early intervention.

Who needs to act

- Both state and federal governments stand to benefit from families getting the support for their children to access early intervention – and solutions need to work across education, health and the NDIS.
- Early learning and early intervention providers are critical partners – but need to be supported appropriately to deliver information, build understanding and consult with local families to ensure the information is understandable.

The way forward

Making pathways to early intervention easier to understand and access

Governments and service providers should provide and promote easier to understand information about the supports available – including videos and fact sheets that set out typical scenarios for families and providing an overview of the steps involved towards seeking support. This would ideally be shared through community health centres to consider local needs and priorities. There is information available – such as on the NDIS website, or through NSW Health – but the information provided is not always up to date, easy to access, or easy to understand.

This information should also include raising awareness of the importance of early learning, child development and early intervention in building the strong foundations for children's futures.

Information should be shared:

- In multiple languages and easy read formats
- Via video as well as diagrammatic representations of the pathways towards seeking support
- On platforms families already use, such as social media
- Through formal and informal community networks, leveraging existing trust structures e.g. handing out a fact sheet through playgroups as a soft point of entry.

Consulting with local families and services to inform the development of resources and toolkits, and piloting approaches put forward by families through consultations – The Hive Parental Health Literacy Consultation Report

The Hive recently conducted research into parental health literacy to understand how parents access, interpret and utilise health-related information. The findings of the report show:

- Most participants wanted more information on knowing what supports were available, how to find allied health supports and use NDIS funding, accessing the NDIS, and engaging supports before their child started school
- Families demonstrated a preference for receiving information via social media, text messages, and from trusted health providers.

This research should be used to inform an approach to providing resources to families, which should be piloted in collaboration with service providers in Mt Druitt.

Case study – the Hive’s approach to wrap around support in place




The Hive's approach to wrap around support in Mt DrUITT

The Hive coordinates wrap around supports for children and families through a collaborative, multi-systemic place-based approach.


What support is provided?

Early Learning Linkers




Early learning Linkers provide one-on-one support to help children and families experiencing multiple and complex challenges overcome barriers to early learning. They are a proven model that increases access for the children most likely to miss out on early learning.

CUBS




The Check Ups Before School (CUBS) program utilises a multi-disciplinary team including a Nurse, a Speech Pathologist and a Health Linker (social worker) to deliver developmental assessments and associated health supports. The program is place-based in ECECs and community sites and is flexible, collaborative, relational and trauma-informed to meet community needs. Children supported into early learning are referred to CUBS.

Willmot Paediatrician Clinic




The Hive partnered with Western Sydney Local Health District to embed a paediatrician clinic in Willmot Community Hub to deliver developmental assessments. The paediatrician works with stakeholders supporting the family to coordinate next steps in accessing supports. A NDIS ECEI staff member and Community Hub staff are present at the Hub to assist with further support the family may require post-assessment.

Health Linkers



The Hive's Child Health Linker provides one-on-one support to help families overcome barriers in accessing services for their children with developmental delays or disabilities. This includes supporting families to navigate waitlists, providing transport to appointments, using brokerage to access a diagnosis, accessing the NDIS, helping them transition to school, and understanding information.

Capacity building supports



The Hive have a partnership with trauma-informed allied health therapists to be embedded in early learning services for a period of time to upskill early educators in implementing strategies to meet the needs of children in their service. This builds the capacity of educators to support children with additional needs for the long term.

What does this look like in practice?

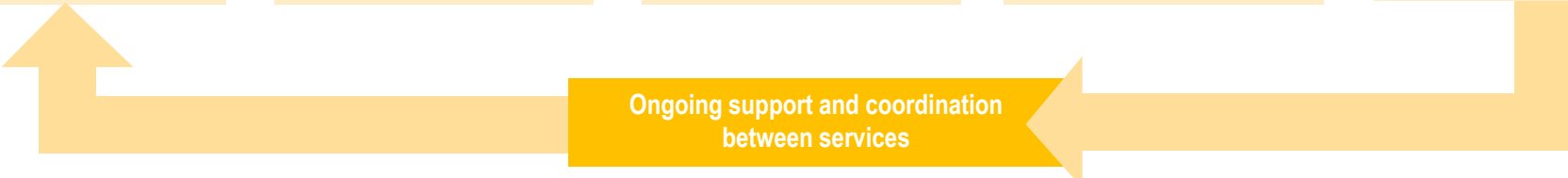
Early Learning Linkers support children into early learning.

Children attending early learning services can be referred to CUBS for a developmental assessment

Children identified as having any potential developmental concerns through CUBS or by local schools or caseworkers can be referred to the Paediatrician Clinic at Willmot.

If a developmental delay or concern is identified – the Hive's Health Linker supports families to access early intervention services.

Children can access early intervention within the ECEC service where educators and early intervention professionals work together to ensure children receive the right support.



Appendix

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