

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:

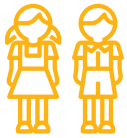
Lifting Our Game - <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/LiftingOurGame.PDF>; The Current State of Knowledge on the Impact of Pre-k- https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/duke_prekstudy_final_4-4-17_hires.pdf; Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia - <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO%20ANALYSIS%20Full%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



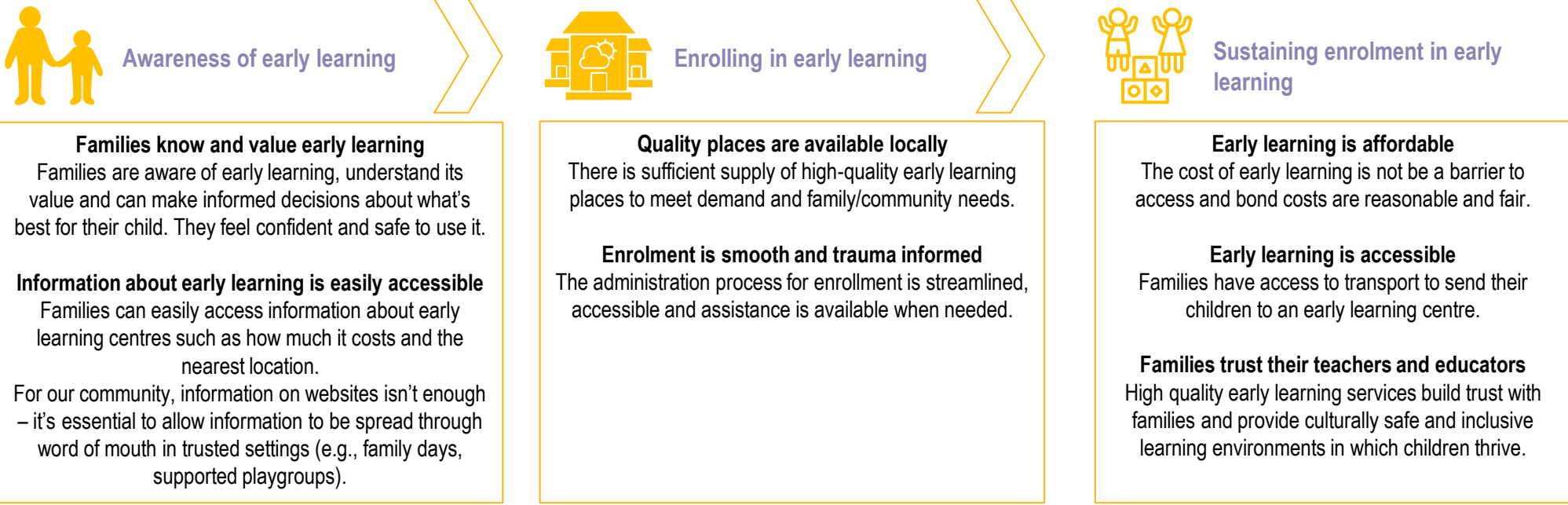
Our aspiration

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:



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

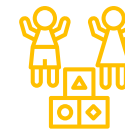
We are clear about the experience we want our families to have when accessing early learning – but there are barriers at every step.



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.

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- 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

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**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.

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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

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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