

Strengthening Early Learning Quality Where It Matters Most

Insights from a decade of place-based collaboration in Mt Druitt



September 2026



UNITED WAY
Australia



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Thank you

The Hive would like to acknowledge the Early Childhood Education and Care services across Mt Druitt who strive for excellence every day despite many challenges. Thank you for caring so deeply for our community's children, and for letting us work alongside you. It is your dedication to your families, to innovation and to quality that has seen our community transform.

We are grateful to dandolopartners for their insight and kind support in this paper and for championing our work for many years.

We thank our learning partners Western Sydney University, particularly the Transforming Early Education and Child Health (TeEACH) Research Centre, for their support and evaluation of the 2770 Early Childhood Educators' Network.

We are grateful to our funding partners, the Paul Ramsay Foundation and Department of Social Services, for joining us on this journey of innovation and learning.

Executive summary

Closing the quality gap in early childhood education and care

All children deserve access to the highest quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). Yet across Australia, the **communities with the greatest need are often those with the greatest barriers to delivering and sustaining high quality education and care.**

Recent sector challenges have seen significant and positive reforms to address safety gaps, along with increasing affordability of and access to ECEC for families.

These reforms are essential and important; however, we argue that **achieving high quality, particularly in communities experiencing disadvantage, requires different strategies and resources that adequately reflect the need of those communities.**

The Hive's success in Mount Druitt

In Mount Druitt (2770), many families experience the impacts of intergenerational disadvantage. **Educators within Mt Druitt ECEC services are supporting children and families with additional family and developmental complexities** and often struggle to achieve high quality ECEC as they focus on meeting the needs of their children, all with minimal resources.

Over the past decade, The Hive has worked alongside local ECEC services to test and refine a place-based approach to supporting quality education and care.

We have invested in quality ECEC through four pillars:

1. Embedding capability through an Early Years Strategy (EYS) Lead
2. Investing in the education and capability of educators to support children
3. Building a connected Early Educators' Network across 2770
4. Building connections to and between early learning, child health services and the broader community

The results have been significant. **In 2017, only 43% of services in Mt Druitt were rated as meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard (NQS).**

By 2026, this figure **increased to 90%.**

It costs more to deliver quality in low socioeconomic areas

Due to the additional challenges facing services in communities of disadvantage, **services have increased spending on higher qualified staff, higher educator-to-child ratios, more intensive family support, greater administrative capacity and stronger connections to child and family services.** The stressors of working in these under resourced environments negatively impacts educator wellbeing and threatens worker retention.

Current funding arrangements do not recognise these additional costs. While the Child Care Subsidy supports affordability for families, it does not address the increased cost of delivering quality education and care in communities facing concentrated disadvantage.

Our case for relational, place-based and equitable investment

We believe a needs-based funding model is needed for the ECEC sector. As demonstrated in primary and secondary education, funding should recognise that some communities and cohorts require additional investment to help children learn.

However, investment must be aligned with local needs, informed by evidence and accompanied by structures that build capability, collaboration and accountability.

Our decade of work demonstrates that effective quality uplift is relational, place-based, flexible and coordinated. Central to our quality uplift work has been our trusted EYS Lead, who serves as a “backbone”, connecting services, mentoring educators, strengthening partnerships and delivering initiatives within the community.

Combined with locally tailored professional development, bimonthly networks and strengthened connections with other early years community supports, **this approach has transformed the quality of ECEC across an entire community through a relatively modest but sustained investment.**

Our Recommendations

Our decade of experience in Mt Druitt demonstrates that quality can improve significantly when services are adequately supported and connected.

We recommend that governments:

1. Make needs-based funding, reflecting Gonski principles, the next reform priority for ECEC to ensure children in all communities experience a quality education.
2. Ensure any new investment is directed to strategies that are evidenced to lift quality, with flexibility to be adaptive to local priorities and contexts.
3. For communities experiencing disadvantage, take a place-based approach to developing and coordinating quality improvement strategies.

Together, these recommendations would help ensure that children experiencing the greatest disadvantage can access the high quality early education they deserve.

Now is the time to change quality for children who need it most

The evidence is clear. We know that high-quality early childhood education changes lives particularly for children experiencing vulnerabilities. We know that educators want to deliver the very best outcomes for children and families. And we know that place-based, collaborative approaches and equitable resourcing for services can significantly improve quality in communities experiencing disadvantage.

The Hive has demonstrated that high-quality ECEC can be achieved in communities experiencing disadvantage when services are adequately supported and resourced.

Now is the time for governments and the ECEC sector to invest in quality, not just safety, and ensure services are resourced equitably to deliver it. Every child, regardless of postcode, deserves access to high-quality early education.



About The Hive

Mount Druitt, 2770

Mount Druitt is the postcode of '2770', comprising of twelve suburbs, and located an hour west of Sydney city. Our community has a history of entrenched intergenerational poverty and social stigma.

Across the 2770 postcode, particularly in the outer suburbs, there are significantly high rates of unemployment, crime, financial insecurity, domestic violence and poor mental health.

In our community:

- There are 60,000 people with approximately 6,000 children aged 0-5 years.
- First Nations people make up nearly 15% in three of The Hive's suburbs, Tregear, Willmot and Bidwill, higher than other suburbs in the postcode.
- 2 in 3 children are considered developmentally vulnerable when starting school, compared to 1 in 5 across NSWⁱ.
- Multiple suburbs are identified as a 'childcare desert'ⁱⁱ.
- Community services are generally centralised with outer suburbs facing significant lack of services and transport access.

After 11 years of working closely with families across the Mount Druitt community, **we know that parents and carers want the very best for their children yet face significant barriers to the quality infrastructure they deserve.**



The Hive

United Way Australia established The Hive as a place-based initiative in the Mount Druitt postcode in 2015. The Hive's goal is to see **“all children in Mount Druitt start school well, with equal opportunity to learn, be healthy and participate in quality community life”**.

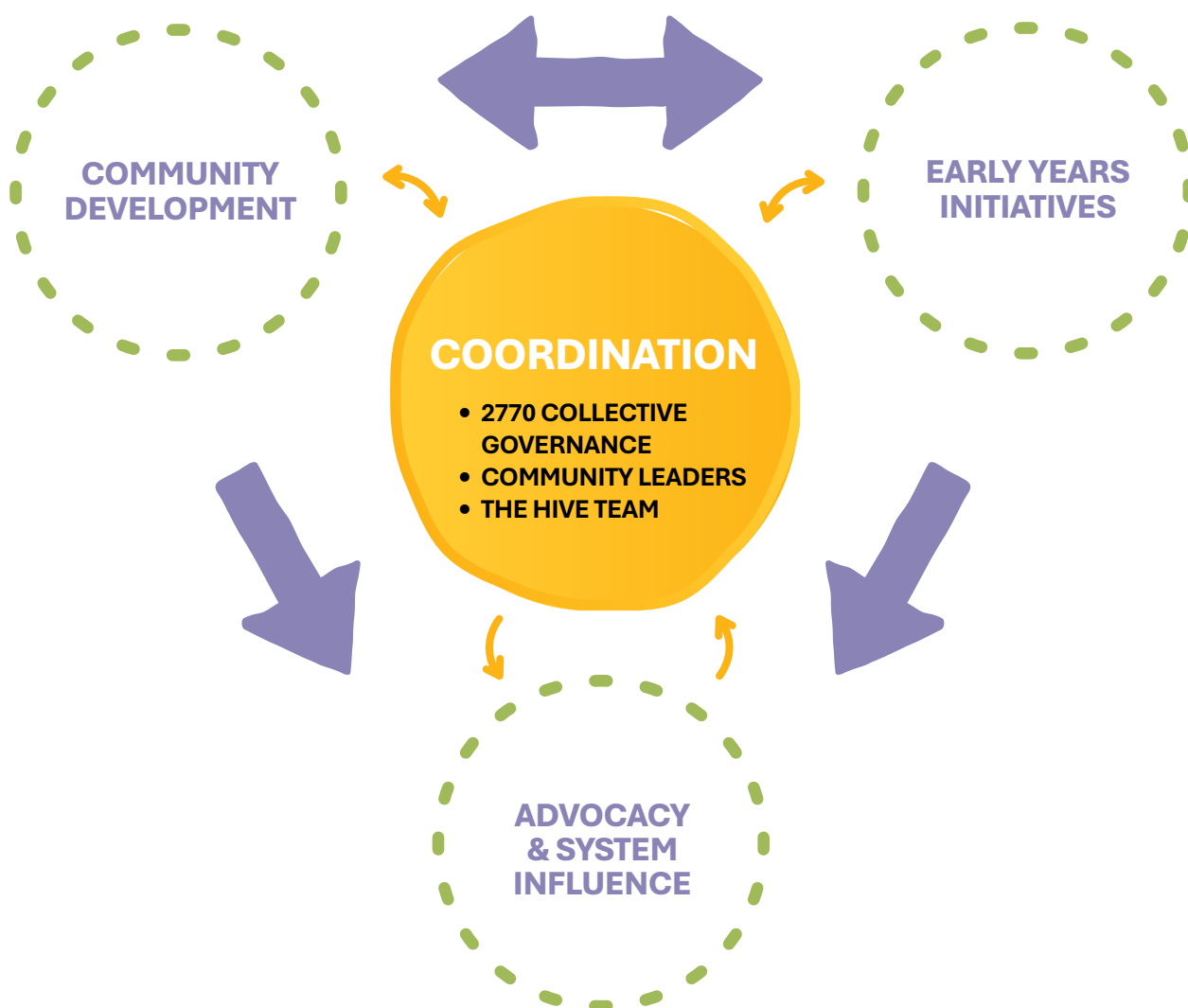
The Hive is the backbone for a place-based, collective impact initiative 'Together in 2770', facilitating the collaboration of residents, community leaders, service providers, organisations and government for stronger outcomes for the postcode.

We take an ecological approach to our goal with 3 main pillars:

Community Development: Working alongside local residents and stakeholders to address community priorities deeply in the four outer suburbs of Bidwill, Lethbridge Park, Tregear and Willmot.

Early Years: Designing and implementing targeted early years incubators to strengthen access to and quality of early education and child health services across Mt Druitt.

System Change: Advocating for equitable policies and systems, elevating learnings from our work on the ground.



The Hive's work supporting ECEC Quality

When The Hive began in 2015, 19 of 33 ECEC services were rated as 'working towards' the National Quality Standards. In 2026 this is only 5 out of 40 services, with 35 'meeting' or 'exceeding' the standards.

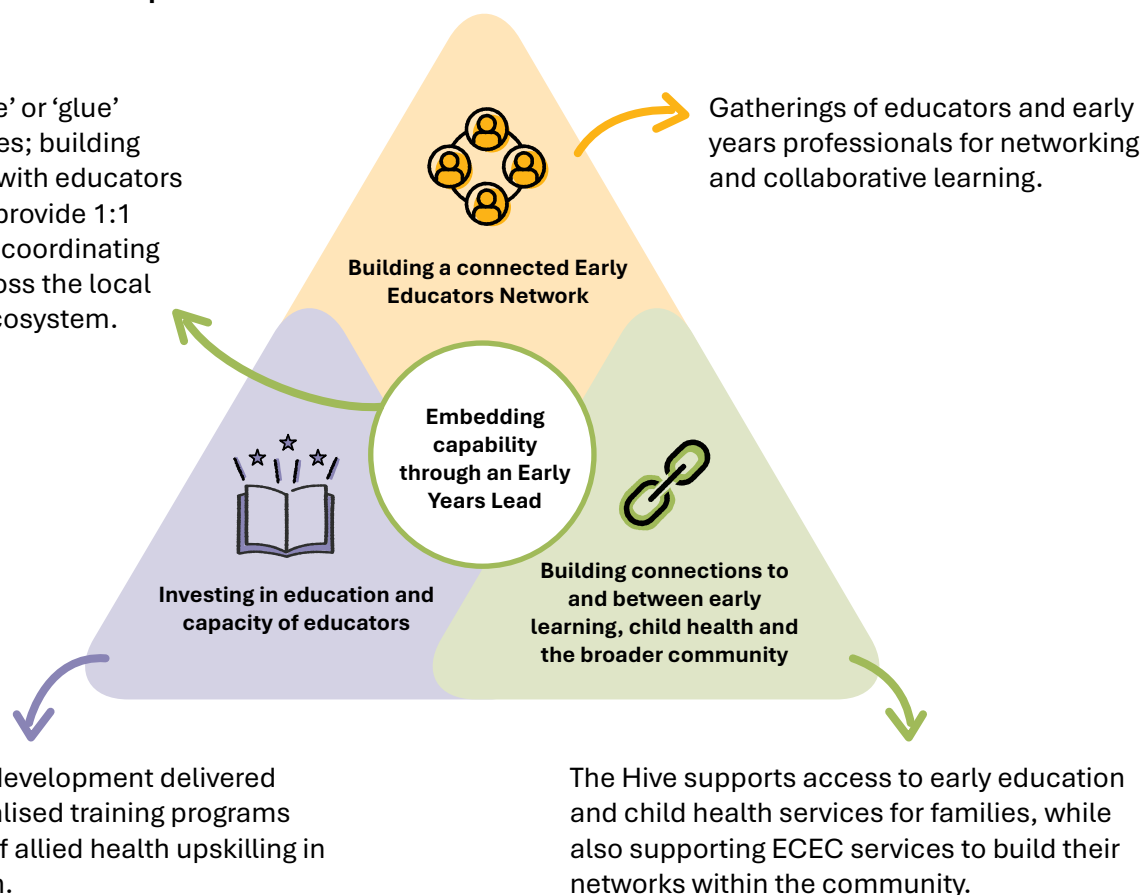
Mt Druitt ECEC services were overwhelmed with the significant levels of disadvantage, complex needs and developmental delays that children were experiencing. **Educators were feeling unsupported and under resourced to meet the need. They were keeping children safe yet lacked the resources and investment to help them thrive.**

In response to what The Hive heard from educators, we developed a series of iterative initiatives to support ECEC services and their educators to be resourced and feel supported to meet the needs of children in their service.



Our work in ECEC Quality Uplift can be represented across four pillars:

The 'backbone' or 'glue' of our initiatives; building relationships with educators and families, provide 1:1 coaching and coordinating initiatives across the local early years' ecosystem.



Professional development delivered through formalised training programs and delivery of allied health upskilling in the classroom.

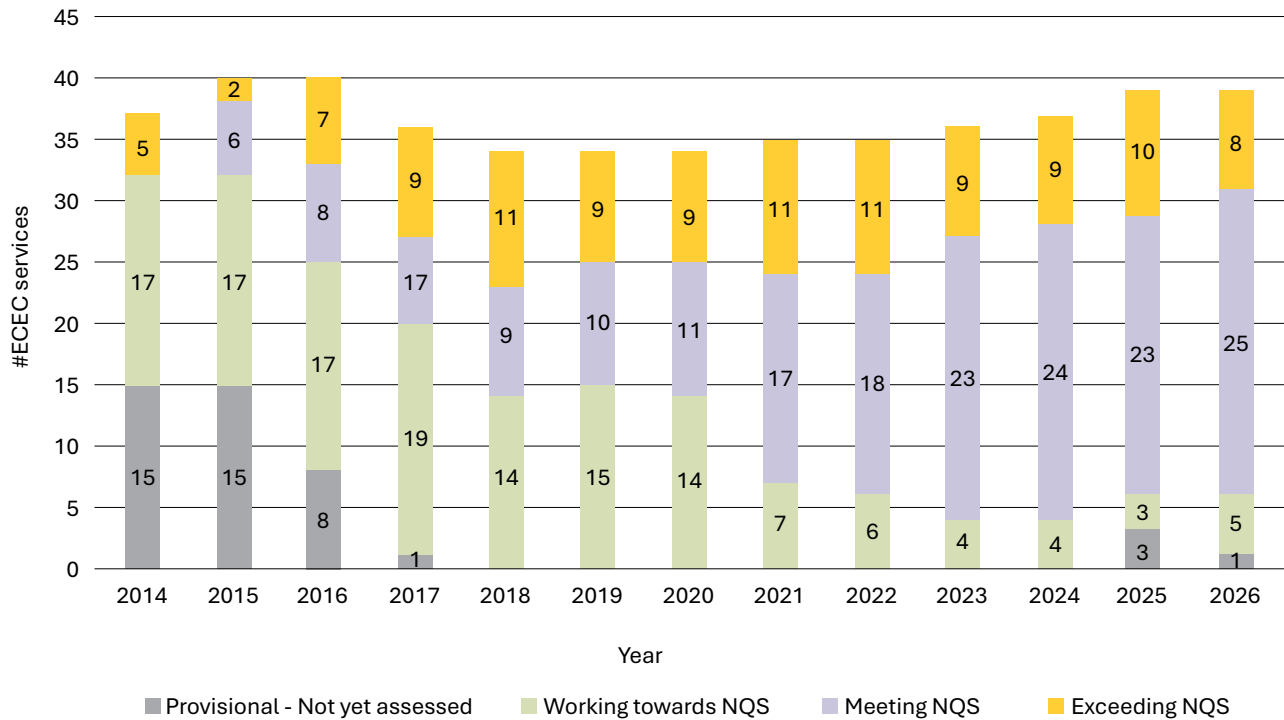
The Hive supports access to early education and child health services for families, while also supporting ECEC services to build their networks within the community.

Our Impact

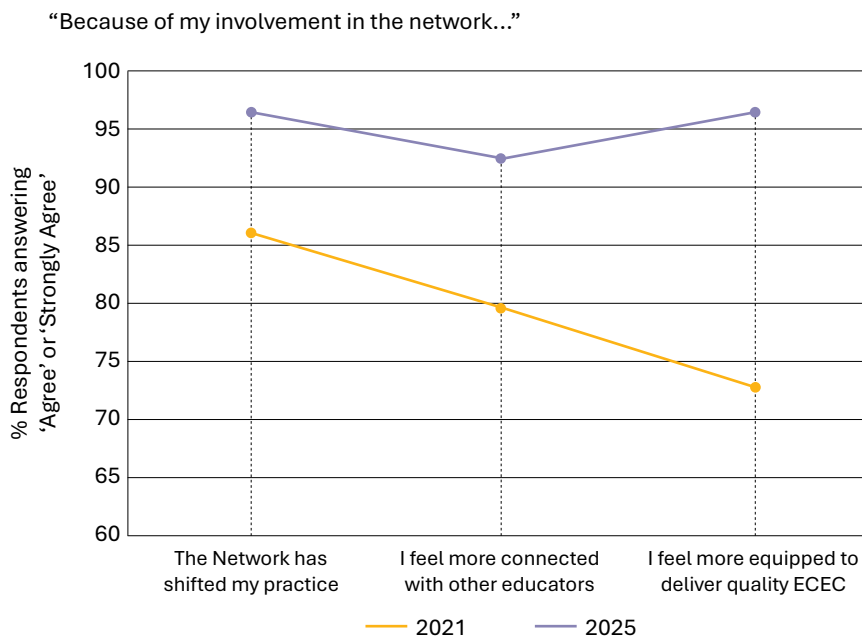
After a decade of intentional, relational and place-based investment, The Hive has seen **quality ratings significantly increase from 43% of services rated meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard, to 90%.**

Through our various quality uplift initiatives, The Hive have strengthened the practice of over 150 Mount Druitt educators.

National Quality Standard rating of ECEC services in 2770



Survey responses from annual Hive survey of ECEN educators



Snapshot from Western Sydney University's Evaluation of the 2770 Early Childhood Educators' Network^{iv}:

The Hive facilitate the Early Childhood Educators' Network, an ongoing professional learning and support network across 40 centre-based services in the 2770 postcode.

Western Sydney University evaluated the ECEN across 2020-2025 against 15 criteria.

Key findings included:

- The % of services meeting or exceeding National Quality Standards **rose from 77-90%**.
(not accounting for increases already seen prior to start of Early Childhood Educators' Network [ECEN])
- The area of greatest improvement was **'Educational Program & Practice'**.
- Across 15 evaluation criteria, the evaluation found the ECEN had **'good' to 'strong'** evidence of impact across 14 criteria.
- The % of children attending a preschool program has **increased from 76.4% to 80.2% in 2770**, at a rate higher than the Blacktown LGA or NSW which may be correlated to the Network and The Hive's additional work to support family's access to ECEC.
- Thematic findings included educators were being **equipped to tangibly try things out in their centre, collaborate with other ECEC services, participate in coaching, connect to external early years services such as health, feel supported in their wellbeing and build greater confidence in their practice.**

"Overall, we find that the Hive's ECEN is an exemplary model of ECEC educator professional development in high poverty contexts. The network creates and sustains a community of practice of educators and other early childhood professionals who learn with and from each other to improve ECEC quality in the local area."

– Conclusion of ECEN Evaluation

“

We are very isolated, I suppose. So, this has been an absolute blessing for us. Just being able to collaborate with other like-minded people, you know, and I've built some good relationships.

Educator, WSU ECEN Evaluation workshop

“

Having this collaboration and this network has supported us to know where to go, who to ring at least and find some support and help.

Preschool Director, policy paper workshop

“

I can't believe that I was about to quit, but you came in and helped organise the students so that [the centre] is working – feels so much better.

Educator, feedback to The Hive

Barriers to Achieving High Quality

Quality is lowest in communities with the greatest need

ECEC attendance is widely recognised to provide a range of positive outcomes in childhood and into adulthood, such as stronger social, cognitive and academic skills entering school, and higher rates of school completion and employment^v.

However, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds:

- Are less likely to regularly attend early learning.^{vi}
- Have fewer high quality rated services operating in their community.^{vii}
- Experience a range of barriers to enrolling in early education.^{viii}

It costs more to deliver quality

The complexity of service delivery in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage impacts the cost of operation and therefore the capacity to deliver high quality ECEC.

In areas of disadvantage, educators are supporting higher numbers of children who are living in poverty, have experienced trauma, have various disabilities or developmental delays, or are from families experiencing complex circumstances.

“

... my teachers do have a certain level of education and knowledge around behaviour management, trauma-informed practice, all of those things. But ultimately, we didn't sign up to be counsellors, we didn't sign up to be OTs, we didn't sign up to be social workers...but we have to, on a daily basis, sit in all of those roles.

Educator,
ECEN Evaluation^{iv}

From the qualifications of staff to practical service design, it costs more to deliver high quality ECEC in areas of disadvantage.

Increased costs facing ECEC services in disadvantaged areas can include:^{ix}

- **Hiring of more experienced and qualified staff** to meet the needs of children and families accessing their service.
- **Increased staffing for higher ratios** to support children who have difficulties regulating their emotions or behaviour, and those with diverse learning needs.
- **Coaching, additional training and support of staff** in recognition of the heavier emotional and mental load
- **Greater administrative resources** to apply for additional funding and connection to external support services such as NDIS, community health, case workers or child protection.
- **Practical supports** such as food, nappies, hats, lunchboxes, backpacks, food pantries for families facing financial struggles, or providing transport to support children to access their service.
- **Safety measures** to ensure staff safety in areas where crime may be higher or family disputes more common.
- **Inconsistent attendance rates:** Due to family complexities, it is harder for children to attend regularly which impacts on occupancy rates, leaving revenue unstable and less predictable.



As a preschool where we support a lot of disadvantaged families and children, we need to make extra effort to build those relationships, to spend time to support these families in completing paperwork, in collaborating with allied health professionals, in all those things.

Educator quote from paper workshop

Services in disadvantaged communities have less capacity to invest in quality

As costs rise across the sector, they are disproportionately impacting providers in vulnerable communities where they may struggle to generate sufficient income to cover these increasing costs.ⁱⁱ

In Mt Druitt, small and independent providers, are common with very few larger providers. Smaller providers have limited resources they can allocate to supporting the professional development of staff or innovation to solve complex challenges.

These smaller services have no capacity to cross-subsidise to recover costs from a higher revenue generating centre within the organisation. If attendance is low, this restricts the revenue available to invest in additional resources that could support quality within their service.

It's not just the children that have additional needs. It's the families that need support with housing, the families that need support with putting food on the table, meeting basic needs. And then you've got the two thirds of children that have additional needs in such a concentrated form here in Mt Druitt.

Educator quote from paper workshop

CASE STUDY: Higher costs of delivery in a Mt Druitt ECEC

Bernadette is the Director of Tregear Presbyterian Preschool (TPP) and the Children's Services Manager overseeing nine ECEC services under the approved provider, Jericho Road. This oversight offers a strong perspective of the additional costs their Tregear service has compared to others. Compared to their services in a different socioeconomic area, **Bernadette estimates their 2770 service to cost \$200,000 more to operate each year.**

In TPP, nearly half of their children have additional needs, with staff needing to apply for inclusion funding individually for all those children. **TPP is an 'exceeding' rated preschool despite the challenges they face in their context and are proof of how it is possible to deliver high quality education and care when additional resources are provided.**

“

Families facing extreme financial stress cannot prioritise education if they cannot afford food or winter clothes. The preschool must step in to meet basic human needs so children can actually show up to learn.

Bernadette, Tregear
Presbyterian Preschool

Additional costs and supports offered in practice include:

- **Higher ratios:** Operating above ratio at four educators per classroom compared to the two minimum requirements to keep children safe and supported.
- **Higher qualified staff:** Having six bachelor qualified Early Childhood Teachers compared to the two minimum requirements to support the complex learning and behavioural needs.
- **Additional admin and family support staff:** Six staff available to support families to complete Inclusion Program Funding paperwork, support letters for doctors and the NDIS, coordinating allied health visits, and providing family support to access early intervention services.
- **Physical environment:** Set aside spaces for allied health professionals or child nurses to conduct assessments, a sensory room for children, assistance rails and a hydraulic nappy change table.
- **Resources:** Purchasing of resources suggested by therapists to support the goals of children with additional needs.
- **Emergency relief:** Connections with Food Bank and organisations to provide food, clothing, blankets, and backpacks for families.



A Case for Change

Current quality improvement approaches aren't working

Unlike other parts of the education system, there's no structured or strategic approach to quality improvement in ECEC.

The key issues include that:

- **Quality improvement is left to individual providers**, who have different levels of capacity and commitment to drive improvement.
- **The services most likely to have the resourcing to support sustained investment in quality improvement are those with high, stable occupancy, operating at scale and able to charge high fees** – which is often less common in those serving disadvantaged communities with higher levels of need.
- **The requirements for a services Educational Leader, the role charged with supporting and enabling quality educational practice in ECEC services, are unregulated** in terms of qualification and experience prerequisites, as well as the time the leader should have protected off the floor to mentor staff and elevate programming.
- **Service leaders, teachers and educators get far less time 'off the floor'** for reflecting, learning, connecting as a team and planning than their colleagues in the school system.
- The common approach to professional learning in the sector is **standardised, one-off training or seminars, that do not support implementation or embedding of high-quality practice**, or adaptation to local contexts.
- There are **high rates of turnover** in the ECEC sector, which means experienced and committed teachers and educators are being lost, and service leaders are stepping into complex leadership roles early in their career.

In addition, there's currently an increased focus on compliance and punitive measures from regulatory authorities. While this is being driven by a welcome and important focus on improving child safety, the punitive approach is creating additional stress and compounding the staffing crisis.

Strategies to achieve high quality are different to those ensuring safety and there must be consideration of both in policy and funding discussions. Children's safety and their access to a quality education is best enabled by a skilled, supportive and well-led workforce.

Why this matters

Children experiencing vulnerability deserve access to the highest quality early education services.

High quality ECEC is a significant protective factor that can improve developmental, educational and lifelong outcomes, and reduce the gap between advantage and disadvantage as children grow.^{viii}

Failure to adequately support children in the early years often results in greater demand for services and intervention later in life.

The Hive's experience demonstrates that with the right investment and support, ECEC services in communities experiencing disadvantage *can* achieve a high quality standard of practice.



The case for needs-based funding

We propose a system of needs-based funding for the early childhood education and care sector that considers the geographic area in which services are operating and the prevalence of disadvantage and childhood vulnerability within each service.

Needs-based funding is now a core part of the funding model in primary, secondary and tertiary education. **There's widespread community understanding that it costs more to deliver a quality education for some cohorts and in some contexts**, and that an equitable education system is a national priority.

But recognising the additional costs of delivery in communities experiencing disadvantage is not a feature of the ECEC system, where it could arguably make the biggest difference.^x

The current ECEC funding models do not account for complexity of need that ECEC services are facing, particularly those driven by disadvantage or poverty. The Child Care Subsidy (CCS) supports equity by helping make ECEC more affordable for low-income households, but it does nothing to address the difference in cost of delivery and equip services to meet the diverse needs of children and families.

In fact, the way the ECEC system is designed, it services more affluent communities who have the greatest access to resources – they can charge higher fees and often have higher and more stable occupancy.

Yet the **services with the highest costs of delivery cannot pass those costs onto their families**, as this would increase their financial strain and risk unenrolment, also resulting in further financial stress for the service and poorer outcomes for the child.

Services that are delivering ECEC in communities of disadvantage are carrying an additional load of responsibility and complexity in their service delivery. They must be resourced effectively to undertake this work, and in ways that truly acknowledge the context in which they are operating.

“Some of the reports to get funding for those children might take me up to 20 hours to write for one child.

Educator, workshop participant

Money alone is not the answer

A needs-based funding approach could be transformative in the ECEC sector. However, the experience of the school system shows that **additional investment will not shift the dial for children unless it is well targeted, aligned with local needs, used on evidence-based strategies and spent efficiently.**

The Hive's approach has demonstrated the effectiveness of having **decisions about quality improvement priorities made by those on the ground within the community.**

When decisions are made centrally, by people disconnected from the community, they may lack an understanding of local priorities, educators' workloads and the realities of the contexts in which they work.

Current funding approaches are focused on individual service operation, without consideration of the broader community ecosystem in which centres operate or the resources and supports (or lack thereof) available to their services beyond outside their own setting.

Additionally, funding individual services to deliver programs within their centre may be inefficient and exacerbate fragmentation and isolation. Individual service leaders, especially those already stretched, may struggle to know what's most important for their service or where they should start, and what kinds of supports and resources would make the biggest difference.

Working collaboratively and locally can make sure any additional investment in quality improvement and inclusion is aligned with local needs, can be shared efficiently between services, draw on evidence, and build momentum and accountability.

In our experience, there is significant benefit in **relational supports available locally within the community, delivered by those with the capacity to meaningfully engage, listen and support without judgment.**

The Hive's Quality Uplift Initiatives

The Hive's Foundations for Impact

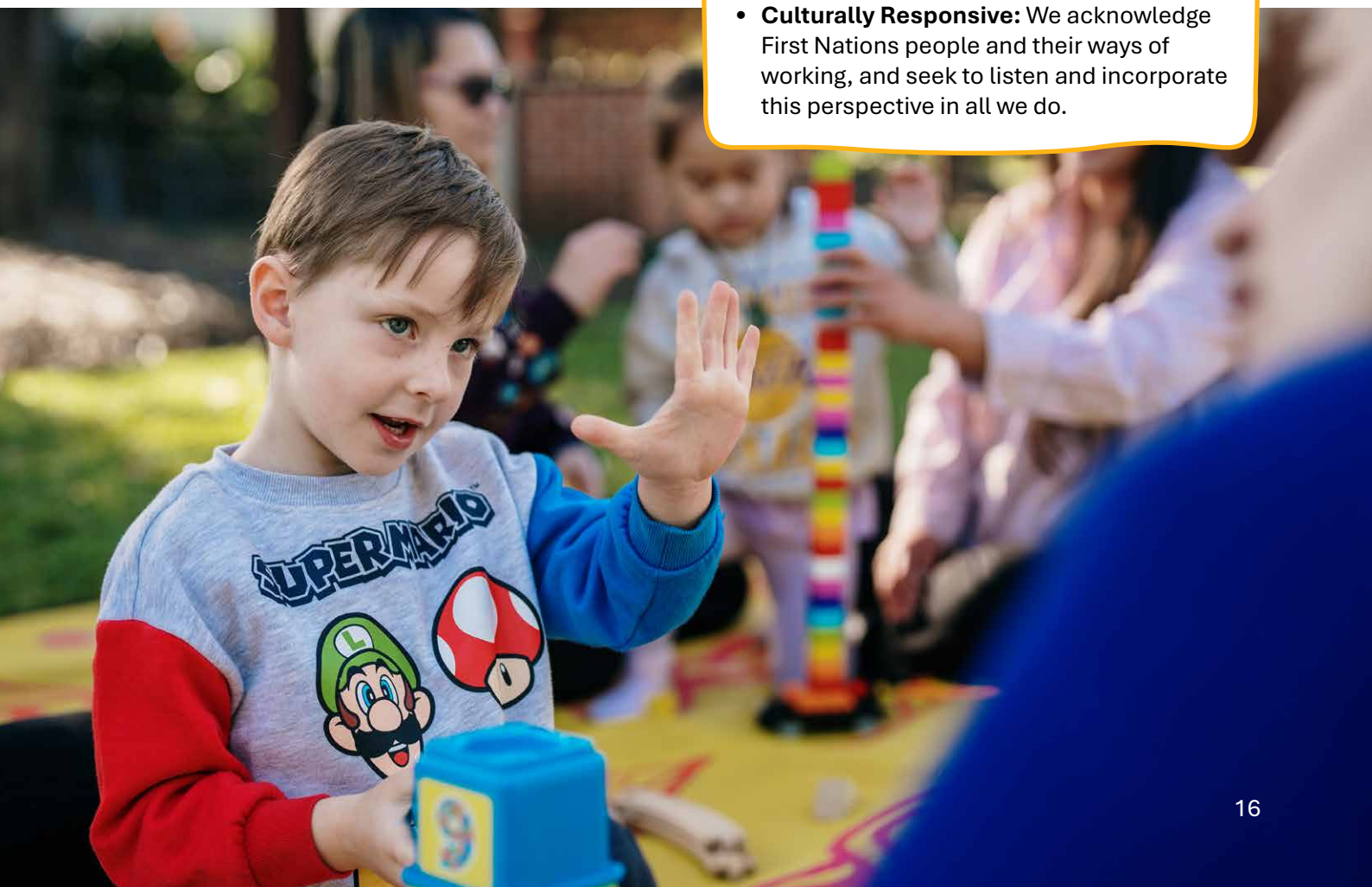
The Hive has delivered multi-faceted and coordinated quality uplift activities in partnership with ECEC services across the Mt Druitt postcode for 10 years. Our individual initiatives have each had significant impact on centres and have transformed the ECEC landscape across Mt Druitt. **However, it has been the sustained investment across the multifaceted initiatives that have resulted in the cumulative impact on the quality of the local ECEC service system.**

Despite the breadth of activities and significant impact, our initiatives have not been particularly resource-intensive. Core costs include 1 full time Early Years Strategy Lead, venue bookings, catering, resources and training fees. **Our work demonstrates that for a modest investment, that is sustained over time, impactful delivery and change in quality can be achieved.**

We aim to share our unique insights into why this approach has been successful and who is best placed to operate them, especially as we advocate for these approaches to be scaled.

Throughout all our ECEC uplift activities the principles that have driven our success include:

- **Relational:** Investing in relationships support engagement and trust and show educators they are valued.
- **Place-based:** Focusing on a small geographic area and deeply understand the population, the strengths and challenges, then design solutions for this context. Rigid program guidelines that aren't responsive to local priorities are ineffective.
- **Multi-faceted and coordinated:** Multiple solutions and initiatives are required to address the complex and varying needs of services.
- **Strength-based:** Educators are doing the best they can with what they have. Be curious, non-judgmental and build upon existing strengths.
- **Flexible:** Have funding flexibility to trial new ideas or adapt them to the context.
- **Culturally Responsive:** We acknowledge First Nations people and their ways of working, and seek to listen and incorporate this perspective in all we do.



The Hive's ECEC Quality Uplift Activities:



1. Building capability through a 'backbone'

The most important element of The Hive's quality uplift initiatives is often an undocumented one.

The Hive's 'Early Years Strategy (EYS) Lead' is the 'backbone', 'glue', and coordinator of our work with centres and is the driver for our success in Mt Druitt.

This is an important consideration for government and sector leaders seeking to replicate this work. Without these relationships, trust and place-based connections, the individual initiatives will not be as effective.

What does the 'backbone' do?

In her role, our EYS Lead builds relationships and trust with ECEC services and other organisations such as playgroups, schools and child health services, facilitates the Early Childhood Educators' Network, and designs and implements our quality uplift initiatives.

What our backbone does	Elements of success
1.1 Early Years Strategy Lead • 1:1 relational coaching with centre directors and educational leaders • Facilitates and organises the Early Childhood Educators' Network (ECEN) • Facilitates peer connections between services where knowledge sharing and learning can occur • Designs and delivers new initiatives to meet contextual needs • Builds connections and collaborative partnerships between ECEC services, playgroups, paediatric health services, primary schools and any local organisation that supports children and families. • Understands the impacts of policy reforms and uses insights to advocate for systems change in sharing insights from local services. • Supervises The Hive's Linkers and our Child Health Initiatives	• Holds on the ground experience as an educational leader in an ECEC service in Mt Druitt – bringing great credibility • Holds a Master of Educational Leadership bringing strong evidence and knowledge of practice and pedagogy • Regularly engages with families and children at engagement events to understand the community • Office based within 2770 • Proactive, relational and strength-based engagement with centres • Follows up with educators to ensure learnings from ECEN or trainings are understood and embedded • Holds a small caseload of Linker families to deeply understand experiences of both families and educators in accessing early education and child health services.

“The Power of Doughnuts”

A day in the life of The Hive’s Early Years Strategy Lead (our “backbone”)

Jean sits in The Hive office in Bidwill (2770), next door to two local ECEC services and only minutes from the preschool where she worked for many years as educational leader. Earlier that morning, she attended a community engagement activity in collaboration with local stakeholders, speaking with children and families over coffee and hot chocolate on their way to school. Now she is preparing for the next 2770 Early Childhood Educators’ Network (ECEN) gathering, confirming speakers, organising catering and following up with a local ECEC Director, who has missed recent sessions however Jean knows the content of the next gathering could help address challenges being faced by that service.

Later, Jean will deliver a few boxes of doughnuts to local services as part of her relational check-ins. At one check-in, she will meet with a Director and a local occupational therapist to discuss strengthening the centres inclusion practices, sharing ideas and resources. At another, she will meet a new Director, invite them to the ECEN and let them know she is available for any support.

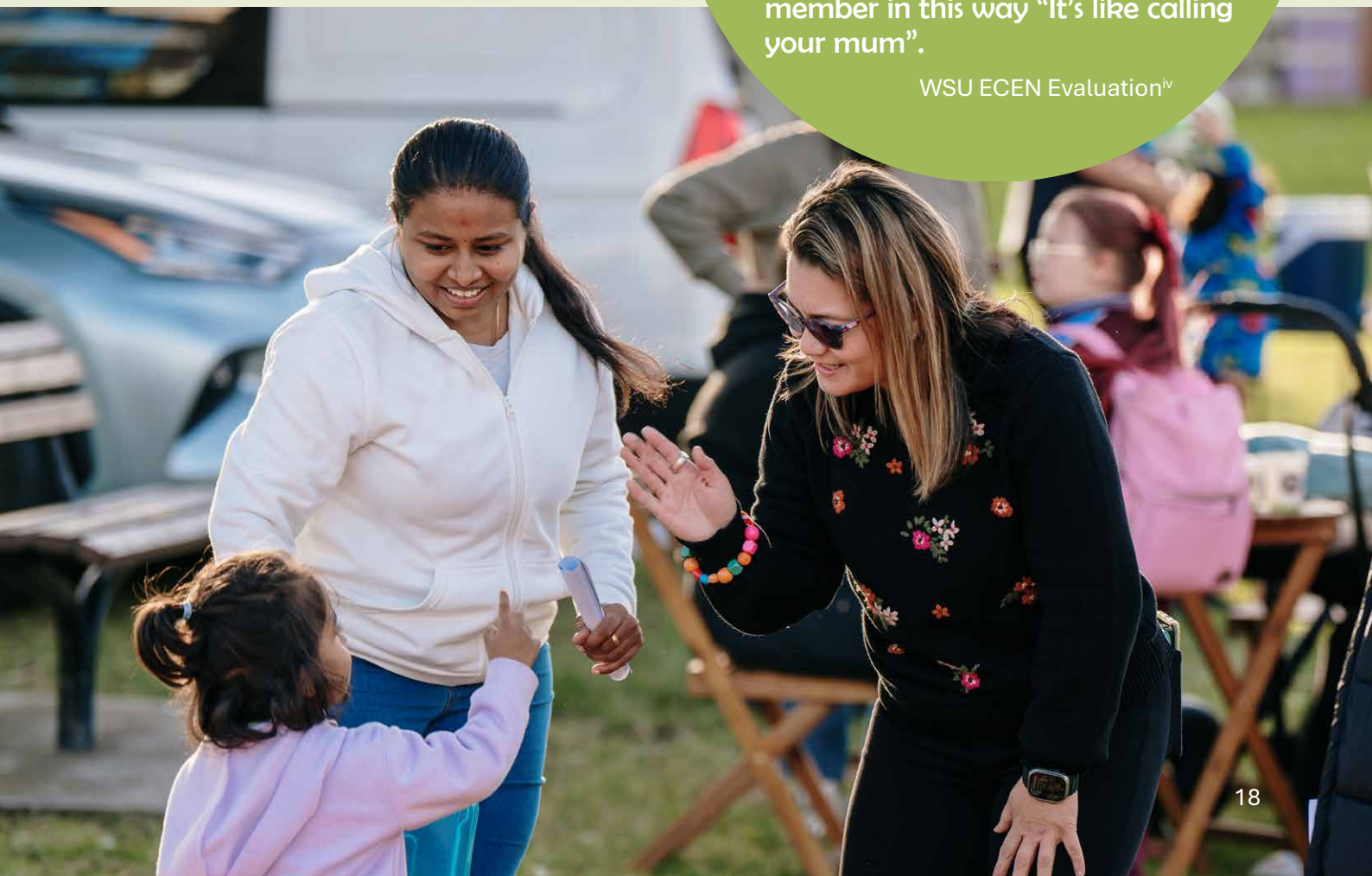
Throughout the day, educators call and email for advice about families experiencing barriers to early intervention and child health services. Jean also keeps up to date with sector changes and helps translate information for local services to understand.

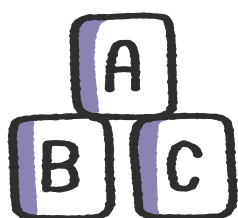
Jean’s regular check-ins, encouragement and practical support help educators feel connected, confident and valued in their practice.

“

The convenor of the community of practice, Jean Villacorta, is of central importance to the community. Jean’s knowledge, acknowledged identity as “one of us,” personality and communication style are important factors. The importance of this convenor is described by one member in this way “It’s like calling your mum”.

WSU ECEN Evaluation^{iv}





2. Investing in the education and capability of educators to support children

The Hive directly invests in the professional learning and capacity building of educators through formalised training programs and bespoke in-service capability building.

Initiative	Success Principles and Impact
2.1 Formalised Training Programs • 4x year-long monthly training programs • GoodStart Early Learning's 'Family Connections' program (20 participating ECEC services, 2016–2017) • Western Sydney University's 'Collaboration for Learning' (CFL) (13 participating ECEC services, 2018–2019) • No cost to attendees • The Hive funded staff backfill so educators could attend training and mentoring. • Educators were paired with mentors to help embed learning into practice. • One-off trainings on key topics offered for all early years professionals across 2770	• Free with backfill funding to promote attendance. • Face-to-face training built cross-service relationships and reduced isolation. • Onsite mentor visits helped embed learning in context. • CFL was recognised as NESA professional learning. • Trainings inspired some educators to pursue further study, including bachelor's, master's and doctorate research.
2.2 Specialised Support • Addressed challenge of services feeling ill-equipped to support the significant demand of children with diagnosed and undiagnosed developmental delays leading some to turning families away. • Specialised Support has built educator capacity across 18 services in 2770 to understand and support children's developmental needs. • The Hive funded an occupational therapist and speech pathologist to assess the needs of children, model strategies and guide educators in implementing these strategies. • The Hive would support centres to apply for funding to sustain the program.	• Strategies were modelled alongside educators in their classrooms. • Built educator confidence in inclusion practices and child development. • Improved understanding of children's needs across their cohort. • Used a strengths-based approach to support and upskill educators.



3. Building a connected Early Educators' Network across 2770

In 2020, The Hive launched the '2770 Early Childhood Educators' Network' (ECEN) to build upon the relationships developed between services through formal training.

Initiative	Success Principles and Impact
3.1 Early Childhood Educators' Network • In-person bimonthly gathering where centres connect and access professional development • Fosters relationships and reduces competition to bring educators together to support 2770's children and share effective strategies. • Provides tailored professional development responding to the needs of Mt Druitt centres. • The ECEN welcomes all early years professionals across 2770 in a range of contexts, such as playgroups and therapists, strengthening the local early years ecosystem. • Western Sydney University completed an evaluation of the ECEN in 2026.^x	• Led by The Hive's EYS Lead who was a Mt Druitt educational leader and understands the local context. • Brought educators together and reduced isolation and burnout for services in an area with complex challenges. • Strengthened pathways, connections and awareness of local supports such as child and family health, NDIS, Primary schools, and other community organisations. • Free, tailored PD followed by collaborative exploration of the implications for centres in the 2770 community. • First Nations expertise and knowledge were shared with services from a local Aboriginal early years organisation who built partnerships at the ECEN which strengthened cultural practice and education across services. • An evaluation of the ECEN found^{iv} the percentage of services 'meeting' or 'exceeding' the NQS rose from 77% to 90% and services reported greater confidence in implementing innovative strategies that support the unique needs of children in a high poverty context.



4. Building connections to and between early learning, child health services and the broader community

The Hive has increased ECEC services connections to other supports for children and families within the community. These have resulted in educators feeling greater confidence to holistically support their families being aware of services available and pathways to access these.

Initiative	Success Principles and Impact
4.1 Early Learning and Child Health Linkers - The Hive has two Linker roles that help families overcome practical and financial barriers to accessing early education and child health services. - As Linkers work with centres, The Hive helps ECEC services embed Linker support practices into their own service delivery. - Educators can now help families apply for birth certificates, facilitate referrals to child health services, and explain the NDIS.	- Centres feel less overwhelmed and better able to explain processes that families must navigate. - Centres are better connected to community services which supports families. - Families see centres as safe places to seek support. - Educators have increased capacity to complete referrals and connect families to community supports. - Two local centres have embedded Linker-style roles to strengthen family support.
4.2 Place-based child health services - The Hive and partners work with the Local Health District (LHD) to deliver place-based child health services. - The Check Ups Before School (CUBS) Program brings child and family health nurses into ECEC services and community centres for increased uptake of developmental checks.^{xi} - The Willmot Paediatrician clinic brings outreach paediatric care into a local hub, reducing transport barriers and improving referral options. - The Early Years Strategy Lead links centres with the local health district for referrals and helps reach children most likely to miss developmental assessments, including First Nations children.	- Breaks down silos between early education and child health services. - Builds educator confidence to discuss child development with parents. - LHD staff participate in the ECEN and build relationships with centres. - More children identified with developmental delays are identified and connected to supports before they start school. - These initiatives give the EYS Lead a broader view of community needs across child health and early education. - Outlined in our July 2022 - June 2024 Impact Report^{xii}: - The weekly Willmot Paediatrician Clinic held 285 appointments in the community, with 30% being First Nations children 301 children were seen locally within their community for developmental health checks, two thirds were First Nations children.

...continued over

Initiative	Success Principles and Impact
4.3 Ready to Learn • A new initiative providing a supported playgroup model within a preschool with the purpose to support a smoother transition to school. • Facilitated by a multidisciplinary team of early educator, primary school teacher, speech therapist and occupational therapist. • Aiming to bridge the gap between ECEC and Primary School, ensuring the educators and professionals surrounding the child are connected and informed of their needs.	• Builds a stronger transition to school pathway through increased communication between the professionals supporting a child and both sides of the transition. • Broader focus than just preparing a child for school, instead preparing the school for the child. • Supports parent involvement not just attention on the child • Not age specific, allowing for children to be connected earlier, sometimes years before school starting.

We know what works

- **The Hive's multifaceted quality uplift initiatives have resulted in significant improvements to the early childhood education and care landscape across Mt Druitt.**
- **The case for adequately and equitably resourcing ECEC services in areas of disadvantage is clear.**
- **The Hive's work has demonstrated that educators are passionate and willing to engage in practices that build their capability and strengthen service delivery. Feedback from Mt Druitt educators consistently highlights that the love for their community and connections with other local educators are highly valued and are a key driver of engagement.**



Recommendations

The Hive's decade of experience working in a community experiencing disadvantage points to three reforms that would lift the quality of early learning where need is greatest. Our recommendations are:

- 1. Make needs-based funding the next reform priority for ECEC, to ensure children in all communities experience a quality education.**
- 2. Ensure any new investment is directed to strategies that are evidenced to lift quality, with flexibility to be adaptive to local priorities and contexts.**
- 3. For communities experiencing disadvantage, take a place-based approach to developing and coordinating quality improvement strategies.**

Recommendation 1:

Make needs-based funding the next reform priority for ECEC, to ensure children in all communities experience a quality education

All other parts of Australia's education system explicitly and actively recognise the additional costs of providing quality education for children and communities experiencing adversity.

Extending the core Gonski principle of equity in education to the ECEC sector is long overdue.

As we have shown, services in communities experiencing disadvantage are expected to respond to greater levels of need without sufficient access to resources to do so. These services need to invest more:

- **Time** to build trusting relationships with families, to support consistent attendance and sustained engagement. Services also need time to navigate complex service systems and work alongside allied health and community services to deliver wrap around support for children.
- **In service leadership** – to coordinate a more complex operating environment, to work

towards building high performing teams, and provide extra support for educators to build their skills and knowledge and manage the emotional demands of the job.

- **In embedding quality and safety in practice** – as they are more likely to experience high staff turnover and struggle to access and hold time for learning, reflection and professional connections.

These higher costs exist in the services with the least capacity to generate additional revenue. This creates safety risks and lower quality in the services supporting the most vulnerable children and families – those who stand to benefit most from access to a quality early childhood education.

A needs-based approach to funding should be the next priority for ECEC reform.



Recommendation 2:

Ensure any new investment is directed to strategies that are evidenced to lift quality, with flexibility to be adaptive to local priorities and contexts

The design of a needs-based funding model needs careful consideration, balancing local flexibility with evidence-based investments and appropriate accountability. The Gonski Review offers a clear lesson for needs-based funding: **without funding tied to evidence-based strategies and a strong understanding of local priorities, inequality can escalate and funding is wasted.**

There are some core principles that should guide the design of any needs-based funding model for ECEC:

- **A clear but broad understanding of need** – recognising the varied ways poverty, disadvantage and trauma impacts children and the way services support them. Funding should be informed by indicators of child, family and community need, rather than relying on individual child assessments or diagnoses. Service wide funding can reduce the arduous process of individual child funding applications that takes educators away from supporting children.
- **Investing in evidence-informed approaches** – guiding needs-based funding towards the supports most likely to deliver lasting change within services and for children and families, including support to build the evidence for community-led initiatives.
- **Flexibility to be responsive to context** – a ‘one size fits all’ approach that doesn’t take into account the diverse strengths and priorities of individual services and each community, risks inefficient and ineffective investment.
- **Sustained and predictable funding** – short-term, one-off grants make it difficult for services or communities to employ staff, build trusted relationships, or plan and sustain quality improvements that grow over time.
- **Embedded accountability and learning mechanisms** – it is important that any additional funding for ECEC be clearly and transparently directed to practices that make a difference for children, and that there be explicit mechanisms to learn, within services and as a system, what is working and what is not.



Recommendation 3:

For communities experiencing disadvantage, take a place-based approach to developing and coordinating quality improvement strategies

The Hive's approach to quality improvement worked because we collaborated and applied what we'd learned about working in place.

We:

- **Brought services together to tackle shared challenges**, reducing professional isolation, enabling peer learning and collective solutions.
- **Shared resources efficiently** – rather than each service individually seeking training, coaching, or new programs, we sourced these centrally and made them available across all services.
- **Invested in the 'backbone'** – our Early Years Strategy Lead was the person on the ground, building trust with service leaders, identifying priorities, making connections, challenging and supporting services to work differently, and connecting individual services to wider networks and local services.
- **Developed a plan and sustained implementation** – alongside local services, we helped identify common problems, commission programs and resources to fill gaps, and sustained the focus and a continuous improvement approach over time.

Place-based needs-based funding

While there's clearly a place for a needs-based funding model that provides additional resourcing to individual services, there is an opportunity to get better value and greater impact from that investment by supporting place-based networks to coordinate how the investment is used.

A place-based approach to needs-based funding may not be needed in all communities, but for those experiencing disadvantage it will extend the impact and efficiency of any needs-based funding model.

There are several practical options for establishing this coordinating capacity:

- **Leveraging existing place-based backbones** – in many communities experiencing disadvantage, there are existing backbone teams who already hold local knowledge, trusted relationships with local organisations, and familiarity with the local early years service system. This could include local or state and territory networks, where these models already exist. Prioritising Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations where possible would have significant benefit.
- **Commissioning new coordinating agencies** – tendering this function to local not-for-profit organisations or consortia, potentially using a model similar to Inclusion Agencies. The key point here is to ensure there are local coordinators embedded in the relevant communities, not in a distant head office.

These coordinating teams would need to demonstrate deep understanding of local contexts and quality early childhood practice, and be a credible and trusted partner with services, and to support sustained quality improvement over time.

A place-based approach to needs-based funding involves a modest additional investment, yet is a powerful mechanism for ensuring a needs-based funding model delivers its intended impact.

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About The Hive

The Hive is a place-based, early years initiative of United Way Australia that has fostered collaboration across Mt Druitt since 2015.

Our goal is for 'all children in 2770 to start school well, with equal opportunity to learn, be healthy and participate in quality community life'.

We strive to achieve this through deep community development work with our local partners, innovative early years initiatives and advocacy for equitable policy and systems.

The Hive is the backbone for the 'Together in 2770' Collective Impact initiative in Mt Druitt.

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