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Front  
Project

# A NATIONAL VISION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SUBMISSION

Creating a vision of the future that ensures all children and families can benefit of quality, equitable and accessible ECEC.

## ABOUT THE FRONT PROJECT

The Front Project is an independent, national enterprise working to improve quality and create positive change in Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. We work with government, business and the early education sector to address disadvantage, improve outcomes for children and increase the short and long-term gains for Australia. We find innovative solutions that create impact in all parts of the system so that all children can thrive, regardless of the different challenges they experience.

We know high quality early education lays foundations for children that can last a lifetime, and at the same time provides significant benefits to our society and the future prosperity of Australia. Our society will see the full benefits of investment in the early years when the system is geared toward ensuring all children can access high quality education and take advantage of the opportunities this presents.

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### Acknowledgement of Country

The Front Project respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and learn, and pay respect to Elders, past and present. Sovereignty has never been **ceded**. It always **was** and always will be, Aboriginal **land**.

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## Executive Summary

The Front Project makes four recommendations for a National Vision of Early Childhood Education (ECEC) in Australia. We applaud the intention of the National Vision, and we believe it reflects the high-level strategic need for a broad, unifying statement of purpose for ECEC. The current Draft Vision would benefit from more consultation around four core areas.

First, to consider re-framing much of the Vision to put children at its core. Additional benefits arising from the ECEC reforms, such as increased workforce participation are important, but over-emphasised in the current Draft.

Second, to add greater nuance to how systems stewardship is reflected in the Vision. The desire to adopt a systems stewardship approach in ECEC is very welcome and could yield major gains in achieving the Vision and forthcoming Early Year Strategy. We encourage broadening conceptions of which actors are important stewards in this Vision.

Third, we would encourage a re-framing of entitlements in the ECEC Vision towards the child. The current focus rests more on the entitlements of parents as key beneficiaries in the ECEC system. While we recognise the multiple beneficiaries in the ECEC system, we believe the Vision should clarify the fundamental importance of putting entitlements to children first.

Finally, the National Vision for ECEC should be more clearly positioned in relation to the outcomes from the national Early Years Summit. This would make the Vision more strategically relative to the Summit and integrate a high-level national approach to ECEC and the Early Years more broadly.

We commend the role of National Cabinet, and the Vision of Federal, State and Territory Education Ministers for their leadership in developing this Vision and offer our support in the shared goal of a thriving ECEC system and a happier present and future for all children.

# SUMMARY OF VISION



### **Recommendation 1: Put children at the core of ECEC**

The developmental and educational outcomes of children is the lead catalyst for ECEC. Increasing the workforce participation of parents is a secondary, economic benefit.



### **Recommendation 2: Broaden systems stewardship for better governance**

Government and system actors must deepen their understanding of systems stewardship to embrace the unique opportunity facing the ECEC system, a chance to rethink governance with a whole system approach.



### **Recommendation 3: ECEC entitlements should focus on children first**

Entitlements should rest with the child, with an emphasis on the long-term benefits of high-quality, accessible ECEC for children moving away from a parent benefit approach.



### **Recommendation 4: Better align the Vision with the Summit Outcomes**

This Vision needs greater alignment with the goals and direction as set out in the National Early Years summit. Alternatively the Vision should address the disconnect between the Vision and the work from the Summit and provide clarity around where the government places ECEC in relation to the broader Early Years system

## RECOMMENDATION 1: Put children at the core of ECEC

The developmental and educational outcomes of children is the lead catalyst for ECEC. Increasing the workforce participation of parents is a secondary, economic benefit.

The Front Project welcomes the intent behind a National ECEC Vision. It is vital to the ongoing growth of the ECEC system, across all bases, that a strategic direction is formulated covering the core features uniting system actors and participants.

For an ECEC Vision to shape such a system, it must clearly focus on children in its scope and intent. A successful and thriving ECEC system is one that is centred on the timeless needs of children. An emphasis on children is a core, non-negotiable feature of what the ECEC system is, what it must be, and how it functions. This would still provide scope for the Vision to recognise the broader benefits arising from ECEC reforms and the wider impact of a high quality ECD system in which it sits.

We also understand that delivering on the present and future needs of children is a highly complex and contingent process. Significant reform of and investment in ECEC in Australia is underway and we stand at the cusp of a paradigm shift across the provision of high-quality early learning.

Indeed, we recognise that creating and sustaining a high-quality ECEC system can also enable other important outcomes influencing a child's social, emotional and economic wellbeing. The achievement of such outcomes is critical to the success of ECEC, and to the continued growth of the Australian economy.

Setting out a National Vision to account for these complexities must not over-emphasise the economic benefits of ECEC reform over the primary focus on children and consistently meeting their learning and development outcomes. The reform, growth and increased provision of ECEC is not solely a pathway to leverage workforce participation, yet we must recognise these outcomes are very important to an individual's sense of emotional, social and economic wellbeing.

**Recommendation:** The Vision must clearly articulate and place the needs of children at the centre of the Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care, and not overemphasise the economic benefits to the nation over the benefits to children and their current and future wellbeing. Specifically, children should be present in the Scope statement.

## RECOMMENDATION 2: Broaden systems stewardship for better governance

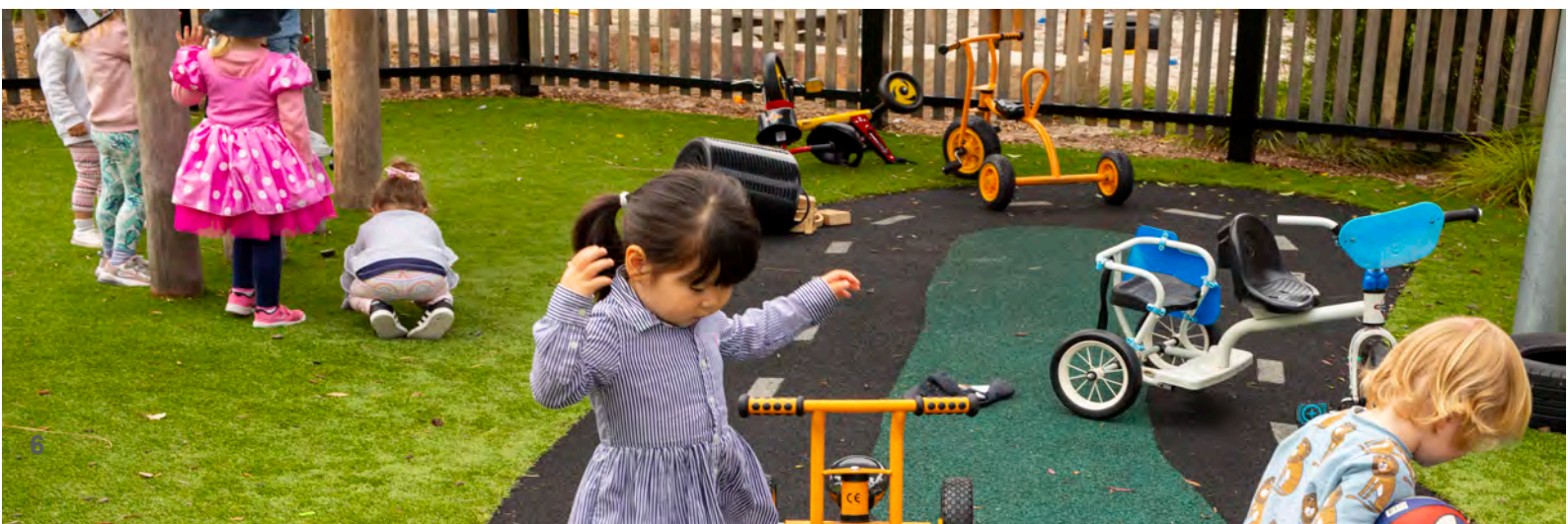
Government and system actors must deepen their understanding of systems stewardship to embrace the unique opportunity facing the ECEC system. This is a chance to rethink governance with a whole system approach.

The Front Project acknowledges and welcomes the use of the term ‘stewardship’ in the draft Vision in relation to the role of government. Systems stewardship reflects an important model and approach to the sustainable governance of the system. Our research indicates that system stewardship provides an opportunity to improve the health, performance and efficiency of the ECEC system by uniting the sector towards common goals (The Case for System Stewardship Report, The Front Project, 2022).

An important concept in systems stewardship is the idea of multiple stewards, where no single actor has complete and total control over the direction of all facets of a system. While there are key stewardship positions in ECEC, including fundamental roles for ensuring quality standards, regulatory compliance and child protection and safety standards, establishing a national approach to systems stewardship would allow for a shared vision and mutually agreed upon responsibilities for meeting the system’s objectives (The Case for System Stewardship Report, The Front Project, 2022).

The Front Project believes that commitment to systems stewardship will see visible transformation of the ECEC system, making it a more equitable system, operating with a more aligned vision and reduced siloing across system actors. Further, we see increased transparency and collaboration – fundamental attributes to encouraging higher levels of innovation.

**Recommendation:** The Front Project recommends that the draft Vision is a full representation of the government’s role as the system steward and articulates and integrates the systems stewardship model deeply throughout the Vision, including identifying the roles in the system that are and can be taken up by others outside of government.



## RECOMMENDATION 3: ECEC entitlements should focus on children first

Entitlements should rest with the child, with an emphasis on the long-term benefits of high-quality, accessible ECEC for children, and move away from a parent benefit approach.

The draft Vision sets out the important connection between children and parents as core beneficiaries in the ECEC system. The Front Project has long championed this view that benefits created for families have positive flow-through impacts on the lives of individual children.

Current policy places the entitlements for investment in ECEC with the parents and care givers. This deviates from the notion that the greatest impacts of high-quality ECEC are for the benefit of the child, whilst also fulfilling basic human rights and entitlements to accessible and quality education. The draft Vision emphasises family entitlements alongside the outcome of enabling workforce participation.

The evidence base demonstrates that children experiencing disadvantage gain the most benefit, with ECEC participation linked to improved outcomes compared with non-ECEC attending counterparts (Children at the centre ECEC report, ARACY 2022). It is those children who are experiencing disadvantage who can benefit the most from high quality ECEC that is not impacted by locations, family financial situation and family circumstances (including children living in out of home care).

**Recommendation:** Building on Recommendation 1 (Putting Children at the Core of ECEC), we encourage a redrafting to focus on entitlements resting with the child. This would allow a flexible system to work for children regardless of the context they are living in or the changes they experience in that context. This would especially support children who are experiencing out of home care, or inconsistent care giver housing and income.

## RECOMMENDATION 4: Better align the Vision with the Summit Outcomes

This Vision needs greater alignment with the goals and direction as set out in the National Early Years summit. Alternatively the Vision should address the disconnect between the Vision and the work from the Summit and provide clarity around where the government places ECEC in relation to the broader Early Years system

The Early Years Summit, held in March 2023 provided an important, symbolic moment for the ECEC system, as well as the Early Years system more broadly. This Summit marked a possible sea change in how collective thinking is understood and how we act upon reforms in the Early Years, and especially in ECEC. Setting the stage in this way provides an excellent opportunity to formulate an ECEC Vision that builds on this work. The National Early Years Summit acknowledged the child as the main beneficiary of the policy landscape across the Early Years. As such, the Summit positioned the child at the centre of the strategy identifying that it is the early years of a child's life that government are wanting to support, irrespective of the government department that holds that portfolio.

We note that the current draft Vision is not well aligned with Summit outcomes, and it is unclear why the Vision frames only the ECEC, and not the Early Years of a child's life more broadly. Clarification for actors, stakeholders, families and children around why different parts of the government are divergent around the ways they are defining and talking about their work would help reduce repetition and provide a clear connection between government work.

Aligning the National Vision with Summit outcomes would provide an opportunity for strategic cohesion during times of rapid change and would reassure actors across the Early Years of the intent behind the National Vision.

**Recommendation:** We encourage a clear integration and alignment of Summit outcomes into the National ECEC Vision statement. Doing so would position the Vision strongly in relation to longer-term policy goals and systems change across the Early Years.

