

# Making sense of the current safety crisis in early education and care

How we got here and where to next



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Sovereignty has never been ceded.

It always was and always will be,  
Aboriginal land.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## CURRENTLY



### Rapid sector growth

Between 2013 and 2023, the number of childcare places increased by 69%, helping to meet demand while also putting pressure on workforce supply, service quality, and regulatory oversight.<sup>1</sup>



### Workforce shortages

Workforce shortages, combined with pressure to meet occupancy and other targets, can result in high casualisation, rushed recruitment and onboarding, and supervision practices that increase immediate safety risks.<sup>2</sup>



### Funding incentives

Large government subsidies can incentivise providers to prioritise short-term financial returns over sustained investment in workforce capability and quality outcomes for children.<sup>3</sup>



### Inadequate checks and balances

Long gaps between NQS assessments mean service quality declining without timely oversight, reducing transparency for families and accountability for providers.<sup>4</sup>



### No clear system vision or goal

The sector lacks a shared vision and measurable objectives, making it difficult to align policies, funding, and practice.

## WHERE TO NEXT?



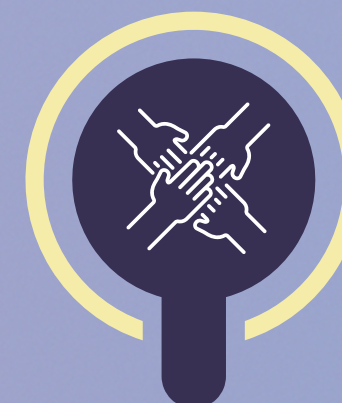
### Layer safety with high quality at a service-level

Build on high quality as a foundation to embed robust child protection policies, mandatory training, strong supervision practices, trusted reporting channels, and a culture of vigilance in every service.<sup>5,6</sup>



### Strengthen and support a consistent workforce

Invest in qualifications and training, professional pay and conditions, ongoing professional development, and retention strategies that keep more of the same skilled educators in front of more of the same children each day.<sup>7,8</sup>



### Governments accountable with clear roles and responsibilities

Establish clear roles and responsibilities for all parts of the system with a mechanism to hold governments to account on achieving agreed set of system objectives.<sup>9</sup>



# SAFETY RELIES ON





# CURRENT SAFETY CYCLE

## Prevention



## Detection



## Response



### For example:

- Provider approval & fit-and-proper checks
- Working With Children Checks - vary across jurisdictions with all checking for criminal conduct and substantiated disciplinary/regulatory action and some unsubstantiated allegations
- Teacher Registration
- Child protection training & mandatory reporting
- National Quality Standard (QA2, QA3, QA4) requirements, including staffing and ratio requirements
- Safe physical environment & WHS compliance
- Provider-level HR and IR practices

### For example:

- Effective supervision of children
- Monitoring & spot checks by regulators
- Risk-based compliance monitoring
- Complaints mechanisms & reporting channels
- NQS assessment & rating visits

### For example:

- Incident reporting & investigation (staff, providers, regulators, police)
- Some states have Reportable Conduct schemes where employers respond to allegations of misconduct by its employees
- Enforcement powers under National Law
- Revocation or suspension of service approvals and funding, fines & penalties
- Corrective action plans & follow-up assessments
- Governance & leadership accountability for remediation



# HOW WE GOT HERE

## Big money for big growth

The market share of **for-profit childcare** has **increased from 60% to 70% since 2013**.

The Australian Government spends around \$14b annually on the Child Care Subsidy.<sup>10</sup>

## Regulation hasn't kept pace

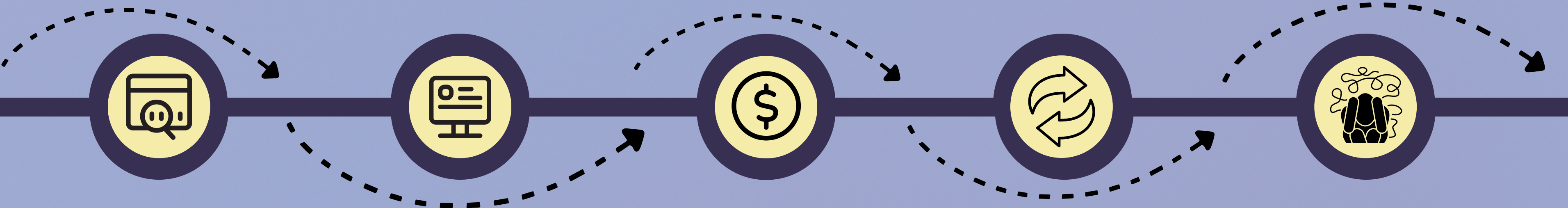
Assessment and ratings are infrequent and inconsistent, there are a lack of spot checks and weak escalation of non-compliance. Federal funding for state/territory regulators via a National Partnership Agreement on Quality was cut in 2018, worth \$61m.<sup>13</sup>

- Currently 1,301 (7%) of services are yet to be assessed.
- **In SA average time between assessments 8-10 years.**<sup>14</sup>

## Workforce under pressure

Turnover rates in Long Day Care can exceed 30% annually, disrupting relationships and continuity of care.

- One forthcoming research study found **children experienced a change in educator roughly every 6 weeks.**<sup>16</sup>
- 77% of educators report working below required staffing levels at least weekly.<sup>17</sup>
- Child care services average 15.7 WorkCover claims per million hours worked, compared with 8.3 across all occupations.<sup>18</sup>



## NQF works, but not enough accountability for quality uplift

AERO research tells us the NQF works:

- **Children who attend Exceeding services have better outcomes than those in Meeting and Working Towards services.** They are less developmentally vulnerable and do better at school.<sup>11</sup>

Around 1 in 10 services is rated Working Towards.<sup>12</sup> There are limited incentives and accountability for ongoing quality improvement.

## Services can change hands quickly

Since 2013, **58%** of services that dropped from Meeting or Exceeding the National Standard to Working Towards did so following a change of ownership.<sup>15</sup>

## Parents under pressure

Most parents of young children are working

- nearly 70% of couples with children under five have both parents employed.
- **One in five people who want to work but can't cited childcare as the main reason.**
- Around 24% of Australians live in childcare "deserts" with severely limited access.<sup>19</sup>



# SAFETY INQUIRIES

## National

ACECQA Review of Child Safety Arrangements under the NQF  
*December 2023*

Child Safety Review  
*Due late 2025*

Senate Inquiry into Childcare Safety and Quality  
*Due 10 March 2026*

## NSW

Independent Review into the ECEC Regulatory Authority  
*Report released June 2025*

Parliamentary Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector  
*Report due March 2026*

## SA

Education Minister urgent request to improve child safety

## WA

Review of Regulatory Approach to Child Safety in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings  
*Published 19 August 2025*

## QLD

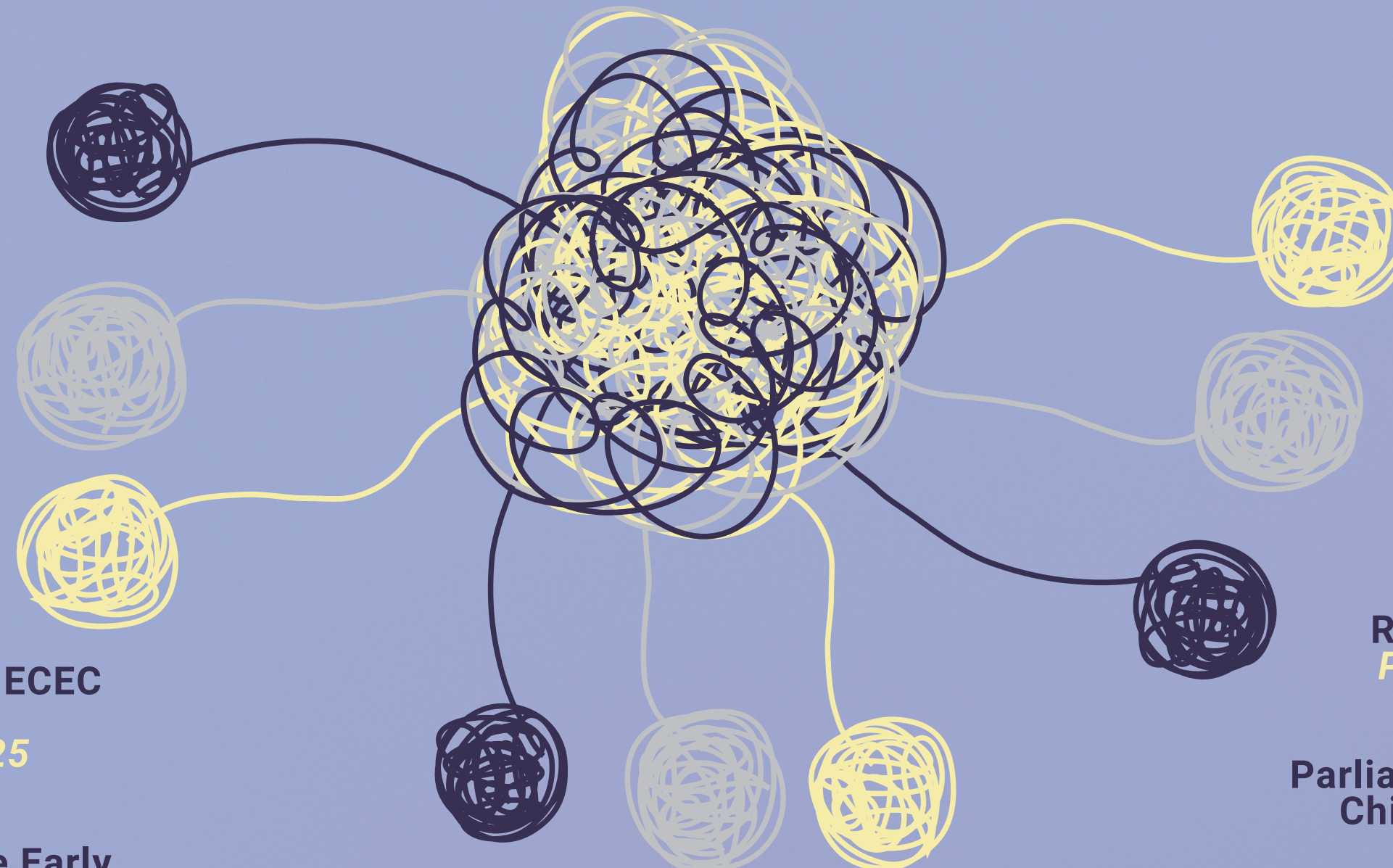
Child Safety Roundtable  
*12 July 2025*

Review of System Responses to Child Sexual Abuse  
*Ongoing*

## VIC

Rapid Child Safety Review  
*Published 20 August 2025*

Parliamentary Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector  
*Report due June 2026*







# WORK IN PROGRESS

## **Commonwealth has enacted:**

- *Strengthening Regulation of Early Education Bill (2025)*: leveraging CCS funding for service approval and operation, increased fines, spot checks and monitoring, increased availability, transparency and national consistency of compliance and safety data.
- Worker Retention Payment scheme, reducing educator turnover and improving supply of educators.
- Mandatory 24 hour reporting of specific incidents.
- Stronger protections around digital technology and mobile phone use.
- Child Safety embedded in National Quality Standards from 1 Jan 2026.

## **Education Ministers' Meeting on 22<sup>nd</sup> August committed to:**

- \$189m by Commonwealth to strengthen safety and quality in ECEC settings.
- \$132.6m investment by states and territories to regulators and associated investments.
- Putting 'paramount interest of the child' into National Law.
- Commonwealth funding a National Educator Register that captures who is working where (and will be continually built on).
- Commencing November, Commonwealth will conduct 1600 more spot checks to support state regulators
- Ongoing mandatory child-safe training for all levels of staff to support a child-safe culture, including paid time off the floor.
- CCTV trials in up to 300 services.
- Review of implementation of ratios, including use of "across the service / under the roofline" flexibility, by end of 2025.
- Penalties tripled for offences committed under National Law and National Regulations.
- Improved transparency for families, including information on service safety record and compliance and enforcement breaches.

## **Standing Council of Attorneys-Generals agreed to:**

- Urgently progress National Working With Children Check.





# FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

## Immediate opportunities:

- Whistleblower protections for ECEC professionals<sup>20</sup>
- ‘No wrong door’ for complaints from parents/ caregivers.
- Sustained levels of resourcing for state & territory regulators to meet an agreed national standard.
- Align WWCC and Reportable Conduct schemes (noting Victoria already moving on this)<sup>21</sup> and harness opportunity to align with National Educator Register, bringing together real time intelligence to identify problems early.
- Taking tougher action on low-quality educator training courses.<sup>22</sup>
- National settlement of roles and responsibilities for the Commonwealth, state and territories.<sup>23,24,25</sup>
- Set clear expectations and regulate for best practice recruitment and induction (noting Victoria is moving on this).<sup>26</sup>

## Building a safer system for the future:

- Funded quality improvement programs (programs already happening in NSW, Vic, SA, Qld).<sup>27</sup>
- Sustained and ongoing pay and conditions uplift.<sup>28</sup>
- Professional working conditions and strategies to attract and retain qualified staff, and minimise use of waivers and casual labour.
- Strengthen pre-service training.
- Using data to reveal low-performing services and providers, with a focus on the underlying causes of safety and quality failures, including workforce characteristics and management practices.



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**New National Agreement** to improve policy coordination, role clarity and accountability.<sup>31</sup>





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