Submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee

Inquiry into the State of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care System in Rural, Regional and Remote Communities

Submitted by: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA)
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Acknowledgement of Country

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters across Australia on which we live, work and gather, and pays respect to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to Country, culture, language, community and kinship, and that sovereignty was never ceded.

We extend this respect to the Traditional Custodians of the many nations represented within our membership, from saltwater to freshwater and desert Country, and honour the diversity of language, culture and lore across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia.

We honour the strength and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women past, present and emerging who continue to advocate for the safety, wellbeing and rights of their families and communities, and we acknowledge the children who carry this legacy forward.

About NATSIWA

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) is the national peak body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women across Australia. NATSIWA provides a collective national voice to ensure that the leadership, lived experience and policy priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are centred in government decision-making.

NATSIWA is funded through the Australian Government's Gender Equality Strategy under the Office for Women and works to strengthen the participation, safety, wellbeing and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls. As a national alliance, NATSIWA engages with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women across urban, regional, rural and remote communities to elevate community perspectives in national policy and reform processes.

NATSIWA works across policy reform, systemic advocacy and community engagement to address structural barriers faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in areas including safety, health, housing, employment, education and justice. Our work is grounded in the principles of self-determination, cultural authority and community-led solutions.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women hold cultural authority, lived experience, community responsibility and intergenerational leadership roles as parents, carers, educators and service leaders on whom early childhood education and care in rural, regional and remote Australia depends. They must have ownership and control of data collected about their lives, families and communities, including authority over how this data is gathered, interpreted, used, stored and shared.

Executive Summary

NATSIWA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry into the state of Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system in rural, regional and remote communities.[6] Reliable, culturally safe ECEC underpins the economic participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women as parents, carers and workers, and shapes the earliest developmental outcomes of our children.

This submission draws on national evidence — including analysis by SNAICC[1], the Productivity Commission[2] and the Australian Government's own Closing the Gap[5] reporting.

The evidence is clear: ECEC access in rural, regional and remote Australia is inconsistent, services are limited, and a market-based funding system continues to reward provider growth in already-saturated metropolitan areas over the communities with the greatest need. Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), providers best placed to deliver culturally safe, trusted care, remain a tiny fraction of the sector and are structurally disadvantaged by current funding settings.

NATSIWA is clear that incremental change is not sufficient. Reform must combine the recent demand-side improvements to the Child Care Subsidy with dedicated, sustained supply-side investment in ACCO-led services, a genuine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC workforce strategy, and system design that is co-created with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and communities.

At its core, this submission calls for an ECEC system that recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women as leaders, carers and decision-makers within their families and communities and ensures every child can access quality early learning regardless of where they live.

1. Extent and Nature of ECEC Service Gaps Across Rural, Regional and Remote Australia

Issues and Impacts

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- "Childcare deserts", areas with more than three children for every available place, are concentrated in regional and remote Australia and disproportionately overlap with communities where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are concentrated.[1]
- Only 107 of Australia's approximately 18,000 ECEC services (0.59%) are Aboriginal community-controlled, despite ACCOs being best placed to meet community need.[1]
- The market-based funding model introduced under the 2018 Child Care Package rewards providers for opening in already-saturated metropolitan areas, leaving thin markets in regional and remote communities structurally under-served.[1]
- Gaps span long day care, family day care, in-home care, outside school hours care and preschool/kindergarten alike, forcing many families to travel long distances or go without care altogether.

Recommendations

- Direct a defined share of Commonwealth capital funding (including the Building Early Education Fund) specifically to underserved rural, regional and remote communities.
- Require geographic and community-need mapping, disaggregated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, to guide future ECEC investment.
- Monitor "childcare desert" measures as a standing indicator in national ECEC reporting.

2. Attracting, Training and Retaining a Qualified ECEC Workforce

Issues and Impacts

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up only 3.8% of the national ECEC workforce.[1]
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are under-represented at bachelor-degree level (9.0% versus 14.7% for the non-Indigenous workforce), reflecting a lack of cultural safety in tertiary institutions and registered training organisations.[1]
- Nearly 40% of ECEC educators nationally report pay as "poor or very poor," and ACCOs cannot compete with for-profit sector wages.[1]
- These pressures are compounded in remote communities by the added costs of housing and transport, and by limited local access to training and career development.

Recommendations

- Develop a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Years Workforce Strategy.
- Fund subsidised tertiary and vocational pathways delivered in partnership with ACCOs and community-controlled training organisations.
- Increase the ECEC Worker Retention Payment, with additional loading for regional and remote roles.
- Establish an ACCO ECEC Workforce Innovation Fund to support locally designed recruitment and retention models.

3. Effectiveness of the Child Care Subsidy (CCS)

Issues and Impacts

- From January 2026, the 3 Day Guarantee entitles First Nations children to 100 subsidised hours per fortnight regardless of a parent's activity level, a welcome reform NATSIWA supports.[3]
- However, an entitlement to subsidised hours has no value where no service exists to use it. In many rural, regional and remote communities, the binding constraint is service availability and workforce capacity, not subsidy settings alone.

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- CCS-based, demand-side funding does not reflect the true cost of delivering holistic, wraparound ECEC in thin markets, and interacts poorly with the multiple, fragmented funding streams ACCOs must navigate.[1]
- Families with low or variable wages, common in rural and remote economies reliant on seasonal, casual or itinerant work, face unpredictable CCS entitlements, since the subsidy is reconciled against an estimated annual income. Underestimating income can leave families with a subsidy debt, while overestimating means paying higher gap fees than necessary. Where services do exist, gap fees remain a significant out-of-pocket barrier for these families.

Recommendations

- Complement the 3 Day Guarantee with dedicated supply-side funding for ACCOs and other providers operating in thin rural, regional and remote markets.
- Review how CCS settings interact with other Commonwealth and state funding streams to reduce administrative burden on community-controlled providers.
- Simplify CCS income estimation and reconciliation for families with seasonal or variable income, and review gap fee levels in thin markets where providers face little competitive pressure to keep fees low.

4. Effectiveness of Existing Commonwealth Programs and Investments

Issues and Impacts

- Programs such as Connected Beginnings and the Community Child Care Fund have improved integration of early childhood, health and family services in some Aboriginal communities.[4]
- Coverage remains limited relative to need, and short funding cycles undermine the long-term planning ACCOs require to build sustainable services and a stable local workforce.

Recommendations

- Expand Connected Beginnings and comparable integrated programs to more rural, regional and remote communities.
- Move Commonwealth ECEC funding for ACCOs to longer-term, indexed funding cycles rather than competitive short-term grants.

5. Challenges for Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)

Issues and Impacts

- ACCOs deliver trust-based, culturally embedded services with strong continuity of care, embedding language, Aboriginal ways of knowing and family-led approaches across curriculum, environment and pedagogy.[1]
- ACCOs face regulatory complexity, high capital establishment costs, and funding arrangements not designed around their integrated, wraparound model of service delivery.
- Current mainstream funding is fragmented and administratively burdensome, and does not reflect the true cost of the holistic supports ACCOs provide.[1]

Recommendations

- Ring-fence a defined share of Commonwealth ECEC capital funding for new ACCO-led services.
- Fund comprehensive “backbone” support (governance, compliance, data) for ACCOs entering or expanding in the ECEC sector.
- Review the National Quality Framework in genuine partnership with the ACCO sector to ensure it accommodates community-controlled models of care.

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6. Other Related Matters: Gendered Economic Impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

Issues and Impacts

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women carry the primary caring load in many rural, regional and remote communities; ECEC availability is a precondition for their employment, education and civic participation.
- ECEC is also a significant employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women: investment in ACCO-delivered ECEC is simultaneously investment in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female workforce.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's voices are frequently absent from ECEC system design, despite being its primary users, workforce and community decision-makers.

Recommendations

- Ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's voices are embedded in ECEC policy design and any reform to the CCS or National Quality Framework.
- Align ECEC reform with the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, particularly Priority Reform Two (building the community-controlled sector) and Priority Reform Four (data and shared decision-making).[5]

Conclusion

Early childhood education and care, as a foundation of child development and family economic participation, must work for every Australian family regardless of where they live.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in rural, regional, remote and very remote communities, this is not currently the case. The evidence is clear: access is inconsistent, services are limited, and a market-based system continues to under-serve the communities with the greatest need.

This submission has outlined how current ECEC settings are contributing to inequitable outcomes and has identified the structural reforms required to ensure the system is fair, workable and sustainable. NATSIWA is clear that reform must go beyond incremental change: it must combine recent demand-side improvements to the Child Care Subsidy with sustained, dedicated investment in Aboriginal community-controlled ECEC, a genuine First Nations ECEC workforce strategy, and system design shaped by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

This Inquiry presents an important opportunity to reshape Australia's ECEC system so that it delivers on its promise of universal access. NATSIWA urges the Committee to take forward reforms that ensure no child is left without quality early learning because of where they live.

References

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