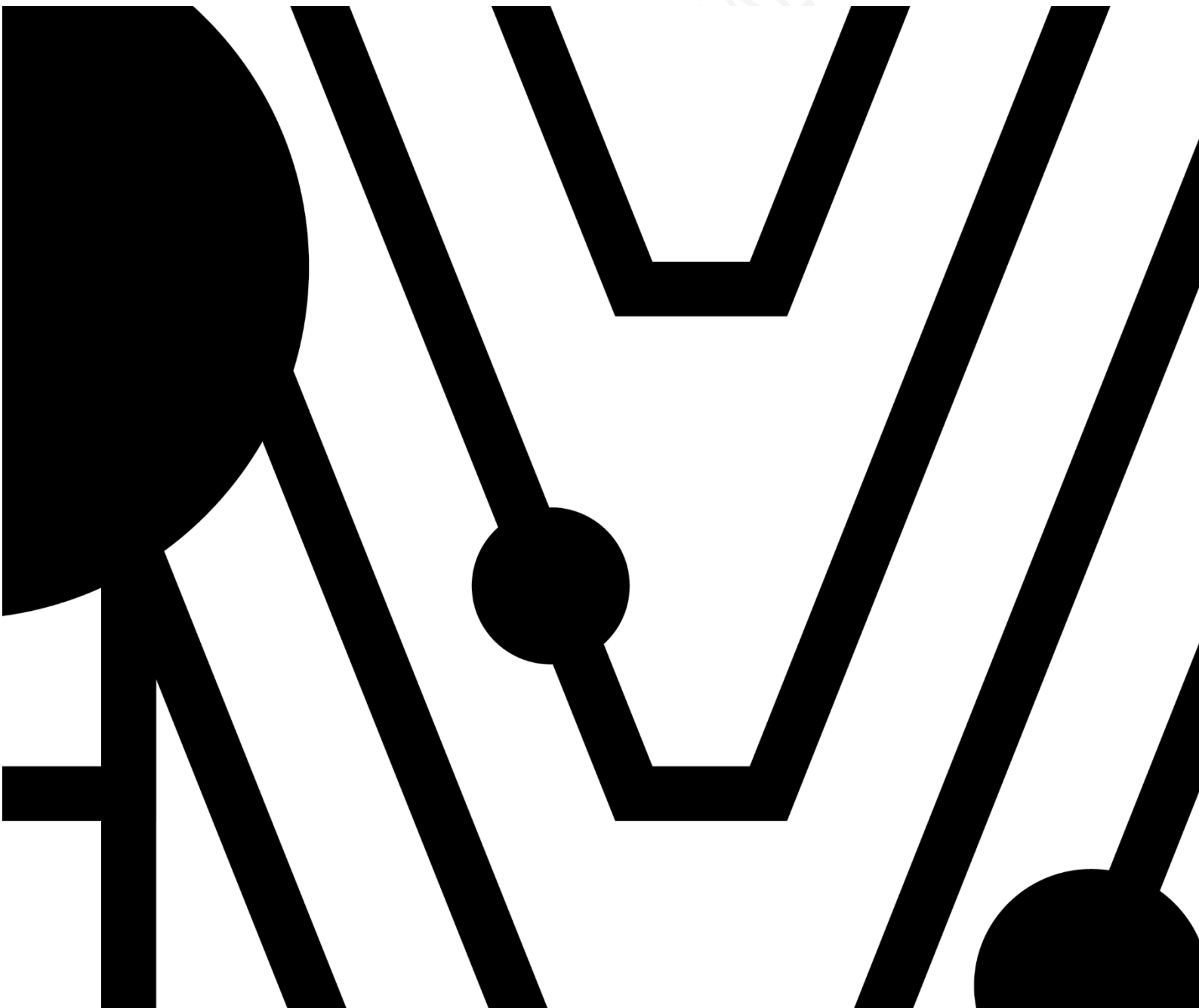


NSW Department of Education

Independent Expert Review – Summary report on process

January 2024



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GoldbergBlaise operates in terms of quality management principles.
This report has been prepared by Abigail Goldberg.

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1.0 Background

The NSW Government made an election commitment in 2023 to build 100 new department operated preschools by 2027 and to build co-located preschools on all new public primary school sites.

The establishment of the 100 government preschools program is a significant undertaking. To provide a transparent and accountable process, it was decided that the final site selection would be by an **Assessment Panel**, supported by an **Independent Expert Reviewer (IER) / Independent Chair** with a **Probity Advisor** to oversee the process.

1.1 Scope of the Independent Expert Reviewer / Independent Chair role

The scope of the Independent Expert Reviewer (IER) role was agreed to include:

- reviewing Panel processes set up by the project team and secretariat and providing advice on suitability
- reviewing data and documentation given to the Panel
- providing a short report regarding whether the Panel has carried out its role in accordance with its processes and Terms of Reference. The report was to make up part of the formal sign-off of the site selection process.

The Independent Expert Reviewer also independently chaired key assessment meetings, with the Probity Advisor also present.

This document is a summary of the Independent Expert Reviewer final sign-off report.

1.2 Detailed description of the IER role

The Independent Expert Reviewer played a crucial role in ensuring rigour of the decision-making process for the selection of sites through:

- **Advice:** reviewing and providing advice on the panel process, Terms of Reference (ToR) and governance systems established by the project team and secretariat.
- **Panel documentation review:** reviewing data and decision-making documentation given to the panel.
- **Point of escalation and mediation:** being available as a point of escalation should issues or disputes arise during the site selection process, noting that no escalation was required and no disputes arose during this process.

2.0 Report on governance

2.1 Overview

This section provides an overview and assessment of the governance processes applied to the selection of pre-school sites.

2.2 Assessment panel

Assessment panel make up	Comment
Assessment panel composition	<p>The assessment panels comprised very senior departmental representatives as voting members.</p> <p>An independent voting member was included for reasons of expertise, diversity and governance robustness.</p> <p>An advisory team (non-voting) of departmental experts in both Early Childhood Outcomes and School Infrastructure was available to support the assessment panel.</p>
<p>Overall comment: Various factors were taken into consideration in determining the composition of the assessment panel, including level of seniority and experience in panel assessments, skill sets relevant to the task, state knowledge and diversity across the panel to ensure diversity of thinking.</p>	

2.3 Assessment panel procedural support

Assessment panel procedural support	Comment
Independent Chair / Independent Expert Reviewer (combined role – author of this report)	The Independent Chair / Independent Expert Reviewer provided advice on meeting preparation, structure, governance, processes, agenda, minutes and follow-up actions as well as advice relating to site selection criteria, processes and tranches for site assessment. (see also 1.2)
Probity Advisor	<p>The Probity Advisor provided independent oversight of the assessment and decision-making processes to ensure fairness, impartiality, and compliance with relevant guidelines, policies and the Terms of Reference.</p> <p>At the key decision-making meetings on 6 December 2023 and 17 January 2024, the Probity Advisory maintained a strict line of sight on the decision-making process, ensuring adherence to the agreed decision-making methodology.</p>
Secretariat	The department provided a secretariat who managed the logistics and documentation supporting the assessment process as well as acting as the primary point of contact for assessment panel members.

Project Team	The project team was responsible for data analysis, due diligence investigations and inputs to the process. The project team had a support rather than voting role. Project team advisors were present at the assessment meetings to provide background information, input and assistance when required.
Guests	The panel Terms of Reference allowed for guests to be invited should additional information of a technical or subject matter expertise be required. No guest input was considered to be needed and hence no guests were invited to participate in the process.
Overall comment: <i>Comprehensive professional support was available to the assessment panel and to ensure the robustness of the assessment process. Project team members all demonstrated high levels of skills and commitment to ensuring an excellent process and outcome.</i>	

2.4 Assessment panel governance

Assessment panel governance	Comment
Code of Conduct	Each participant was required to agree to and sign-off on the Code of Conduct, and if needed provide updates on emerging conflicts of interest.
Conflict of Interest recording	No conflicts of any material significance were declared. These records were overseen by the Probity Advisor and are retained by the Secretariat.
Overall comment: <i>Adherence to the Code of Conduct ensured a transparent approach to potential conflicts of interest.</i>	

2.5 Data inputs and analytics

Data inputs and analytics	Comment
Site selection processes and data inputs	<p>A tightly documented, robust set of processes and protocols structured the collection, analysis and sorting of data. Data inputs combined socio-economic factors as well as factors relating to site suitability and infrastructure viability.</p> <p>For the second process, updated data not previously available supplemented decision making and supported robustness of the process governance.</p>
Scoring methodologies	Scoring methodologies are outlined in the '100 Preschool Site Selection Assessment Criteria Rubric', December 2023. An 'Addendum for the Second Panel Assessment Site Selection Methodology', January 2024 updates this where needed.
Overall comment: <i>Highly disciplined processes combining socio-economic factors with site suitability and infrastructure viability inputs were developed as is appropriate for a site selection process for preschool use. The data was welcomed by the assessment panel members, who commented on its comprehensiveness and usability. It was also noted by assessment panel members that presentation of the material was clear and comprehensive.</i>	

As the independent expert, I was impressed by both the quality and clarity of the data, and the analysis undertaken by the project team.

2.6 Meeting processes

Meeting processes	Comment:
Pre-assessment introductions	<p>Both the Assessment Panel and the project team met separately with the Independent Chair prior to the first assessment panel meeting for introductory sessions that addressed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • governance and meeting processes • probity matters • confirmation of data inputs to be provided for the decision-making process.
Pre-assessment: individual panel member review and briefings as needed	<p>The project team made themselves available to Assessment Panel members prior to assessment meetings to enable the review of information and respond to queries if needed. All panel members were equally able to avail themselves of this assistance.</p>
Panel assessment meetings	<p>The Assessment Panel met first on 6 December 2023 to make decisions about which school sites would be recommended for a preschool build. Discussion and debate at this meeting was collaborative, facilitated by the Independent Chair and overseen by the Probity Advisor. The project team was called on for advice as needed.</p> <p>A second Assessment Panel meeting was held on 17 January 2024 to decide on additional school sites to make up 100 sites. Discussion and debate at this meeting was again collaborative, facilitated by the Independent Chair and overseen by the Probity Advisor. The project team was again available for advice as needed.</p> <p>The proceedings and outcomes of both meetings are documented in Minutes recorded by the panel secretariat.</p>
<p>Overall comment: <i>A process of structured and professionally chaired meetings was undertaken to ensure governance hygiene and meeting discipline.</i></p>	

3.0 Summary of findings

3.1 Assessment panel

- *Various factors were taken into consideration in determining the composition of the assessment panel, including level of seniority and experience in panel assessments, skill sets relevant to the task, state knowledge and diversity across the panel to ensure diversity of thinking.*
- *Comprehensive professional support was available to the assessment panel and to ensure the robustness of the assessment processes. Project team members all demonstrated high levels of skills and commitment to ensuring an excellent process and outcome.*
- *Adherence to the Code of Conduct ensured a transparent approach to potential conflicts of interest.*

3.2 Data inputs and analytics

- *Highly disciplined processes combining socio-economic factors with site suitability and infrastructure viability inputs were developed as is appropriate for a site selection process for preschool use.*
- *The data was welcomed by the assessment panel members, who commented on its comprehensiveness and usability. It was also noted by assessment panel members that presentation of the material was clear and comprehensive.*
- *As the independent expert, I was impressed by both the quality and clarity of the data, and the analysis undertaken by the project team.*

3.3 Meeting processes

- *A process of structured and professionally chaired meetings was undertaken to ensure governance hygiene and meeting discipline*

3.4 Summary of findings

In my view the Assessment Panel carried out its role in accordance with its processes and Terms of Reference. The Panel was also supported by:

- *Skilled and professional project team support*
- *Comprehensive, high quality data inputs*
- *Effective secretariat support, including governance assistance*
- *Oversight by an independent Probity Advisor.*