



REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION STRATEGY: CONSULTATION PAPER

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About the Regional and Remote Early Childhood Education Strategy

What will the regional and remote strategy do?

Early Childhood Education (ECE) services play a vital role in the wellbeing and development of children and young people. In recognition of this, the Regional and Remote ECE Strategy aims to ensure that children in regional and remote areas have access to sustainable, high quality early childhood education and start school with the skills they need to engage in learning.

The Strategy will guide the Early Childhood Education Directorate (ECED) on how best to support the needs of regional and remote early childhood services, families, children and communities to meet this important goal and will be informed by national quality standards and participation targets on universal access. We will use the Strategy to help shape the development of services and supports for ECE in regional and remote NSW.

Why are we consulting?

The operational context of ECE services in regional and remote areas can differ from services in metropolitan areas. In regional and remote areas, ECE services are often an important part of broader community infrastructure.

Consultation is crucial to ensuring that the Strategy meets the needs of the wide variety of regional and remote communities across NSW. This is why we are asking for feedback from peak bodies, government agencies and ECE services to help inform the Strategy.

Your feedback will contribute directly to the development of the Strategy and ensure that the needs of your local community are considered.

How to provide feedback

Consultation questions have been drafted to guide your input as well as some additional information in the appendices to assist you with your response. We welcome feedback on any or all of the consultation questions. Any other information or feedback that assists in the development of the Strategy is also welcome.

How can you contribute?

- Send us an email:
ECEreferencegroups@det.nsw.edu.au
- Online, via the link available at
<http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/what-we-offer/regulation-and-accreditation/early-childhood-education-care/regional-and-remote-ece-strategy>
- Post your feedback to:
Attention Manager Engagement
Department of Education
Early Childhood Education Directorate
Level 11, 1 Oxford Street
DARLINGHURST NSW 2010

Next steps

We will be conducting a small number of stakeholder workshops – information on these workshops will be available on the NSW Department of Education's website from February 2017. If you would like to participate in a stakeholder workshop please email ECEreferencegroups@det.nsw.edu.au.

Once the Strategy is developed further consultation will be undertaken to guide implementation of the Strategy.

Supporting children and regional and remote NSW

The importance of Early Childhood Education in preparing children for school is well known. Research shows that children who participate in quality Early Childhood Education programs are more likely to arrive at school equipped with the social, cognitive and emotional skills they need to engage in learning. Children continue to benefit throughout their lifetimes, such as through improved economic participation and higher levels of family wellbeing (O'Connell et al. 2016; Heckman 2010).

In New South Wales, 28% of four-and five-year old children that enrol in ECE do so in a regional, remote or very remote setting (ABS Preschool Education Australia 2015). However children growing up in regional and remote settings are more likely than their metropolitan counterparts to:

- Be developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the five domains assessed in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC); in 2015, close to one in two children living in very remote areas were considered developmentally vulnerable.

- Be below the national minimum standard in both literacy and numeracy; by year 3, children in regional and remote areas are more than twice as likely as their metropolitan peers to score below the national minimum standard on NAPLAN assessments.
- Have poorer outcomes over their lifetime, for example, lower earnings, greater morbidity, higher rates of incarceration.

Research has shown that the greatest benefits of early childhood education accrue to children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Melhuish 2015). Given that disadvantaged children are over-represented in regional and remote areas, it is particularly important that high quality early childhood education is accessible and affordable in regional and remote communities.



Consultation Questions

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1. How could the delivery of early childhood education in regional and remote NSW benefit from more integration and collaboration?

 2. What are Commonwealth and State Government early childhood programs that the Department could link with?

 3. How can the Department assist early childhood services to engage with Aboriginal families and communities more positively and effectively?

 4. What are the factors that make it more difficult for families in regional and remote areas to ensure their children participate meaningfully in early childhood education? How can the Department address these factors?

 5. How effective is distance preschool as a form of early childhood education? How could it be improved?

 6. How effective is mobile preschool as a delivery method for early childhood education? How could it be improved?

 7. Overcoming barriers to access associated with distance and remoteness will be a key priority of the Strategy. What are some examples of effective methods to address the impact of distance?

 8. How can the Department offer greater support to the early childhood education workforce in regional and remote areas?

 9. What can the Department do to help early childhood services in regional and remote areas recruit and retain early childhood teachers?

 10. What would an effective incentives program to reward innovation in delivering ECE in regional and remote settings look like?

 11. What data and information sources should be considered to better inform the Strategy?

Appendix A: Regional and Remote Early Childhood Education Strategy Principles

1. Local solutions are most appropriate for local problems. The challenges of early childhood education in Deniliquin may be quite different to those in Lightning Ridge. Issues affecting access to preschool in Bourke might not exist in Armidale. The Regional and Remote Strategy should not prescribe one-size-fits-all solutions; instead, through partnerships with communities, priority will be placed on flexible approaches to delivering accessible and high quality early childhood education.
2. Regional and remote communities require innovative approaches to service delivery and access. Regional and remote communities are distinct from metropolitan areas in many ways; they have lower population density, larger distances between towns and infrastructure, and often a lack of information. For these reasons, systems that may work in cities, like competition and typical market-based approaches, are often ineffective in regional and remote areas.
3. There should be an emphasis on high expectations. While the Strategy should recognise the additional challenges of early childhood education in regional and remote communities, the government should also expect that over time regional and remote areas and can obtain the same opportunities to participate at the same level.
4. Early childhood education must be provided in a way that embeds cultural respect and inclusion. From staffing to community engagement to curriculum, early childhood education services must be supported by the Government to engage with Aboriginal communities in culturally inclusive and competent ways.
5. Decision-making should be informed by evidence and evaluation. Drawing on evidence from the outset means decisions are informed and more likely to produce their intended outcomes, and continual evaluation ensures that ongoing improvements are made.
6. Approaches to regional and remote policy and delivery must support the government's commitments around universal access and the National Quality Framework, including that all children in their year before school have access to 600 hours of early childhood education, delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher.

Appendix B: Overview of findings from existing research

Outcomes

By the first year of school, children living in regional and remote areas are more likely to be considered developmentally vulnerable than children in major cities (AEDC 2015). However, it is not clear to what degree remoteness is the causal factor in this outcomes disparity compared to factors such as socio-economic status that are strongly correlative with remoteness.

Participation

Unexpectedly, available data indicates that children living in regional and remote areas are more likely to be enrolled in a preschool program (ABS Preschool Education Australia 2015). Additionally, children enrolled in ECE in regional and remote settings are more than twice as likely as their metropolitan peers to be enrolled in a dedicated preschool rather than a long day care centre.

Workforce

There are additional challenges associated with recruiting, retaining and developing early childhood education teachers (ECTs) in regional and remote areas. In particular, there is a shortage of Aboriginal ECTs in preschools that service communities with large Aboriginal populations.

Service delivery

Researchers identify integrated or coordinated service provision as the most effective and efficient approach to delivering preschool in regional and remote settings. Examples of both interagency coordination and integration with schools are evaluated positively in the literature.

Engagement with Aboriginal families

The delivery of early childhood education in Indigenous regional and remote communities must recognise the history of disempowerment experienced by these communities, and ensure that services are flexible, responsive and collaborative with local Aboriginal children and families.

Pedagogy

'Place-based' learning has been championed as an innovative and effective preschool pedagogical approach, especially in regional and remote areas. This approach emphasises connection to land, nature and community in order to make a preschool program more relevant to children.