

Hon Julia Gillard AC
Royal Commissioner into Early Childhood Education and Care
GPO Box 11025
Adelaide SA 5001

May 2023

Dear Commissioner

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.

SVA is a not-for-profit organisation with the mission to alleviate disadvantage, towards an Australia where all people and communities thrive. We influence systems to deliver better social outcomes for people by learning what works in communities, helping organisations be more effective, sharing our perspectives, advocating for change and influencing systems.

SVA recognises that the best chance to change lifelong outcomes for children is to change what happens in early childhood. SVA has supported a number of initiatives designed to support better outcomes for young children and particularly for children experiencing disadvantage. We have a breadth and depth of experience and insights around addressing early childhood developmental vulnerability.

Our work spans demonstration projects and ventures focused on supporting disadvantaged young children, including current partnerships with Murdoch Children's Research Institute and SNAICC; working with a diversity of social sector organisations to enhance their impact through our consulting team; and creating an evidence broker for education evidence, to improve the quality, availability and use of evidence in schools and early learning settings.

We are also experts in systems change. We understand that there are valuable roles for government, business, the not-for-profit sector, philanthropy and for communities and families themselves in creating an Australia that gives children the best start in life.

SVA has a national focus and as such, our expertise is not specific to the South Australian context. Our submission focuses on our expertise in relation to integrated early years services for children and families experiencing disadvantage, the evidence-based supports that are most beneficial for children in the first 1000 days, and evidence to enhance quality and to support the workforce in early childhood education and care (ECEC).

We encourage the Commission to consider:

- The core components we have identified as critical for success of an integrated child and family centre (ICFC) model.

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- Key enablers of high-quality outcomes for children through ICFCs – in particular an effective funding model, well supported workforce and an operating model that ensures centres are child-centred and able to support families as both a service and social hub.
- The need for investment in organisational and practitioner capability to support a child and family-centred approach in the early years, including dedicated funding for the ‘glue’ in ICFCs. This includes the leadership, structures, practices and infrastructure required for an integrated holistic service model, as well as engagement with families and other services to connect families to support.
- The importance of combining or ‘stacking’ multiple, effective evidence-based strategies across the early years, which should include antenatal care, sustained nurse home visiting and parenting programs in addition to ECEC in the first 1000 days.
- Evidence for Learning’s synthesis of international evidence on what is important for child learning outcomes in ECEC, including the strong evidence for communication and language approaches
- The examples we provide of strategies to enhance professional development for the ECEC workforce.

Comment on the Commission’s Interim Report

We welcome the findings of the interim report and the Commission’s broad focus on early childhood development. We are particularly supportive of the emphasis on equity, on meeting the needs of different communities and families, and on the role that the ECEC system can play as a backbone universal infrastructure for early childhood development, within the proposed principles for design of three-year-old preschool.

Integrated services in areas of high developmental vulnerability

SVA is encouraged by the Commission’s recommendation that universal three-year-old preschool be delivered through a mix of provision including place-based commissioning of integrated service hubs in areas of high developmental vulnerability. We provide more detail below on findings from our work on ICFCs as an important place-based model to support children and families experiencing significant disadvantage.

The ‘glue’ in connecting families and children to what they need

We note the Commission’s reference to the ‘glue’ – the often unfunded work of teachers and directors in connecting vulnerable families to support. We have taken a wider view of the ‘glue’ in our work (discussed below), as capturing the organisation and practitioner capability that enables coordination and integration of support for children and families both within and between services. This ‘glue’ is particularly important for integrated models such as ICFCs, but also to support a child and family centred approach across the wider early years system.

Data and evidence

SVA is pleased to see the principle that “the system should allow for continuous learning and adaptation” (Recommendation 2) and the recommendation for the state government to invest in the evidence-base (Recommendation 11). We encourage the Commission to view these elements together as part of an ‘**evidence ecosystem**’ – which requires both understanding what can make

things better or worse and the know-how to put that into practice. In the ECEC context, establishing a thriving evidence ecosystem requires:

- Investment in more rigorous research, such as randomised control trials, to build a better evidence base in early childhood education in Australia - the rigorous evidence base in early childhood education is 5-10 times smaller than that of school education
- Funding and supporting multiple organisations throughout the ecosystem to generate, translate and support the use of evidence – from policymakers to leaders to educators
- Being responsive to the needs of educators and efficiently discontinuing practices that have been shown to be less effective.

The voices of children, families and local communities also have an important role. Through SVA's involvement in the Early Years Catalystⁱ we identify the need to shift mindsets and redesign systems to place children at the centre, which includes:

- recognising families and those with lived experience as 'experts' who can inform policy, program and service design
- establishing feedback loops to enable families and communities to provide feedback to government and service providers on their needs and experiences as service users
- ensuring the inclusion of families and communities in the co-design of social policy and programs design and delivery.

Integrated Child and Family Centres (ICFCs)

Through our [Young Children Thriving: Nurture Together](#) program, SVA has been working to ensure that children experiencing vulnerability have timely access to the wraparound supports they need to thrive. We have been building the evidence for ICFCs, strengthening sector capability to provide quality, integrated services and examining options to improve the funding and policy environment for these vital supports.

ICFCs are a service and social hub where children and families can access key services and connect with other families. Usually taking the form of a centre that provides a range of child and family services, they provide crucial programs intended to improve child development and wellbeing. They also provide a space where families can come together to build social networks.

We draw your attention to the following findings from our work on ICFCs that can inform your final report. We have outlined the research and papers we have developed in the Appendix and include two recent papers as attachments to this submission.

Evidence base for integrated child and family centres

Recent research from the National Child and Family Hubs Network found growing evidence on the impact of integrated service delivery for children and families, in a range of service settings – these findings are outlined in *Child and Family hubs: an important front door for equitable support for families across Australia*ⁱⁱ.

Although integrated early years models could benefit all children and families, the evidence suggests that ICFCs play a particularly important role in meeting the needs of families experiencing vulnerability

and disadvantage in a uniquely integrated and efficient way. In doing so, they help to bridge the gaps in child development and wellbeing outcomes that have proven stubbornly persistent in Australia.ⁱⁱⁱ

Core components of an ICFC

Core services and necessary conditions of success for ICFCs have been identified, in consultation with sector leaders and government representatives:

- **early learning programs:** programs intend to support a child's education development in their early years. Includes playgroups, toy libraries, preschool, childcare and transition to school programs
- **maternal and child health:** free universal primary health services available to families and carers with new babies, such as health nurses, immunisation services, and breastfeeding support
- **family support services:** parenting programs, adult education programs and other tiered interventions as required
- **allied health services**
- **other activities as determined by community need** such as nutrition workshops, Elders groups, legal and financial services etc.

Further information on the core components is at [Attachment A](#), section 4.3 (pg.46).

Quality in ICFCs

ICFCs operate under a range of funding mechanisms and operating models. Quality is essential for ICFCs to support child outcomes, yet there is no overarching approach to measuring or assessing quality. There is value in developing tools to support ICFCs to identify and provide high quality services and supports. These include quality frameworks at a centre level, as well as a nationally consistent quality framework.

Key enablers of high-quality outcomes for children and families in ICFCs are:

- An effective funding model with secure, long-term funding
- The glue must be valued and recognised in the funding centres receive.
- A unique response to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years centres.
- Adequate remuneration and professional support for centre leaders and the workforce.
- Consistent, national quality assessment tools and measurements, and professional development supports.
- An operating model that supports staff to work in a way that is child-centred and relational and ensures centres can support families both through formal service delivery and as a social hub where families can meet and connect with other local families.
- Better integration across state government departments to enable integrated funding, overcome data sharing barriers and fully incorporate all services, including maternal and child health services and allied health, into the model.
- Comprehensive allied health service provision within the centre, as well as efficient pathways to access therapeutic supports.
- Effective leadership from government and funders, including that they recognise and value ICFCs as a key model to meet the needs of children and families experiencing disadvantage.

- Collaboration and partnerships between federal and state governments to enable childcare provision within ICFCs, streamline procurement and funding processes and support overarching mechanisms for ICFCs to be recognised, defined and supported as a sector.

Further detail is in [Attachment B](#), section 4 (pg.47).

The 'glue'

Early years funding is often directed to a narrowly-defined set of activities within each sector or service type. Providing effective, coordinated and integrated support for children and families requires investment in critical organisational and practitioner capability – the 'glue'. We have identified the crucial elements of the 'glue' as:

- Business oversight: including governance, finance, auditing, HR, risk and compliance that enables a service provider to operate successfully.
- Staff supports: including practice frameworks, learning and development, professional supervision, and other business and operational supports that staff need to perform their jobs properly.
- Family and community outreach: including the resources required to support families to attend services or participate in a broader range of supports. This includes resources such as additional staff, vehicles and brokerage of client supports such as emergency housing. It also includes establishing and supporting networks and referrals with other relevant services.
- Technology and data: refers to the necessary hardware, software and data capability, including a data capture system, data sharing capability between services and supports to build data collection and analysis capabilities.
- Learning systems: monitoring and evaluation, business intelligence and systems for continuous learning and quality improvement^{iv}.

The glue components of some existing ICFCs are not as well financed (if at all), leading to undue administrative complexity and eventual unsustainability of the centres. Dedicated 'glue' funding is required^v. Deloitte Access Economics sets out a range of alternative funding options for ICFCs that includes consideration as to whether federal or state governments should fund the glue. Glue funding for existing ICFCs, especially models such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated child and family centres that depend on the Child Care Subsidy as their main funding instrument, may be different to longer term funding models intended to support a national approach to ICFCs. We have called for a tripartite approach to bring together the federal and state governments, and the sector, to develop a collective approach to ICFCs. Further information on funding options can be found in [Attachment A](#), sections 5 & 6.

Investment in 'glue' capability is also needed more widely across ECEC and early years systems. This includes investment in critical data and learning systems at a service and community level (including in place-based initiatives) to collect, track and act on data and embed a culture of continuous improvement. It also includes providing adequate funding to charities contracted to deliver early years services for the full costs of achieving the outcomes required, including the indirect costs. SVA and the Centre for Social Impact's *Paying What It Takes* report^{vi} found that not-for-profit organisations across Australia are, in general, not funded for the actual cost of what they do. This holds charities back from operating effectively and delivering better outcomes in the community.

First 1000 days

SVA is a partner in the Restacking the Odds initiative, together with the Centre for Community Child Health at Murdoch Children's Research Institute and Bain & Co. Professor Sharon Goldfeld gave a comprehensive overview of this work in her submission^{vii}, and appearance at the Commission in January 2023, with a focus on ECEC. As noted in that submission, improving early childhood outcomes and redressing disadvantage requires implementation of a combination of effective, evidence-based early years services. Our work on *Restacking* identifies that, in addition to ECEC, the evidence-based services accessible to children and families in the first 1000 days of life should include **antenatal care, sustained nurse home visiting and parenting programs**. We reviewed global evidence on best practice in delivering these strategies, including what is important for quality, quantity and participation in each service. Our findings are detailed in a series of technical reports on the Restacking the Odds website^{viii}. We encourage the Commission to prioritise integration and co-location of ECEC with these three services (including via integrated child and family centres), as well as with schools.

Quality

As the Commission notes, early learning needs to be high quality to have an impact. SVA established what we believe to be Australia's first national education evidence broker, [Evidence for Learning](#) (E4L) in 2015. E4L has aggregated and synthesised a significant amount of the evidence of what is important for quality and to improve learning outcomes for children, which can be drawn upon and inform the Royal Commission.

E4L holds the exclusive Australian licence to education research, assets and tools produced by the United Kingdom's Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and localises these for Australian educators. E4L's [Early Childhood Education Toolkit](#) summarises global research on topics relevant to ECEC.

This evidence base highlights that communication and language approaches are a high impact (an additional 7 months learning progress on average in a year) and low-cost strategy to support young children's learning and development. These strategies – that often involve multiple practices to build vocabulary, language, talk and social communication skills and investments in staff professional development -- have slightly larger impacts for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.^{ix}

The Toolkit also includes the evidence for early years professionals actively [involving parents](#) in supporting their child's learning and development and [resources](#) to support parental engagement.

SVA would be happy to provide the Commission with further detail on the global and local evidence (both its strength and efficacy) of a range of approaches to ECEC if this is of particular interest.

Workforce capability:

As identified in the interim report, investment in **professional development** for early childhood educators is important for delivering quality. As part of this, ECEC practitioners need to be supported to access, understand and put the latest evidence into practice. E4L's [Early Childhood Education Toolkit](#) supports educators in making evidence-informed decisions about how to improve learning outcomes, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage. It empowers educators to lead their own learning and become more effective as professionals, in an efficient way.

As an example, we know that Australian early childhood educators identify challenging behaviours as a major impediment to workplace wellbeing and educational effectiveness, and a key practice area for

which they seek support^x. E4L commissioned a systematic literature review on **responding to challenging behaviour** in ECEC settings^{xi} and has developed an evidence summary and [resources](#) for educators to address this need^{xii}. Providing educators with evidence-based resources and professional development in this area can improve workforce retention as well as supporting children's learning and development.

There is also an untapped opportunity to leverage the knowledge and expertise of exceptional early years educators within current practice and systems to interrupt the cycle of disadvantage, using principles of Social Network Theory^{xiii}. An example in practice might be how to solve for best practice literacy support for children from transient family backgrounds. [The Connection](#) initiative developed by SVA implements network methodology to find the best practitioners leading work on literacy support. It determines how best to connect them, support them and enable them to accelerate their influence across the mapped ecosystems of practice. This approach activates and connects the existing expertise that sits within our systems to accelerate impact and efficiencies.

Yours sincerely

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Attachments:

Attachment A: Deloitte Access Economics, Exploring need and funding for integrated child and family centres, 2023, prepared for Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and the Centre for Community Child Health. Forthcoming (advance copy provided for the Commission), accessed at [Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres \(socialventures.com.au\)](#).

Attachment B: Social Ventures Australia, Happy, healthy and thriving: enhancing the impact of our Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia, 2023 accessed at <https://www.socialventures.com.au/assets/Enhancing-the-impact-of-our-Integrated-Child-and-Family-Centres-in-Australia-full-report-1-May-edit.pdf>

Appendix: Integrated Child and Family Centre papers

We have produced several papers on Integrated Child and Family Centres that we encourage the Commission to consider.

SVA commissioned two papers from the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute to explore the potential of integrated child and family centre (ICFC) service models to support children and their families who are experiencing vulnerability:

[Core care conditions for children and families: implications for integrated child and family services](#)

This paper reviews what is known about the core needs of children, parents and families, the conditions that parents require to meet the needs of their children, and how well the service system is meeting those needs. It uses this evidence to identify what role ICFCs could play in addressing the needs of children and families^{xiv}.

[Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability](#)

This paper explores the common elements of ICFCs which have the greatest impact for children experiencing socio-economic vulnerability, and what is required for high quality implementation of each of these. It reviews national and international examples of holistic, integrated early learning programs for young children and their families^{xv}.

In May 2023 we launched two new papers exploring the critical role of ICFCs, the key enablers to increase their impact and pathways to scale up and better embed them into Australia's early years policy and service system:

[Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to Integrated Child and Family Centres \(Attachment A\)](#)

Together with CCCH at MCRI, SVA commissioned Deloitte Access Economics to prepare a report that explores a national approach to scaling ICFCs. This paper explores the level of child and family disadvantage across Australia as an indicator of significant need for ICFCs and how it interacts with the existing supply of ICFCs. It unpacks options for how ICFCs could be funded under a national approach and options for how to scale and embed ICFCs within the national early years system^{xvi}.

[Happy, healthy and thriving children: Enhancing the impact of Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia. \(Attachment B\)](#)

In this paper we closely examine a number of Australia's major ICFC models. We explore the operational, policy and funding structures that are needed to best support outcomes for children and families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. This paper aims to inform strategies to both strengthen the impact of ICFCs and scale their operations to ensure the children who would benefit most are able to access them^{xvii}.

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- ⁱ F McKenzie, E Millar, S Rogers, *Gathering Evidence for Action: Rapid Assessment of Leverage Points for Transformational Change to the Early Years System*, Prepared by Orange Compass, Social Enterprise Finance Australia, Clear Horizon and Centre for Community Child Health for the Early Years Catalyst, 2023. Forthcoming – contact SVA for more information.
- ⁱⁱ S Honisett, R Cahill, N Callard, V Eapen, J Eastwood, R Goodhue, C Graham, L Heery, H Hiscock, M Hodgins, A Hollonds, K Jose, D Newcombe, G O’Loughlin, K Ostojic, E Sydenham, S Tayton, S Woolfenden and S Goldfeld, *Child and family hubs: an important ‘front door’ for equitable support for families across Australia*, National Child and Family Hubs Network, 2023, doi:10.25374/MCRI.22031951.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Deloitte Access Economics, *Exploring need and funding for integrated child and family centres*, 2023, prepared for Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and the Centre for Community Child Health. Forthcoming (advance copy provided for the Commission).
- ^{iv} Adapted from Deloitte Access Economics, *Exploring need and funding for integrated child and family centres*
- ^v Deloitte Access Economics, *Exploring need and funding for integrated child and family centres*
- ^{vi} Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and Centre for Social Impact (CSI), [Paying what it takes: funding indirect costs to create long-term impact](#), SVA and CSI, March 2022, accessed 15 September 2022.
- ^{vii} Professor Sharon Goldfeld, Submission to the Royal Commission in to Early Childhood Education and Care, 21 December 2022 <https://www.royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au/documents/submissions/session-4/goldfeld-submission.pdf>
- ^{viii} RSTO Indicators, Restacking the Odds website: [RSTO indicators - Restacking the Odds \(RSTO\)](#) at rsto.org.au.
- ^{ix} Evidence for Learning, [Early Childhood Education Toolkit](#) [website]
- ^x K Thorpe, N Panthi, S Houen, M Horwood and S Staton, *Support to stay and thrive: mapping challenges faced by Australia’s early years educators to the national workforce strategy 2022–2031*. The Australian Educational Researcher, 1–25, 2023.
- ^{xi} Staton, S., Coles, L., Houen, S. Seale, B., Mecklenburgh, N, Van Halen, O., & Thorpe, K, [Responding to challenging behaviour with Children aged 2-5 years in Early Childhood Education and Care settings](#). Melbourne: Evidence for Learning, 2022.
- ^{xii} [Responding to challenging behaviour in ECE | E4L \(evidenceforlearning.org.au\)](#)
- ^{xiii} Social Network Theory and Educational Change edited by Alan J. Daly . Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2010
- ^{xiv} TG Moore, 2021. *Core care conditions for children and families: Implications for integrated child and family services*. Prepared for Social Ventures Australia. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, The Royal Children’s Hospital. <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.14593878>
- ^{xv} TG Moore, 2021. [Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability, prepared for Social Ventures Australia](#), Centre for Community Child Health at The Royal Children’s Hospital and the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, accessed 6 March 2023.
- ^{xvi} Deloitte Access Economics, *Exploring need and funding for integrated child and family centres*
- ^{xvii} Social Ventures Australia, *Happy, healthy and thriving: enhancing the impact of our Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia*, 2023 accessed at <https://www.socialventures.com.au/assets/Enhancing-the-impact-of-our-Integrated-Child-and-Family-Centres-in-Australia-full-report-1-May-edit.pdf>.