

Goodstart submission to the National Blueprint for Early Childhood Intervention

January 2020

1. Summary

At Goodstart Early Learning, we are pleased to provide input to the National Blueprint for Early Childhood Intervention. We thank you for this opportunity and commend your comprehensive consultation process in developing this valuable ten-year road map for children with a developmental delay and/or disability.

As Australia's largest provider of early childhood education and care, we are committed to playing a pivotal role in identifying and supporting children's needs earlier and in a safe and inclusive environment. However, with 80 per cent of a child's brain development occurring in their first five years, high quality early learning can be an intervention in its own right.

Our vision for early childhood intervention in 2030 is consistent with our vision as an organisation: that every child has the best start to school and life, regardless of where they live, what early learning setting they attend or their family's circumstance. By providing consistently high quality early learning – with access to tailored and responsive funding and support for children with additional needs – we will see more Australian children ready for school and life, as evidenced by a reduction in developmental vulnerability when they start school (AEDC). We will help achieve this by:

- 1) Continuing to provide high quality early learning and programs and practice to support social inclusion;
- 2) Advocating to government for policy change so that every child can access funding and support at the level they need, when they need it; and
- 3) Influencing the broader early childhood sector (early learning and early childhood intervention) by sharing and promoting evidence of best practice.

2. Recommendations

There is clear alignment between the objectives of the National Blueprint for Early Childhood Education and the benefits of high quality early childhood education and care. For all Australian children to have the best start in life, including those with a developmental delay and/or disability, it is critical that the National Blueprint for Early Childhood Intervention recognises the important role of early childhood education in helping children to thrive and to make sure the existing funding and support system removes – not increases – any barriers to access and participation.

For this reason, we recommend that the National Blueprint for Early Childhood Intervention:

1. Acknowledges the importance of access to high quality early childhood education and care, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability, as both a pathway to early childhood intervention and as a prevention and early intervention platform strategy in and of itself.
2. Implores Australian Governments to invest in universal access to high quality early learning in the two years before full time school, in recognition of the lifelong social, educational and economic benefits it offers.
3. Recommends policy changes to key funding and support mechanisms, including the Additional Child Care Subsidy and Inclusion Support Program, so that all children are supported to participate in a positive early learning experience, regardless of where they live or their family's circumstance.
4. Recognises and reflects the wealth of existing program, practice and partnerships that exist in the broad early childhood sector, including early childhood education and care providers and the wider health and community support system.

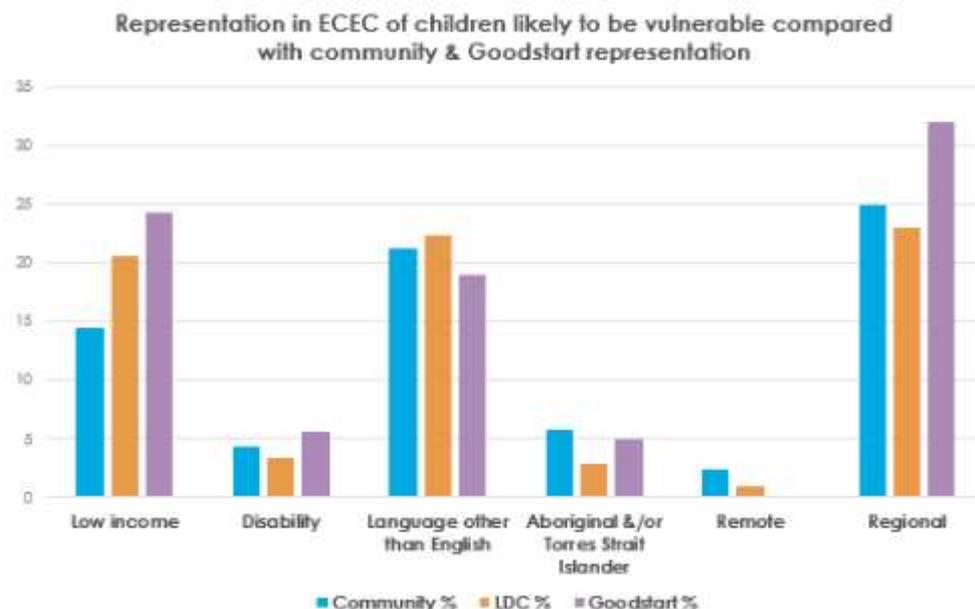
3. About Goodstart Early Learning

3.1 We are for children, not profit

Goodstart is Australia's largest not-for-profit social enterprise and Australia's largest ECEC provider, with 665 centres located in all states and territories, caring for more than 75,000 children from 63,000 families with a team of 16,700 employees. Our purpose is to ensure all Australia's children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life.

It is our view that all children should be supported to participate in quality early learning and care, regardless of where they live in Australia, their family circumstances, their inclusion support needs, or their early learning setting. We believe the best way to do this is to ensure all children have access to at least two days access to high quality early learning in the two years before full-time school. There is a wealth of international evidence that shows that two years of kindergarten has more impact than the one year that Australian currently provides, and this was confirmed in the *Lifting our Game Report*¹.

Across Australia, 39% of children attending our services have at least one indicator of vulnerability and we have proportionally more low-income families and children with disability than the community and sector. We also have more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children than the rest of the sector but not at community levels across the country.



3.2 Beyond Goodstart

Our social purpose is to support all Australia's children, not just all children in Goodstart centres. We are committed to advocating on behalf of children and explaining the importance of quality early learning and other policy issues that benefit children and families, including early childhood education, workforce participation, welfare, disability support, mental health and wellbeing as well as social inclusion and equality.

We work closely with The Early Learning and Care Council of Australia, Early Childhood Australia, the Australian Council of Social Services, United Voice, the Australian Childcare Alliance, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, and our Founding Members on early learning and care policy issues.

¹ Lifting our Game 2017 - <https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/aboutUs/Documents/lifting-our-game-report.pdf>

4. Inclusion and early childhood intervention at Goodstart

4.1 Social inclusion at Goodstart

Inclusive practice is a fundamental part of our way of working. As an inclusive organisation, all children, families and educators are welcomed at Goodstart. Quality early learning begins with secure, nurturing relationships between educators and children². Each and every day, our centres and teams of educators work in partnership with thousands of families across Australia to deliver high quality, inclusive and community connected early learning programs to benefit all children and their learning, development and wellbeing.

We actively support all children to participate in our services, irrespective of their abilities, developmental capabilities or life circumstances. We provide a national support structure that assists with accessing funding support, additional staff training and enrolling children needing additional support. We try to maximise all available funding and support, so a child can fully participate in early learning but, sometimes, there are administrative delays that risk the child not having the support they need. As a not for profit and in line with our social purpose, we often fund inclusion support until government funding is approved. However, red tape and funding delays often mean that, in other services, children are being excluded.

To truly support social inclusion, we fund additional educators (outside ratio) to support children with additional needs, we work hard to ensure our early learning environments are suitable for children of all abilities and we continuously develop and invest in our educators to enable them to offer the best possible care and education for all children. Our key initiatives that support vulnerable children across the country are outlined below (Section 3.2).

4.2 Programs and practice

Understanding a child's strengths and skills, authentically partnering with families and collaborating with other early childhood professionals, such as allied health practitioners, is critical to the successful inclusion and participation for children with a diagnosed disability, developmental delay and/or additional needs within an early childhood education and care setting. Listed below are a few of the programs we have implemented to make sure all children and families feel a sense of belonging and feel safe, nurtured and valued.

At Goodstart, inclusive practice is supported by a network of social inclusion coordinators and access to an Inclusion Support Helpdesk and support continuum, which highlights the elements and considerations of inclusive practice.

1) Enhancing Children's Outcomes (EChO) centres

EChO centres offer enhanced services over and above the universal base of education and care. We invest in proportionately disadvantaged communities using our unique EChO model to enhance learning, development and wellbeing outcomes for very vulnerable children, along with supporting their families and building their communities.

Services include additional teachers, child and family practitioners, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and social inclusion coordinators. We also offer playgroups, visiting service providers, food rescue and re-distribution, referral and support in the local community and scholarships for eligible children. Importantly, educators and allied health professionals work together in the centre creating a practice uplift.

2) Family Connections program

At the heart of our inclusion strategy is our foundational social inclusion Professional Development program, Family Connections. Goodstart has partnered with allied health professionals and other support agencies to

² Sims, Margaret (2015), 'The role of staff in quality improvement in early childhood', available [here](#).

develop and deliver Family Connections – a unique program delivered over 12 months to centre directors and educators, created to enhance outcomes for children and their families in vulnerable circumstances. The program includes a monthly face-to-face professional learning session, additional on-the floor coaching in centres, facilitated centre team meetings and mentoring for centre leaders.

Family Connections aims to strengthen practice and relationships between educators, children and families by focusing on their strengths, resources and aspirations to generate improved child outcomes. Importantly, the program supports centres in building connections with community services. Family Connections is delivered in Learning Circles over the duration of a year and covers topics such as leading change for children, attachment-based practices, communication, social, emotional, sensory development and play, partnerships with families and community links.

3) Intensive Individual Support Plans (IISP)

The IISP provides an additional educator over a 12-week period to support the inclusion of a child with ongoing high support needs. The additional educator provides relationship-based intensive support. Training and mentoring support is provided to the centre and additional educator by either a Goodstart Child and Family Practitioner, Occupational Therapist or Speech Pathologist, depending on the presenting needs.

Goodstart invests approximately \$440,000 per year to support these very vulnerable children. One of the criteria for being eligible for an IISP is ineligibility for the Inclusion Development Fund (IDF) or providing evidence that ISP support is not sufficient to meet the full support needs to overcome the inclusion barrier. This means that there is a direct correlation to children being supported through this approach, children who require significant levels of support to overcome their inclusion barrier, and lack of appropriate access to the Inclusion Support Program (ISP).

4) Redlands Integrated Early Years Place

The Redlands Integrated Early Years Place (RIEYP) is an integrated service, which is delivered through a partnership between Goodstart Early Learning and The Benevolent Society and receives funding from the Queensland Department of Education. The REIYP is an innovative model working in partnership with local community agencies in the Redlands to deliver programs and services which improve child and parental wellbeing, strengthen family resilience, promote children's development and build community connection for families. The positive engagement with community partners through the Community Advisory Committee has enabled the local community agencies, parents and prescribed entities to work together to co-design opportunities, programs and services which promote the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children in the Redlands.

The day to day direct service delivery is largely achieved through universal and targeted playgroups which aim to build resilient families, are preventive in nature and create child safe educational environments. Local services such as Qld Health, Family and Child Connect, Early Childhood Early Intervention, Domestic and Family Violence services and local Aboriginal Family Wellbeing services rotate their participation at the playgroups.

5) Increasing Access and Participation Project (Victoria)

The research tells us that the children who would benefit most from early learning are also the ones most likely to miss out. We also know that children who start behind, stay behind. To support some of our most vulnerable children, Goodstart Early Learning partnered with the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in Victoria to support children known to child protection to access and participate in early childhood education and care. We employed a Family Community Engagement Worker to provide outreach for families, connect with external services, support social inclusion and upskill existing centre teams around the support needs of the child and family.

Through this program, 91 vulnerable children are now engaged in early learning and participating regularly. Centre teams are working with families around their child's needs, through the development of Emotional

Support Plans, and have engaged medical and allied health professionals to support development and wellbeing, were required. Families are also supported to access Additional Child Care Subsidies and other support funding.

6) Early Learning Fund (ELF)

Goodstart and The Benevolent Society have partnered together to establish the ELF to help improve access to quality early childhood education and care by removing cost as a barrier and supporting children's participation early learning.

The ELF offers scholarships to Indigenous children, refugee and humanitarian entrants, families in hardship and children at risk of abuse and neglect. In 2019, the ELF supported 390 children at a cost of approximately \$330,000.

7) Early Childhood, Early Intervention (ECEI) Pathways

Goodstart has partnered with The Benevolent Society and Brotherhood of St Laurence to articulate the role of ECEC settings and educators alongside appropriate ECEI pathways. The project seeks to provide resources and support to educators in their role including identification of support need, referral, ongoing support and support coordination. The project also outlines the practice expectations for educators as they are supporting children and families that are eligible for services within the ECEI pathway.

4.3 Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at Goodstart

A key part of our inclusive practice is creating culturally safe and welcoming environments. We have implemented an Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Educators Community of Practice program at Goodstart. The Community of Practice aims to increase workforce participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and overcome barriers to Indigenous children participating in early learning. The model enables solutions to be created and addressed locally, aiming to create culturally safe and competent early learning centres, strengthening local community connections and relationships.

Since the model was introduced in February 2018, 41 participating centres have welcomed an additional 100 Indigenous children and 23 Indigenous educators and employees. Workforce pathways, partnerships and diversity manager, Simone Miller, together with cultural liaison, Melody Ingra, presented on the Community of Practice model at the Aboriginal Early Childhood Conference in June 2019. We also support cultural safety in our services by training educators, centre support staff and central office staff in cultural competency, using the Arrilla platform.

5. The case for better early childhood intervention

5.1 Data and evidence

Early childhood development is increasingly recognised as a key predictor of future outcomes for children. Research has shown that investing time, effort and resources in the early years of a child's life has significant impacts on their behaviour, learning, health and wellbeing, as they transition from childhood to adulthood³. Data from the Australian Educational Development Census (AEDC) shows one in five Australian children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain, whereas this figure doubles for Indigenous children. However, the AEDC also tells us that children who attended early childhood education and care were nearly half as likely to start school developmentally vulnerable as children who did not attend early learning.

³ 2018 AEDC National Report, available [here](#).



1 in 5

Developmentally
vulnerable

Around 1 in 5 children were
developmentally vulnerable in
one or more domain in 2018.



6 in 10

Indigenous children

Indigenous developmental
vulnerability has steadily
decreased from 47% in 2009 to
41% in 2018.

There is strong domestic and international evidence, grounded in attachment theory and neuroscience, that ongoing access to high quality early learning with consistent educators has a protective effect for vulnerable children, including children with a disability, children with developmental delays and/or children at risk. In this way, early childhood education and care is not just an avenue for earlier identification and referral – early learning is an important intervention in its own right.

5.2 A persuasive national discourse

It often feels like the whole country, if not the world, is talking about the benefits of quality early learning. Perhaps this is because the evidence and research is so undeniable – early childhood education can have lifelong benefits for a child's school and life outcomes. For this reason, the role of early learning in early childhood development and wellbeing has been reflected in several national policy publications, including:

- i) COAG Early Learning Reform Principles⁴ – emphasise the importance of early learning in a child's wellbeing, learning and development.
- ii) Productivity Commission on Mental Health (Draft Report)⁵ – recommends enhancing the capacity of preschool services to support social and emotional development.
- iii) Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability⁶ – considers the barriers faced by people with a disability in early childhood education.
- iv) Lifting our Game Report⁷ – found that high quality early childhood education is linked with higher levels of employment, income and financial security and improved health outcomes.

⁴ COAG Early Learning Reform Principles 2018, available [here](#).

⁵ Productivity Commission on Mental Health (Draft Report), available [here](#).

⁶ Royal Commission: Education and Learning Issues Paper, available [here](#).

⁷ Lifting our Game, available [here](#).

6. What do we need to support better early childhood intervention?

Providing universal access to high quality early learning is a step in the right direction for many children. However, for children with additional needs to have a positive and engaging early learning experience, it is essential that the right supports are in place. Getting this right up front will also have flow-on benefits for the other children in the centre, the educators and the child's family.

Goodstart is working hard to ensure all children have a consistently positive experience by delivering high quality early childhood education, tailoring our program and practice to support inclusion and maximising all available funding and supports. However, we know that children and families continue to have inconsistent experiences – both in Goodstart and across the early childhood education and care sector. It is critical that early childhood intervention funding and support is timely, responsive, flexible and accessible.

There are a range of funding mechanisms that support children and families experiencing vulnerability to access early childhood education and care. The primary Commonwealth funding sources to support children in early learning are:

- 1) Child Care Subsidy and Additional Child Care Subsidies; and
- 2) Inclusion Support Program (ISP).

Unfortunately, these funding sources are not being implemented as effectively and efficiently as they could, and this is resulting in some children having a negative outcome or simply missing out altogether. This Blueprint presents an opportunity to reiterate the importance of making sure funding is matched to need and that the policy settings are creating opportunities for children, not more barriers.

State and territory governments also invest in early childhood education. However, funding levels and objectives are diverse and are generally directed towards preschool in the year (or two) before full-time school. Only Victoria provides inclusion support funding for children in kindergarten.

6.1 Additional Child Care Subsidies (ACCS)

When a child is deemed to be at risk of abuse or neglect, their participation in early learning and care is paramount. The system administration of ACCS Child Wellbeing should facilitate that access, not create further hurdles. However, vulnerable children and families who should be benefitting from this additional support are not only missing out, they are having disproportionately negative experiences.

With the system not working as intended for children at serious risk of abuse or neglect, we are seeing the following adverse outcomes:

- Families and carers are incurring debts for their child at risk to participate in early learning and care.
- Early learning services are carrying large debts in order to provide access to early learning and care for a child at risk.
- The current CCS and ACCS Child Wellbeing process places undue responsibility and pressure on families experiencing trauma, such as struggling with mental illness, addiction, and/or escaping domestic and family violence.
- The CCS/ACCS system is unforgiving – one minor error in an application can have significant repercussions, often magnifying existing trauma and stress.

Recognising the importance of early learning – both as a prevention and as an early intervention – it is crucial that vulnerable and disadvantaged children are properly supported to participate, including by removing cost as a barrier to access. We therefore recommend that the ACCS be amended as follows:

- 1) Allow providers more flexibility to use provider eligible enrolment provisions to enrol children at risk immediately when they present at a centre.
- 2) Increase the provider-approved ACCS Certificate period from 6 to 13 weeks.
- 3) Grant providers discretion to backpay ACCS for greater than the current 28 days.

6.2 Inclusion Support Program (ISP)

The Inclusion Support Programme (ISP) assists early childhood education and care services to include children with additional needs alongside their peers, through provision of tailored inclusion advice and support from Inclusion Agencies (IA) and access to funded support and specialist equipment, where required. Currently, ISP funding is targeted to children with a diagnosed disability.

For the past 12-18 months, the Australian Government Department of Education and Training has been conducting a review of the ISP Guidelines, including consultation with the sector and families. Goodstart has provided several rounds of feedback in this process.

With regard to the most recent draft circulated for consultation, we were pleased to see positive changes incorporated into the draft of the ISP Guidelines. These proposed changes – if adopted – will be highly beneficial for children and families in meeting the objectives of the Inclusion Support Programme. Specifically, we welcomed the following changes:

- a) Expanded eligibility to include undiagnosed conditions, such as trauma related behaviours;
- b) Ensuring ISP funding and support for children participating in a preschool program in a centre-based care setting;
- c) Clarifying that the definition of typically developing peers is not limited to same-age peers; and
- d) Including a guiding principle around child-centric program delivery.

However, for the ISP to truly meet the needs of children, families and educators, we made a number of important recommendations:

- 1) Index funding for educator wages: Index the wage subsidy annually, in line with increases in the award, so it does not continue to lose value in real terms and apply a one-off 'catch up' increase to the wage subsidy to align with current award wages (\$25.00/hour).
- 2) Match funding to attendance: Remove the 25 hour individual cap and 40 hour shared funding cap for an additional educator and match funding to a child's enrolled hours, to support a child's participation in early learning and their parent's workforce participation.
- 3) Provide timely and seamless funding for support: Implement an Access and Continuity Guarantee to provide funding continuity when a child changes rooms or adjusts their enrolled hours within the same service.

As well as impacting a child's early learning participation, access to this funding can also impact parents workforce participation. The research and evidence tell us that parents – particularly mothers – caring for children with a disability show lower workforce participation than other parents. We therefore encourage you to consider including these recommendations in the National Blueprint for Early Childhood Intervention and in any advice to Government.

7. National Blueprint survey feedback

Key Area 1: What families need

We agree with putting families at the centre of everything we do. They say it takes a village to raise a child and, at Goodstart, we do everything we can to become part of that family's village. We understand the important role that our teachers and educators play in supporting families at this most wonderful, yet challenging, time in their lives.

We at Goodstart recognise the value in adopting a whole-of-family approach, not just a child-centric approach. Secure relationships between educators, children and families are known to support better early learning outcomes. This is demonstrated through our Family Connections program, detailed in Section 3.2 (above) and also through our Key Educator Relationship model, which gives families and children one or two people in their centre who are deeply connected to their child, their development and their specific needs. It is an everyday occurrence for Goodstarters around the country to be supporting families who feel powerless in the face of confronting systemic issues in the pursuit of accessing appropriate supports for their children.

Key Area 2: A responsive Early Childhood Intervention system

For children and families, there is no 'one size fits all' system that will be everything to everyone. Especially for children with additional needs, it is important that support is flexible, accessible and readily available. While every effort should be made to support families to seamlessly navigate support services, the level of coordination and integration will usually depend on the complexity of the child's support needs. For example, on a continuum of integration, a fully integrated, co-located service model may only meet the needs of a child with significant clinical and non-clinical support needs.

Responsiveness, however, is key and, as demonstrated in sections 5.1 and 5.2 above, the existing policy parameters could be adjusted to ensure children and families can access funding and support in a timely manner. The current funding inconsistencies across jurisdictions coupled with the inconsistent application of ACCS and ISP means that children who would greatly benefit from early childhood intervention in an early learning service may still be missing out.

Feedback from Goodstart centres across Australia has echoed the challenges raised within this Key Area. Consistently, this feedback focuses on delays in early supports, 'bottlenecks' in accessing appropriate systemic supports, and challenges in the design and implementation of the ECEI Partner Approach and how it aligns to an ECEC model.

Key Area 3: Resourcing and funding models

We agree with the statement that, "Individualised funding alone is not sufficient to build a fully inclusive well-resourced innovative early childhood support system." This is one of the many reasons we implemented the EChO model, which not only provides vulnerable and disadvantaged children with access to allied health professionals, but also supports practice uplift within the early learning setting. In this way, an EChO centre can be both a provider of intervention *and* a community hub.

Goodstart is cognisant that the design of how these two settings, therapy and community hub model, interact with each other is vital to ensuring sustainable outcomes within communities. ECEC settings must, therefore, be explicitly explored and it should be articulated how providers of each of these models would be expected to engage with ECEC providers.

Early childhood education and care services can play a pivotal role in supporting earlier identification of developmental delays or other behaviours. However, prevention and early intervention services are often in high demand yet chronically under-resourced. It is not only important to have clear referral and engagement pathways; the support agencies must have capacity to support families being referred to them.

Key Area 4: Family centred planning

As noted under Key Area 1, we support a family-centred approach. At Goodstart, we recognise the broader social and economic environment and how it impacts children and families. For this reason, our policy and advocacy efforts seek to support the whole family, including through workforce participation, welfare and income support, mental health and wellbeing and, of course, education.

As noted under Section 5.2, providing sufficient funding and support for a child's participation in early childhood education and care can have significant benefits for their parent's workforce participation. Increasing workforce

participation can have social, economic and emotional benefits, particularly for families who may experience marginalisation as a result of their child's needs or behaviours.

Key Area 5: An Early Childhood office

With regard to the recommendation to establish an Early Childhood specific office alongside the Quality and Safeguard Commission, we encourage you to first look at existing structures and forums that may be able to fulfil the intended functions of the office. Noting Key Area 2 seeks to improve the responsiveness of an already complex web of early childhood intervention services, creating a new office may be duplicative and add confusion about roles and responsibilities, particularly given the different structures already in place in our federated system.

It may be more effective and efficient to look at what opportunities already exist, for example, within the Commission for Children and Young People, the National Children's Commissioner or the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority.

Key Area 6: Shared, not set, responsibility

We acknowledge the 2015 Applied Principles and Tables of Support, specifically those in relation to Early Childhood Development. We support the principle of shared responsibilities but also note the Tables of Support have been tailored to be clear about expectations in each setting and each Table is consistent with the shared, overarching Principles. Further, we acknowledge and support the principle that the interactions of people with a disability with the NDIS and other support systems should be as seamless as possible.

At Goodstart, we seek to observe these principles by providing high quality support to children and families in our centres and beyond, as well as making referrals to support services, helping families navigate the funding and support system, and advocating to Government on their behalf.

Key Area 7: An Early Childhood Capabilities Framework

With inclusion an integral part of our social purpose, we wholeheartedly support the objective of a shared approach to inclusive practice best achieved through practice support and professional development. Inclusive practice helps children with additional needs feel like they belong but also improves the experience and wellbeing of other children participating in an inclusive early learning setting.

We note the National Blueprint calls for a 'coming together' of early childhood intervention services and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and for the early childhood intervention sector to be redefined to include ECEC services. Regarding the latter, you may find many ECEC services already consider themselves part of the prevention and early intervention system for children.

As noted under Key Area 2, there is no 'one size fits all' for integration in early childhood. There are already a range of partnerships, integrated models, co-located services, Memorandums of Understanding, etc between ECEC services and early childhood intervention services. While there may not be national – even local – consistency about how these relationships are developed, this is partly due to them being developed subject to need and local demand. In fact, the most successful place-based approaches are the result of both community and industry readiness, rather than a consistent implementation approach⁸.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this submission further – or would like to request data or case studies – please contact:

Kelly Millar, National Social Policy Manager on 0409 576 847 or kmillar@goodstart.org.au.

⁸ Queensland Government Framework for Place-Based Approaches, available [here](#).