

Roundtable Summary – Early Childhood Education and Care

Date: Tuesday 2 July 2024

Hosts: Dr Angela Jackson, Panel Member and Professor Catherine Bennett, Panel Member, Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Participants: This roundtable brought together a range of stakeholders from the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector.

Purpose of this roundtable

- This roundtable provided representatives of the ECEC sector with the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and pandemic response on the sector and steps that could be taken to improve preparedness for future emergencies.

What we heard at the roundtable

- ECEC plays a critical role in the development of children and the lives of their families. Consistent attendance at ECEC is vital for child development and provides stability for children during times of crisis. The sector provides a critical but unrecognised social cohesion function. ECEC also enables workforce participation and contributes to economic growth. ECEC should be recognised as an essential service at all times, including during public health emergencies.
- There is significant diversity in the ECEC sector. Different types of services and providers vary in terms of operating environments, size, funding models and reporting requirements. Preparedness for future emergencies would be enhanced by genuine consultation with the sector to develop and test plans that recognise and respond to this diversity.
- A lack of coordination and often inconsistent and rapidly changing public health orders across jurisdictions made it challenging and time-consuming for providers to understand and implement restrictions, particularly when operating in multiple locations. Greater coordination across all levels of government would help ensure the continued provision of ECEC services in a future emergency.

COVID-19 Response Inquiry

- Health advice on the risks COVID-19 was late, with many parents and staff accessing information from overseas in the early stages of the pandemic. The risk to children in particular was confusing for families, providers and educators. The sector had to advocate strongly for the publication of health advice specific to ECEC that acknowledged differences from schools. Where advice was published, it was not sufficiently tailored. This placed a significant burden on peak bodies to interpret and translate information for members. In the future, there should be transparent and early communication as soon as a pandemic emerges internationally, and peak bodies should be better supported to disseminate information to the sector.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the ECEC workforce. Many educators felt they were not recognised as frontline workers, despite the risks, challenges and increased workloads they faced. This sentiment was exacerbated by ECEC workers not being prioritised in the vaccination rollout and contributed to a significant rise in educators leaving the sector. ECEC workers should be classified as essential and given the appropriate training to manage risks, the communication needs and concerns of parents, and their own health in advance of a future public health emergency.
- Additional government funding was essential and welcomed by the sector during the pandemic. It helped many providers remain viable and enabled some children to increase their attendance, but not all. The speed at which funding was rolled out, lack of consultation and insufficient understanding of the diversity within the sector also caused inconsistency in which services could access support, and inflexible approaches did not meet the needs of all providers. Gap fee waivers were announced by government without funding allocated, leaving some providers out of pocket. The transition out of pandemic settings was also sudden and the sector would have benefited from a staged withdrawal of support.
- Ahead of a future emergency, governments should work with the sector to develop a more responsive emergency funding model that can be deployed rapidly and respond to different needs. Any funding model should be designed to enable consistency in children's lives, be predictable for parents and sustainable for providers, and account for a transition out of emergency settings.