

TERMS OF REFERENCE: Review of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

OBJECTIVE

The objectives of the review are to assess:

- the degree to which the agreed objectives, outcomes and outputs of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education have been achieved since 2014;
- the broader benefits that have been achieved for the community and economy as a result of the National Partnership;
- the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of current funding, measurement and performance arrangements; and
- future arrangements to maintain and improve the benefits already achieved and the benefit of pursuing any new objectives, outcomes or outputs.

The Review will also provide evidence-based findings to inform consideration of future funding and policy settings.

SCOPE

The review will address the following:

1. The extent to which the National Partnership policy objectives, outcomes and outputs have been achieved, including:
 - a. the achievement and maintenance of Universal Access across Australia;
 - b. the achievements in improving access to, and participation (enrolment and attendance) in quality early childhood education programs for 600 hours in the Year Before Full-time School(YBFS), delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher who meets the NQF requirements for all children, and in particular children in regional and remote areas, Indigenous children, and children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage;
 - c. that programs are accessible, meet the needs of parents and communities, and that cost is not a barrier to preschool participation, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged children; and
 - d. that preschool programs are supported across all settings.
2. The appropriateness of current performance indicators, benchmarks and targets and the methodologies and data used to measure them, including:
 - a. the methodologies for assessing performance, including teacher qualifications, overall enrolment, enrolment for 600 hours, and attendance in quality early childhood education programs in the YBFS; and
 - b. performance benchmarks and targets.
3. The efficiency and effectiveness of current National Partnership funding arrangements, including:
 - a. the appropriateness of the current performance based payment framework, adequacy and equity of Commonwealth funding and the timing of payments;
 - b. the National Partnership as a mechanism for payments for universal access;
 - c. the level of funding certainty and the intergovernmental arrangements supporting funding arrangements, including the impact of the number, length and type of intergovernmental agreements;
 - d. transparency and accountability arrangements in the agreement; and
 - e. the appropriateness of the methodology for allocating funding.

4. To allow consideration of the achievements under the National Partnership, and to support the development of future focussed findings, provide an overview of how the preschool system currently operates across jurisdictions and settings, including contextual factors and how collective investment supports the delivery of quality early childhood education programs for children in the YBFS.
5. Based on the consideration of the above issues and the Early Learning Reform Principles agreed by COAG in December 2018 (Attachment A), make evidence-based findings to inform future policy settings for children in the YBFS, including:
 - a. how funding may contribute to the maintenance and improvement of outcomes, taking account of each jurisdiction's context and the interaction of National Partnership funding with related funding streams, including Child Care Subsidy payments;
 - b. whether and what changes to arrangements would lead to improvements in outcomes for all children, particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged and Indigenous cohorts, including consideration of:
 - i. improved targets and measures of attendance;
 - ii. the interaction of National Partnership funding with other streams across different levels of government, including National Partnership and Child Care Subsidy payments;
 - iii. the benefits of any new investment in new programs or improving the quality of existing programs;
 - c. identification of changes required to performance indicators, benchmarks and targets, as well as the supporting methodologies and data, to support all jurisdictions' capacity to measure objectives and outcomes.

GOVERNANCE

Governance arrangements for the review will be consistent with the Guide to Reviewing National Partnerships available online at: [http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/guidelines/Short-Guide review 2015.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/guidelines/Short-Guide%20review%202015.pdf). The Commonwealth Minister for Education is responsible for initiating and leading this review. States and Territories (the States) are responsible for participating in accordance with Clause 37 of the DRAFT National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education extension for 2020. The review will include consultation between Commonwealth portfolio and central agencies, as well as between Commonwealth and State portfolio agencies. State portfolio agencies are responsible for advising their central agencies of their participation in the review and consulting with their central agencies during the course of the review. The review will report to COAG's Education Council, through Australian Education Senior Officials Committee (AESOC) and AESOC's Early Childhood Policy Group (ECPG). The ECPG has established a time-limited Working Group to oversee the review process.

TIMING

Subject to Education Council's approval of these Terms of Reference, the review will aim to deliver interim findings to Education Council by the end of 2019 to inform Commonwealth and State government consideration of arrangements for preschool from 2021. The review will aim to provide a final report to Education Council, including findings, in the first half of 2020.

Early Learning Reform Principles

All Australian Governments recognise the importance of the early years of life, and the significant contribution that high quality early learning makes to life-long educational achievement, productivity, wellbeing and success. This is reflected in our collective commitment to the national early childhood quality and participation agendas.

All jurisdictions acknowledge that reform and investment in early learning, which complements and builds on the strengths of the existing system, have the potential to deliver significant economic and social benefits to Australia, including improved school readiness; better opportunities; long-term productivity increases; improved workforce participation, income, financial security and health outcomes; and reductions in crime and welfare expenditure.

All jurisdictions recognise that we have a mutual interest in improving outcomes through early learning, and need to work together to achieve those outcomes. We share a commitment to the provision of high quality early learning services across Australia and improvements to the availability and sharing of data, evidence and research. All jurisdictions are already making a significant contribution to early learning in a range of settings. The substantial early learning system improvements and reform by all jurisdictions form a strong base from which to continue improving outcomes for children and families.

Early learning services include early childhood education and care, and other services that support families and children’s wellbeing, learning and development in the first years of life. All jurisdictions acknowledge that delivery of these services varies across jurisdictions, and that this diversity is a strength. Jurisdictions recognise that early learning intersects with other portfolios and services at all levels.

PREAMBLE

All jurisdictions are committed to cooperation and shared responsibility for early learning

All jurisdictions maintain flexibility to deliver services in a way that adapts to local circumstances, encourages innovation, and supports choice for families

National arrangements for early childhood are cohesive, effective and efficient; funding is sustainable and transparent; and services are high quality, accessible, equitable and inclusive

Reforms are evidence-based, child and family-centred, and complement existing arrangements

Roles and responsibilities are clear, and jurisdictions are accountable under agreed and measurable evaluation frameworks, which are supported by accessible, meaningful and reliable data

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning

Children’s wellbeing, learning and development are supported by high-quality early childhood services

Children are engaged in and benefitting from educational opportunities

Children benefit from better social inclusion and reduced disadvantage, especially Indigenous children

Families are confident and have the capabilities to support their child’s development and learning as first educators

Families are supported to make informed choices, and can access affordable, flexible services that meet their needs and preferences

OUTCOMES