



# Empowered Communities East Kimberley

Response to Productivity Commission Early  
Childhood Education and Care

May 2023



We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Traditional Owners of the East Kimberley, the people of the Balangarra, Miriwoong Gajerrong, Yurriyangem Taam, Goring, Malarngowem, Koonjie Elvire, Purnululu, Ngarrawanji, Uunguu, Wilinggin, Gajirrabeng, Gooniyandi Kija, Walmajarri Kwini, Jaru and Tjurabalan groups.



Binarri-binyja yarrowoo Aboriginal Corporation, backbone for Empowered Communities in the East Kimberley (2023)

Response to Productivity Commission Early Childhood Education and Care Inquiry.

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## About Us

### Empowered Communities East Kimberley

Empowered Communities is led by Indigenous people, for Indigenous people and operates in ten regions across Australia. The Indigenous-led reform initiative is underpinned by the principles of empowerment, development, and productivity. Indigenous leaders from each region are working together with government and corporate Australia to change how Aboriginal policy is designed and delivered. It aims to shift the Indigenous affairs agenda from passive welfare and government overreach to empowerment of Indigenous individuals, families, and communities.

Empowered Communities East Kimberley (ECEK) was established in 2015 by Aboriginal leaders and has grown its opt-in membership base to include 28 Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs) from across the region. ECEK drive reforms to bring about a future in which East Kimberly is a region with a sizeable Aboriginal population consisting of high-functioning families who own their own homes, who have well-educated children, who participate equally in the economy and who value their culture.

#### Vision

We want for our children the same opportunities and choices other Australians expect for their children. We want them to succeed in mainstream Australia, achieving educational success, prospering in the economy and living long, healthy lives. We want them to retain their distinct cultures, languages and identities as peoples and to be recognised as Indigenous Australians.

#### Purpose

Enduring and effective Aboriginal-led reform, which transfers power and responsibility to Aboriginal people and creates opportunity for the social, cultural and economic development of our children and families.

Binarri-binyja yarrawoo Aboriginal Corporation (BBY) is the 'backbone' organisation supporting the implementation of ECEK. Using a place-based collective impact model, BBY performs key secretariat functions to support and facilitate joint action by Aboriginal organisations, government, NGOs, and corporate partners.

For more information, please contact [info@bby.org.au](mailto:info@bby.org.au) or (08) 9169 2272.

# Summary

The Australian Government recognises that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is essential to the nation's education system and economic prosperity and is seeking solutions to support affordable, accessible, equitable and high-quality ECEC that reduces barriers to workforce participation and supports children's learning and development.

At Empowered Communities East Kimberley, we believe that all children should be cared for and loved, with an opportunity to receive a quality education. This submission has a focus on our region, the East Kimberley, and our Kimberley Aboriginal children and families.

The ECEC situation in the East Kimberley is "broken", with a significant shortage of ECEC places for children and only a small number of young children attending early educational institutions. Aboriginal children face barriers to accessing ECEC and are experiencing significant developmental vulnerabilities, while a lack of ECEC prevents parents and caregivers from taking up training and employment opportunities. In addition, critical services in the region are understaffed because consistent ECEC services for employees are not guaranteed.

Barriers to the delivery of ECEC services in the region include structural factors such as regulation ratios, low wages, limited access to training to gain necessary qualifications and limitations from geographical isolation, and personal factors such as cultural and language barriers, administrative challenges, and personal childcare needs.

Barriers to the access of ECEC services in the region include structural factors of limited capacity and personal factors such as costs, transportation, and cultural concerns.

Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CtG) the Commonwealth has committed to Priority Reforms, that can be upheld in the ECEC sector. Transforming the sector through these four reforms, will provide solutions to the before-mentioned barriers and take the necessary steps towards closing the gap and achieving outcomes for our families and children.

## Recommendations:

1. We would like to see the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) ECEC sector built across the East Kimberley region, to deliver services supporting Closing the Gap. We would like to see the Government apply the CtG reforms to strengthen the sector to achieve these outcomes.
2. We would like to see Government sharing decision making with us, the experts for our region, to achieve place-based progress towards Closing the Gap.
3. We would like to see dedicated efforts at the local level to develop the ECEC workforce.
4. At a national level, we would like to see the Government act to increase wages and decrease fees in the ECEC sector.

# Background

The Australian Government recognises that Early Childhood Education and Care is essential to the nation's education system and economic prosperity. The Government is seeking solutions to support affordable, accessible, equitable and high-quality ECEC that reduces barriers to workforce participation and supports children's learning and development.

Following the request made by Dr Jim Chalmers, Treasurer, that the Productivity Commission undertake an inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in Australia, a call for submissions was made.

The Commission is considering options to improve or support:

- Quality ECEC affordability and access
- Education and development outcomes for children
- Economic growth through workforce participation and productivity
- Outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability/disadvantage, including First Nations and those experiencing disability
- Efficiency/effectiveness of government investment in the sector

# Introduction

At Empowered Communities East Kimberley, we believe that all children should be cared for and loved, with an opportunity to receive a quality education. This submission to the Productivity Commission in reference to the Early Childhood Education and Care Inquiry has a focus on our region, the East Kimberley, and our Kimberley Aboriginal children and families.

The ECEC situation in the East Kimberley is "broken", with a significant shortage of ECEC places for children and only a small number of young children attending educational institutions. Aboriginal children face barriers to accessing ECEC and are experiencing significant developmental vulnerabilities, while parents and caregivers are unable to take up training and employment opportunities. In addition, critical services in the region are understaffed because consistent ECEC services for employees are not guaranteed.

## Demographics

The East Kimberley region, which includes the Shires of Halls Creek (SoHC) and Wyndham – East Kimberley (SWEK), has a relatively young population. Almost a quarter of the 11,080 resident population are aged 14 years and younger<sup>1</sup>. Of 7,647 working aged adults, 57% are engaged in the labour force.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census, 2021. [Online].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The East Kimberley has a higher proportion of Aboriginal People than average for Western Australia. Almost half (48%) living in the region are Aboriginal, of which 64% are working aged.<sup>3</sup> Of those working aged, 37% are engaged in the labour force.<sup>4</sup>

Support services make up a large part of the region's economy, including Health Care and Social Assistance, Education and Training, Accommodation and Food Services, and Public Administration.

## ECEC Situation

The population of 1,779 children aged 0-9 years (871 children aged 0-4 years) are serviced by four childcare centres (two in Kununurra, one in Halls Creek, one in Wyndham), and two family day care services (both in Kununurra). The Out of School Care Service previously operated in Kununurra has recently closed due to staffing challenges.

Almost all services report long waiting lists, of up to 136 children, with at least 18-months waiting minimum. Only one of the childcare centres is at registered capacity; the others cannot reach their registered capacity due to a lack of qualified staff.

Currently in the Kimberley, there are only 0.15 ECEC places per 0-4 aged child, compared to the Perth metro licensed capacity of 0.50.<sup>5</sup> Only 16% of children aged 0-4 are attending educational institutions in the Kimberley.<sup>6</sup>

## Discussion

The lack of reliable ECEC services is a societal problem on multiple fronts, with two major issues of detrimental impact to children's learning and development and a decrease in workforce participation.

Children not attending ECEC services are missing out on opportunities for early childhood education. Evidence from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows East Kimberley children are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable (in the bottom 10<sup>th</sup> percentile) compared to the rest of Western Australia.<sup>7</sup> The AEDC also highlights the significant gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in our region. On every development indicator our children are behind their non-Indigenous peers by up to 30%.<sup>8</sup> Early intervention through early childhood education can help to set our children up for success. ECEC services help to build strong relationships between our children and families to others in the community, including service providers, which bolsters the potential for wraparound services.

Lack of ECEC services also becomes a barrier for Aboriginal adults in the region. Without it, working aged people face significant barriers to engage in training and education, not to mention full time employment. Around a quarter of people living in SWEK are providing unpaid childcare, either for their own, or other children, and lack of ECEC services is a primary

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census, 2021. [Online].

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Kimberley Development Commission, "Childcare in the Kimberley," 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census, 2021. [Online].

<sup>7</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Australian Early Development Census, 2019. [Online].

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

reason why people do not engage in employed work. This is particularly a problem for women, who often have difficulties getting back into the job market after taking time off to raise children.

Another major problem with the lack of ECEC services is the impact on vital services provided within the region. Lack of ECEC is cited as one of the primary reasons for absenteeism in the short-term, and for parents unable to participate in the workforce in the long-term. This leaves service providers unstaffed and unable to provide critical services.

### Barriers to the delivery and access of ECEC services in the East Kimberley

Broadly, barriers can be considered either structural, or personal. Structural barriers collectively affect a group and are beyond an individual’s control. Personal barriers are related to barriers which are unique to the individual. Solutions will need to be targeted to address each of these barriers across the region.

Barriers to delivering ECEC services	
Structural	Personal
Regulation Wages Accommodation Training Isolation	Workplace culture Costs Transportation Own childcare Language or cultural barriers Administrative challenges
Barriers to accessing ECEC services	
Structural	Personal
Capacity and waiting lists	Cultural barriers Costs Transportation Administrative challenges

#### Barriers to delivery - structural

**Regulation:** Regulations require from 1:4, to 1:10 Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) per child, with at least 50% being Diploma-educated, and the remainder either qualified, or working towards, a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education. Difficulty in attracting and retaining Diploma-qualified staff limits the number of staff, and therefore children who can be supervised.

**Wages:** Award wages for ECE are low, especially considering the level of training, responsibilities, and hours. ECEC is competing with other employers in the East Kimberley, including Government agencies such as Education, which may offer higher wages and better conditions e.g., school holidays, more convenient hours, subsidies.

**Accommodation:** There are very few rental market options in Kununurra, Wyndham and Halls Creek and what is available is beyond the means of an average starting ECEC wage.

**Training:** To continue working in ECEC, ECEs must either have, or be working towards, Certificate III in Early Childhood Education at a minimum. Training has been difficult to access in the East Kimberley, with TAFE the only option – except for one ECEC service, which trains internal staff. Until recently the TAFE ECE program was unstaffed and although there is now a staff member in place, they are stretched with three portfolios covering the entirety of the

East Kimberley and some of the West. Local students requiring additional support due to literacy, numeracy or resourcing challenges are unable to access it, and may be unable to continue their training. Training packages may also not be appropriate to the region due to language or cultural barriers.

**Isolation:** Exacerbates all other issues. Distance and isolation mean a smaller employment pool, particularly post-Covid-19 with lower movement across state and national borders. The loss of backpackers has meant the loss of one strategy of hiring transient workers for a three-month period (until they are required to start training towards the Cert III). Reputation for public disturbance, burglary, vandalism, and violence means that singles, couples, and families are not attracted to the region. Families also tend to move away when children begin secondary education. Transience is a relatively high, with 41% of people moving away from the region within 5 years.

### **Barriers to delivery – personal**

**Workplace Culture:** ECEC is a high-responsibility, high-pressure career, with low social capital and low remuneration. Where ECEC services do not have adequate staff, this places extra stress on ECEs who may need to forgo training or personal opportunities to care for children. If staff do not feel supported in a personal or professional capacity, they are at risk of leaving the centre, or profession altogether. However, the ongoing administrative cost of recruitment, induction, and training, only to lose staff, is a barrier to employers investing professional development.

**Costs:** For individuals wanting to train as an ECE prior to 2022, there have been fees that when paid outright have been substantial for individuals and created a barrier. However as of January 2023, through the Skills Ready program, the Cert III and Diploma in ECEC are delivered at the local TAFE for free.

**Transportation:** Driving is the primary form of transportation in the East Kimberley, as the weather is hostile in the hot and wet seasons, and effective public transport does not exist. If a person does not have a license, or access to a car, it is difficult to go to work or training.

**Childcare:** Most people working in ECEC services are women, many of whom have or intend to have children. If students or ECEs are unable to organise safe care for their child, they are unable to participate in education, training, or the workforce generally.

**Cultural considerations:** In addition to workplace culture, workplaces need to be mindful of staff's cultural needs as well. If staff do not feel supported in practicing their culture, or that they are excluded because of their culture, they may choose to leave. One example is that in Aboriginal culture, family and cultural commitments are taken very seriously. It is not uncommon for people to unexpectedly be unavailable for long periods of time due to family commitments, which can leave a centre unexpectedly short staffed. One service in Kununurra accounts for this by over-catering staff numbers.

**Administrative challenges:** The administrative burden of working in childcare is high. People wanting to work in this area may require additional support in job seeking, applying for jobs, and completing paperwork and necessary certifications (Police clearance, Working with Children). Many certifications require a payment and identification documents, which people may not have on-hand and will require support to access.



## Barriers to access – structural

**Capacity and Waiting Lists:** The waiting lists at each of the ECEC services are at least 18 months long. If a parent does not place their child on the waiting list as soon as they are pregnant, they are less likely to have a place for when they need it.

## Barriers to access – personal

**Cultural:** Most staff working in the two major ECEC services in Kununurra are not Aboriginal, and there may be some concern about the appropriateness of the service for Aboriginal children.

**Costs:** Fees may place ECEC out of reach for parents, particularly if they are not yet employed.

**Transportation:** If the ECEC service does not offer a bus service, parents who do not have a driver's license and access to a car and car seat may be unable to safely take their child to the service.

**Administrative challenges:** Parents may require additional assistance when filling out the paperwork.

## Closing the Gap

Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CtG) the Commonwealth has committed to Priority Reforms, that can be upheld in the ECEC sector. Transforming the sector through these four reforms will provide solutions to the before-mentioned barriers and take the necessary steps towards closing the gap and achieving outcomes for our families and children.

### Reforms

1. **Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making**
2. **Building the Community-Controlled Sector**
3. **Transforming Government Organisations**
4. **Shared Access to Data and information at a Regional Level**

### Outcomes

**Outcome 2:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong.

**Outcome 3:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.

**Outcome 4:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.

**Outcome 8:** Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

**Outcome 12:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.

**Outcome 13:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe.

**Outcome 16:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing.

Another point to be made is that as the gap closes in relation to outcome 8 and more Aboriginal adults move to economic participation, there will be an even greater demand for ECEC services.

## Recommendations

### Sector strengthening

We would like to see the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) ECEC sector built across the East Kimberley region, to deliver services supporting Closing the Gap.

We know ACCO services achieve outcomes for both our children and adults. We know our children and families prefer to access ACCO services over services run by others, which achieves better outcomes for our children's learning and development. We know ACCOs have higher rates of attracting and retaining Aboriginal staff, strengthening our economic participation.

Building ACCO ECEC services in our region would significantly reduce structural and personal barriers to both the delivery of and access to ECEC in our region, by being inherently culturally appropriate and considerate to the needs of Aboriginal children and staff.

We would like to see the Government apply the CtG reforms to strengthen the sector to achieve these outcomes. Current initiatives such as the Community Childcare Fund Restricted program are supported, but investment decisions taken under these programs should be made in partnership with local Aboriginal leadership.

### Place-based funding models

We would like to see Government sharing decision making with us, the experts for our region, to achieve place-based progress towards Closing the Gap.

We know that genuine partnership is critical to accelerating policy and progress and so we would like to work with both the Commonwealth and WA governments to jointly assess and re-prioritise ECEC investment in our region. This must be done at a service-system level to ensure State and Commonwealth funding is mutually reinforcing, non-duplicative and productive. Joint decision-making with local Aboriginal leadership will support re-prioritisation of investment to better align with our needs and track towards Closing the Gap.

### Workforce development

We would like to see dedicated efforts at the local level to develop the ECEC workforce.

We know an immediate solution to increasing the availability of ECEC services for children is by increasing the number of staff on the floor. We believe recruiting local, Aboriginal people into these roles is key to this solution. We have identified personal barriers to delivery, which include workplace culture, cultural considerations and transport and administrative challenges that need to be addressed. The Skills Ready program has provided free access to TAFE courses in ECEC, however this action needs to be coupled with drives to recruit into service-based traineeships, to ensure individuals are supported through the education process and succeed.

To support development of the Aboriginal early years workforce, the Government could bolster local efforts through an open grant round.

### National level issues

At a national level, we would like to see the Government act to increase wages and decrease fees in the ECEC sector.

Wages in ECEC are low, particularly when in competition with government agencies in the region offering higher wages and better subsidies. To attract and retain quality staff into ECEC positions the sector needs to offer competitive salaries. Fees often place ECEC services out of reach for many of our families. Reducing fees and increasing subsidies guarantees our children access to ECEC services.

To pull these levers would remove significant barriers to ECEC delivery and access in the East Kimberley.