

By your side



# **Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in New South Wales: Recommendations**

## **Submitted by The United Services Union**

**Submission to the NSW Legislative Council  
Committee No.3**

**October 2025**

**UNITED SERVICES UNION**

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## 1. Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in NSW.

This submission is made on behalf of the Early Childhood Educator members of the United Services Union (USU), who work in **300 ECEC centres** across NSW, as well as the thousands of children and their families in the state. It draws on evidence collected from USU members working in council-run ECEC centres, the Early Childhood Services NSW Local Government Project<sup>1</sup>, and the Productivity Commission's 2024 Final Report: A path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Early Childhood Services NSW Local Government Project, Institute for Public Policy and Governance (IPPG) UTS, November 2023,p2

[Early\\_Childhood\\_Services\\_NSW\\_Local\\_Government\\_Project\\_Final\\_Report\(1\).pdf](#)

<sup>2</sup> Productivity Commission, A path to universal early childhood education and care - Inquiry report (Volume1), June 2024 [Volume 1: A path to universal early childhood education and care](#)

## 2. Executive Summary

We support the Committee’s focus on safety, quality, workforce conditions, regulations, access and equity within the ECEC sector.

Our key recommendation is to establish a universal ECEC system in NSW, publicly funded by the Federal or State Government, or a combination of both, similar to the school funding model<sup>3</sup>. Administered and delivered by local government services as a backbone, complemented by not-for-profit and independent providers.

This would ensure that every child aged 0–5 has access to five days per week of quality ECEC, regardless of location or family income.

The model we are advancing is grounded in approaches from leading developed countries. Sweden and Norway provide strong examples of universal early education systems, where access is guaranteed by law and recognised as a child’s right. Families pay only modest fees, with monthly caps and there are no strict eligibility criteria. Local municipalities have a duty to ensure every child in their area is offered a place. Where a municipality cannot provide a placement, it must arrange alternatives or cover the cost of care in a neighbouring area with available spots<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>ACARA, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. National Report on Schooling in Australia, 2023 [nationalreportonschoolinginaustralia\\_2023\\_Chapter9.pdf](#)

<sup>4</sup>Hurley, P, Tham, M and Nguyen, H, 2024. International childcare: Mapping the deserts. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, p12 [Report Title](#)

### 3. Alignment with the Terms of Reference

#### Terms of Reference

#### Our Submission Response

(a) Safety, health and wellbeing of children in ECEC services	Council-run services have the highest proportion of centres exceeding the National Quality Standards (NQS) <sup>5</sup> . Our proposal strengthens regulation, ratios and non-contact time to improve safety and wellbeing.
(b) Quality and outcomes for children	Universal access delivered by qualified educators under consistent national/state standards improves developmental outcomes.
(c) Safety, pay and conditions of workers	We propose lifting wages and conditions, extending paid placements to Diploma/Cert III students, and secure jobs to reduce turnover.
(d) Effectiveness of the regulatory framework	A universal model allows clearer oversight, reduces fragmentation and improves compliance support.
(e) Effectiveness of NSW ECEC Regulatory Authority	Public provision through councils creates a simpler interface for the regulator and strengthens transparency.

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<sup>5</sup> ACECQA NQF Snapshot Q4, 2024 – released May 2025 - NQF Snapshot Q1 2025 (acecqa.gov.au) p14 [NQF Snapshot Q4 2024](#)

(f) Collection, evaluation and publication of data	Councils are well-placed to collect and share service-level data to improve public knowledge.
(g) Availability and affordability of training	Paid placements and funded professional development for educators increase supply of qualified staff.
(h) Composition of the sector and impact of funding	Directing public funds to council-run and not-for-profit services ensures taxpayer funds support quality rather than profits.
(i) Experiences of children with disability	Guarantee inclusion supports and enrolment of children with disability or developmental delay in all council-run services.
(j) Any other related matters	Establish a tripartite taskforce with LGNSW, State/Federal Government and unions to implement reforms urgently.

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## **4. Policy Proposal: Universal ECEC through Local Government centres, combined with enhanced salaries and working conditions.**

### **4.1 Why Local Governments ECEC centres?**

Councils already manage infrastructure, community planning, and service delivery. With public funding they could expand their ECEC centres to meet demand and more fairly and sustainably than the deteriorated private market. In NSW, 64 councils (50%) already provide early childhood services. Council-run ECEC services have the highest proportion of “Exceeding National Quality Standard (NQS) ratings.

Councils are accountable, trusted and embedded locally. International models in Sweden and Norway show universal access guaranteed by law, with low or no fees, administered through municipalities, is possible.

Councils operate in rural, remote and low-income LGAs where private providers are absent. For example, Singleton Council operates a Mobile Preschool<sup>6</sup> service that travels across the local government area to provide early learning opportunities children in rural and remote communities. Two dedicated educators are responsible for driving and setting up the mobile preschool every day. This is physically demanding work, as they deliver early education regardless of heavy rains, extreme summer heat, strong winds and winter cold. However, the model only offers part-time access – typically 1-2 days per week, operating from Tuesday to Friday across three venues: two public schools and one community hall, which means children cannot exercise their right to a guaranteed 5 days per week of early learning. Families are charged \$50 per day<sup>7</sup> per child, which can still represent a barrier for lower-income households, especially when attendance is capped at a few days. In addition, the isolation of educators in remote locations creates another barrier to professional development.

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<sup>6</sup> Singleton Council, Mobile Preschool, 2025 [Mobile Preschool | Singleton Council](#)

<sup>7</sup> Singleton Council, Council fees and charges schedule, 2025/2026 [Fees and Charges | Singleton Council](#)

## 4.2 Alignment with Local Government NSW Submission

Our proposal for universal early childhood education and care (ECEC) aligns closely with the LGNSW Draft Submission<sup>8</sup> to the Australian Government Productivity Commission, which responded to *A Path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care*.

NSW has 128 councils operating over 300 ECEC services, including preschools, long day care, family day care, mobile care, occasional care, OSH and vacation care. Nearly half of all councils provide centre-based ECEC

At the NSW Local Government Annual Conference in November 2023, councils passed a resolution urging the NSW Government to:

- Increase support public ECEC services, including extending paid funding beyond ECT students to those completing Diploma and Certificate III qualifications.
- Assist councils in expanding high-quality early childhood education and care, covering long day care, preschool, out-of-school-hours care, and occasional care.
- Establish a collaborative taskforce with LGNSW, State and Federal governments to implement urgently needed sector reforms.
- Create a dedicated local government funding stream, recognising council's critical role and contribution to the early education care sector.

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<sup>8</sup> LGNSW Submission: A path to universal childhood education and care. Australian Government: Productivity Commission. Draft Report, November 2023, [https://lgnsw.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/Submissions/2024/Productivity\\_Commission\\_ECEC\\_Review.pdf](https://lgnsw.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/Submissions/2024/Productivity_Commission_ECEC_Review.pdf)

### 4.3 Pay and entitlement disparities

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is one of the most undervalued yet essential sectors. Local Government centres are recognised as leaders in quality provision, but the workforce crisis threatens sustainability. Disparities in pay and conditions across councils highlight the urgent need for reform. (See, table 1)

Qualification	Council	Hourly Rate (AUD)	Duties
Certificate III	Liverpool	\$32 - \$34	<i>Setting up room, observations, ratio checks, engaging and educating children in long day care setting. Nappies, programming, cleaning, supervision, food handling, liaising with families, taking phone calls and making documentation</i>
	Penrith City Council	\$31.05 - \$32.76	
	Cumberland	\$29 - \$45	
	Campbelltown	\$ 35.23 - \$36.65	
Diploma	Blacktown	\$30.44 - \$51*	<i>Supervision, weekly program, implementing the program, changing nappies, toilet training, accommodating individual children's needs, daybook, reflection, preparing Individual learning programs</i>
	Inner West	\$36.23 - \$44	
	Northern Beaches	\$37.7 - \$42.27	
	Penrith City Council	\$32.76 - \$39.61	
	Randwick	\$45.76 - \$52.12**	
Bachelor/ECT	Blacktown	\$44.7 - \$58*	<i>Room leader, programming, documentation children's learning, cleaning, change nappies, responsible person when needed</i>
	Georges River	\$47 - \$57*	
	Penrith City Council	\$44- \$57*	
Cooks	Blacktown	\$30.40 - \$34	<i>Menu planning - nutritionist, allergy Health and safety standards in the kitchen. 3 -4 meals a day. Cleaning</i>
	Cumberland	\$34.45	
	Liverpool	\$30.71	

**Table 1.** Qualifications and salaries in Council-run ECEC centres in Metropolitan Sydney. Source USU Survey 2025. \*Salary for a Centre Director, \*\* Salary for an Assistant Director.



## 4.4 Enhanced salaries and conditions for the sector

Salary system differs significantly across councils, meaning educators doing the same job in different LGAs receive vastly different pay and entitlements. According to Table 1, Certificate III and Diploma educators face the biggest pay gap across councils. For Certificate III educators the difference can be \$25,000 per year, while for Diploma educators the difference around \$30,000 per year. Cooks, remain undervalued - despite being essential to daily operations- with limited variation but persistently lower pay than educators.

## 4.5 Key Challenges

### A) Low pay for complex roles and duties:

- The nappy changing allowance is only \$0.50 per hour or \$19.49 per week<sup>9</sup>- an inadequate recognition of the physical, demanding and essential nature of this work.
- The Responsible Person role, critical for legal compliance and daily operational management, receives no additional remuneration under the NSWLG Award.
- The Room Leader/Educational Leader role, central to pedagogy and quality early education, is also unrecognised financially under the Local Government Award in NSW, however, this role receives remuneration of \$4567.31 per annum, under the *Children Services Award*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Clause 17, Level 1 Adverse Working Conditions Allowance- *NSW Local Government Award 2023*, [ircgazette.justice.nsw.gov.au/irc/ircgazette.nsf/webviewdate/C9948](http://ircgazette.justice.nsw.gov.au/irc/ircgazette.nsf/webviewdate/C9948)

<sup>10</sup>Educational Leader Allowance, Children Services Award, 2010, [MA000120 - Fair Work Ombudsman](http://MA000120-Fair-Work-Ombudsman)

## B) Working conditions

- Many educators receive only a **30 – minute unpaid meal break** during a 7–8-hour shift, leaving them at high risk of burnout.
- Staffing **shortages** means educators often miss breaks, work beyond ratios, or carry additional responsibilities without recognition.
- Lack of **permanent relief staff** undermines stability and increase pressure.
- In early education **ratios matter**. Australia current ratios – 1 educator to 4 infants, 1 to 5 toddlers, and 1 to 10 for preschool children<sup>11</sup> – are too high. Developmental research shows that young children thrive with responsive, individualised adult interactions. Smaller class sizes and better staff-to-child ratios allow educators to focus on each child, strengthening relationships and improving learning, development, and well-being outcomes<sup>12</sup>.
- Children with **additional needs** often do not receive adequate staff support, compounding stress for educators and reducing quality for children. The current Inclusion Support Program (ISP) is bureaucratic and costly, relying on seven private agencies funded by the Department of Education to deliver services across the states<sup>13</sup>. This market model results in a loss of public funding by delivering resources to intermediaries, rather than directly supporting early education centres and preschools to employ qualified educators and purchase resources for children with additional needs.

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<sup>11</sup> ACECQA, Educator to child ratios, [Educator to child ratios | ACECQA](#)

<sup>12</sup> OECD (2025), *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b78f8b25-en>

<sup>13</sup> Australian Government, Department of Education, Inclusion Support Program Guidelines, October 2025, [Inclusion Support Program Guidelines](#)

## Educator Testimony:

*I work in an early childhood service and over the years there have been a number of expectations that have been added to my work, and often, these are not remunerated, which adds extra challenges to having good retention rates, or even having new and younger educators come into the sector, as there are so many responsibilities and there is not much recognition in regards to these. One of these areas is the vague nature around requiring staff to sign on as a Responsible Person each day, the mix of who can be in this role includes an approved provider or with management of the service; a nominated supervisor; or in my case, a person that is placed in day - to - day charge of the service in accordance with the National Regulations (National Law). I and other staff are placed in this role of "being in charge", and there are responsibilities tied in with this; however, we are not remunerated for 'stepping up' – Educator, Metropolitan Sydney Council.*

Without urgent investment in salaries and conditions, councils will continue to lose skilled educators to other sectors. Enhanced pay and recognition will not only safeguard quality education for children, but also honour the vital contribution of educators, cooks, and administrative staff as essential workers in our communities.

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## Recommendations

### 1. Build Universal ECEC on Local Government Services

Use council-run centres as the backbone of a publicly funded universal system to guarantee access for all children.

### 2. Increase Funding and Support

Increase and secure Federal and State Government funding to expand high-quality services including pre-school, long day care, occasional care, and out-of-school-hours care.

### 3. Workforce Development and Pay Reform

Extend paid placements and professional development support to Diploma and Certificate III students; lift wages and improve conditions to retain educators and ensure high-quality early education and care.

### 4. Urgent review of Educator-to-Child Ratios

A review should be undertaken to evaluate whether current ratios sufficiently support high-quality education and care. Consideration should be given to reducing ratios and increasing qualified staffing in early years, to enhance supervision, improve learning, well-being outcomes, minimise the risk of negligence and incidents of child abuse in early childhood education.

### 5. Establish Collaborative Governance Structures

Create a taskforce with LGNSW, State, Federal representatives and unions to implement urgent sector reforms.

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## **6. Dedicated Local Government Funding Stream**

Recognise councils' critical role by establishing a targeted funding stream to sustain and expand local government ECEC services.

## **7. Promote Equity and Inclusion**

Support councils to enrol children with additional needs and ensure all children, regardless of background or location, have access to high-quality early education and care by making it compulsory for each centre to employ at least two additional needs educators, as well as qualified speech therapists and occupational therapist professionals.

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