



COVID-19 Response Inquiry Panel
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Dear Panellists

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the response to COVID-19. We welcome the opportunity to express our gratitude to Australian governments for the financial and non-financial support it provided to the early learning and care sector – and to children and families – but also to reflect on the lessons to be learned for future responses.

Goodstart Early Learning (Goodstart) is Australia's largest not-for-profit social enterprise and Australia's largest provider of early childhood education and care (ECEC), with 660+ centres located across every state and territory, supporting more than 67,670 children from 56,800 families with a team of 15,639 employees. As a not-for-profit social enterprise, our purpose is to ensure all Australia's children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life.

For the ECEC sector, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced two very important things:

- 1) The ECEC sector is essential – keeping early learning services open during the pandemic was critical to support families working, especially health and other essential services, and for keeping children safe and supported, particularly children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.
- 2) There is a lack of emergency and natural disaster provisions in legislation for ECEC services – as a sector reliant on attendance-based financing from families and government, the fragility of the sector's financial viability quickly became apparent as swathes of families started to withdraw their children and cancel enrolments.

When the lockdowns for the COVID-19 pandemic were first announced, families rapidly started to cancel their ECEC enrolments for their children. The sector's financial viability was at risk and many providers feared collapse. At Goodstart, we were especially concerned as we were not eligible for JobKeeper payments when it was first announced, though eligibility criteria were later amended to ensure large charities and non-profits could access this support.

The Australian Government extended welcome financial support to children, families and the ECEC sector through two key mechanisms: a period of free ECEC was legislated for all children and families from 6 April to 12 July 2020; and financial support was provided to the sector through mechanisms including the ECEC Relief Package, the Transition Package, the Recovery Package and the Viability Support Package. This support provided significant relief to the sector, though there were issues with implementation and administrative burden associated with the payments. For some providers, the payments were inadequate due to the calculation of support being based on a specified reference period that did not reflect actual revenue during the period of support.

We're for children, not for profit.

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As a national provider, we also experienced the highly varied COVID responses implemented by State and Territory Governments that impacted ECEC, including health advice and implementation in the ECEC context, such as lockdowns and service closures, social distancing guidelines, definitions for essential services – which often included schools but not ECEC, challenges associated with accessing necessary health and personal protective equipment, including vaccines, and ensuring children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage were safe and supported. We continue to observe the longer term impacts of the pandemic and extended periods of lockdowns and social isolation on young children and the ECEC workforce.

We would welcome the opportunity to speak to you further about our experience of the COVID health and non-health decisions and responses made by state, territory and federal governments. **Attachment A** outlines a list of key themes we would like to discuss with the Inquiry Panel for their consideration. We encourage you to speak to other key ECEC stakeholders and have provided a list of key representatives to the Inquiry team, for consideration. Ideally, sector engagement would occur after mid-February, noting the ECEC sector is currently responding to a number of inquiries and strategies, including the draft Productivity Commission report (due 14 February 2024), the draft Early Years Strategy (due 7 February 2024) and the ACCC Inquiry Final Report (expected early January 2024).

In the meantime, we invite you to read our Evidence and Insights paper on the COVID-19 response, '[From fees to free and back again: What we learned.](#)'

We look forward to discussing this with you further in February 2024.

Kind regards,



Dr Ros Baxter
Chief Executive Officer
Goodstart Early Learning



ATTACHMENT A

Key themes on the impact of COVID-19 responses in the ECEC sector – for future discussion

We welcome the opportunity to meet with the Inquiry panel to discuss the following themes from the experience of the ECEC sector during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 1) Sector financial viability and challenges with attendance-based financing and the associated lack of disaster and emergency provisions in legislation
- 2) The inflexibility of financing instruments to respond to an emerging crisis
- 3) That the ECEC sector is an essential service both for the economy and society
- 4) ECEC is different from other parts of the economy and how this affected JobKeeper and COVID viability payments
- 5) Challenges in different State-based approaches to health advice and directions
- 6) Challenges in securing appropriate health, hygiene and safety resources, eg PPE, COVID tests, COVID vaccines
- 7) Appropriateness of National Cabinet decisions, including the different treatment of schools compared to ECEC, i.e. where ECEC was always deprioritised.
- 8) COVID-19 vaccination policies and the impact on ECEC workforce and access, including Goodstart's decision to mandate the COVID vaccine for all staff nationally