



AUSTRALIAN FUTURES PROJECT



Synthesis Report

# EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: PERSPECTIVES OF THE SYSTEM

INTERVIEWS WITH 35 AUSTRALIAN DECISION-MAKERS

Fiona McKenzie

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A MULTI-SECTOR, NON-PROFIT, NON-PARTISAN INITIATIVE HOSTED BY



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## Background

Prepared by the Australian Futures Project and The Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy for the initiative: 'System Shift: Learning within the Early Childhood Development System to Move to Greater Impact'. Participating organisations are: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, Australian Futures Project, Benevolent Society, Goodstart Early Learning, Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy, and ten20 Foundation. For more information, please email: [fiona@australianfutures.org](mailto:fiona@australianfutures.org)



# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 PURPOSE

**System Shift: Building leadership and capability to work differently together to improve outcomes for Australian children** is an initiative of the Australian Futures Project, Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth, Benevolent Society, Goodstart Early Learning, ten20 Foundation and Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy. Our shared goal is to reduce the proportion of children identified as developmentally vulnerable on the Australian Early Development Index at age 5 from 22% (2012) to 15% by 2020 (consistent with the Nest National Plan for Child and Youth Wellbeing Action Agenda). Our aim is to build leadership and capability so that the early childhood development (ECD) system as a whole can deliver better outcomes for Australian children.

The initiative has been co-designed around an open but guided process of engagement and convening. It builds on extensive ongoing work across the ECD community as well as consultation and analysis. It is bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders from across the system in order to draw on their knowledge, experience and capacity to identify problems and build solutions that have so far proved elusive.

As part of this initiative, decision makers from across the ECD system were invited to participate in an interview. The purpose of the interview was to capture different perspectives on how the ECD system works: What are their perceptions of the current system?; What would a good future look like?; What is stopping us getting there?; Where are the system blind spots?; and What are possible leverage points for change? This report is a synthesis of those interviews.

## 1.2 METHODS

Thirty five (35) individuals took part, including State Government Ministers, senior bureaucrats (Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries), business leaders, leading academics, non-government representatives and for-profit service providers. Interviews explored a range of views, perspectives and experiences of those currently involved in the ECD system (broadly conceived). Interviews were semi-structured with a set of five broad questions guiding the conversation:

1. How would you describe the Early Childhood Development system? (This could include the individuals and institutions involved in the system, how they interact with each other, or any other observations and how the system works and what some of the drivers are)
2. What trends (that have arisen over the past decade) are contributing to the current situation? And what has influenced these trends?
3. If the ECD system had a good future, what would it look like? And what would it take to make this happen?
4. Are there system blind spots? (What are we missing or not seeing, talking about or doing?)
5. Who else should be consulted? What else should be considered?

It was up to interviewees if they wanted to focus on a specific area of the ECD system, such as education, health or child protection. Each participant was asked to approach the interview from where they saw the system, rather than curtail their comments to fit any imposed definition. They were asked to respond as individuals with knowledge of the system, rather than as representatives of an organisation or institution. This meant that each interview differed in content depending on what the interviewee wanted to talk about and what they thought was important. Interview length ranged from 30-60 minutes. Interviews were recorded for transcription and names of interviewees are listed in the Annex. However, quotes are not attributed to any individual in the report. Instead a simple coding system is used, with



interviewees labelled i1 to i35. Thank you to everyone who participated in these interviews for their time and thoughtful contributions. It is hoped that this report does justice to their insights.

### 1.3 ABOUT THIS REPORT

The point of this research was to let actors in the system speak for themselves. So while this report has been organised into themes, additional commentary or interpretation is limited. Instead, quotes from the interviewees are used extensively to express their views as they were portrayed in the interviews. Through this work, we hope to gain a better understanding of the how different actors see the system, how the system operates, what some of the underlying drivers are, and what could possibly be done differently in the future.

The report is organised into seven areas, including this introduction. Section Two is on 'Perceptions of the current system' and provides a brief overview of some comments about the system. As is evident from the quotes below, the early childhood development system is rich and complex with many different facets to consider. Section Three details responses to the question 'what would a good future look like?'. Comments related largely to four themes:

- Greater affordability and accessibility
- Devolution and empowered communities
- Greater valuing of the role of families
- More seamless transition to school

Section Four is on 'What is stopping us getting there?'. It details views on barriers or impediments to us realising this future. These examples provide a sobering reminder of serious challenges facing the system. It is also positive in that it shows widespread recognition of some of the problems facing us – which is an important step on the road to change. Topics included:

- Fragmentation of the system
- Competitive funding and territorialism of organisations
- Failing vulnerable children and families
- Resistance to change
- Inability to scale up (or down)

The topics in Section Five are those that interviewees felt were potential system blind spots and worthy of further attention in the future. These blindspots included: economic inequality; mental health; Foetal Alcohol Syndrome; linking in with services for adults; family day care; and child neglect.

In Section Six it is evident that there are many potential opportunities to leverage change, should we choose to pursue them. These opportunities included:

- creating a shared narrative and common language
- providing stronger evidence and evaluation
- building the capacity of parents
- valuing early childhood development for its own sake (not just for economic reasons)
- finding ways of working better together
- moving to higher paid & better qualified staff
- addressing the 'gap' at 2-3 years
- engendering trust and engagement at the community level

The report concludes with a brief discussion of some of the key issues and concrete ideas raised and the need to build leadership and new capabilities that can address them.



## 2 PERCEPTIONS OF THE CURRENT SYSTEM

In asking interviewees to describe the current system, many different facets were mentioned such as who were the actors in the system, different mindsets, past trends and the level of public and policy awareness around early childhood development.

### 2.1 ACTORS

Some viewed the system from the point of view of the actors in the space such as business, unions, government, families, the private sector, researchers, peak bodies, childcare providers, educational institutions, employers, workplaces, playgroups, mothers groups, and child and maternal health providers. For example:

i4: To me, the system is all of the actors across different sectors that have some degree of responsibility for either supporting the children or supporting their parents.

i13: There's the research institutions, there's the on the ground providers and to some degree there's also peak bodies and government who are paying attention to this stuff. But from what I can tell it doesn't seem to get any traction beyond the talkfest side of things.

i21: For me in particular, when you say "early childhood development", I see a bigger context that wraps around children's development in those early years. It's not just one piece of it, it's all the pieces of it coming together. By that I mean education, health, all of the different players that are interfacing with kids and families in those early years.

i24: In terms of the other players in the system, well they're multiple. That's from private businesses to local councils trying to provide some forms of care, family daycare etc, to as they say, the specialist service system that addresses the most disadvantaged. That's really very ad hoc across the states and territories.

i35: When we think about early childhood development and the system itself, I guess we see it from our perspective as it being very much multi-layered, and certainly our approach going forward will be looking at that layering of the system, so from very grass roots community based early childhood parenting centres, early childhood programs, and run by a number of players at that very localised level. So that would be for example local playgroups, parenting groups, community based not for profits, with a combination then of some formal providers through for example local government and then I guess extending up into then the next level up, the state system, where we've got departmental engagement through education and health and child services, and then the next layering, then the federal system and how that is funded.

Not an 'actor' but something created by human actors is the built environment, which was also mentioned by four interviewees as being an important part of the system:

i4: The built environment is part of the system...it is about public transport and it's about green space and it's about footpaths...having services that are locally based, that are accessible, that are 24/7...With a lot of women going back into the workforce from quite young in their child's lives, neighbourhoods are quite different to what they were. You know, particularly if you kind of go to some of the suburbs where young families are. Many of those houses are empty during the day. They are often the suburbs that are poorly supported with, you know, public transport. I was watching 'Life at 9' yesterday. They were talking about whether nine year olds could walk to the shop. A lot of these neighbourhoods don't have a shop that they could walk to.

i7: I think child care is very similar in that society has moved on. I don't think that providers or Government have really kept up with what families need. So it's quite an interesting tension I think when you look at early childhood education and care as a whole, you get interesting tensions between families who need



care provided in a certain place at a certain time at a certain price point... There needs to be a lot more co-ordination in terms of planning about where centres are built and all that kind of thing.

i29: I've seen young mums who are quite well off financially suffer the stress and the pressure of caring for a child the same as a mum from one of our lower socio economic areas. In fact they're probably more isolated because the people around them are all at work and being professional and you think when you're going to have a baby that you will organise your life and the child will just fit in these particular boxes...those areas everybody vacates, little mini ghost towns until 5:30 at night and if you are home you're home and alone.

i33: A lot of the services are not where they probably need to be in terms of where there are lots of kids but in places where they've always been and therefore parents travel quite a long distance, but staff travel much greater distances because they can't afford to live where the services are because they were built probably 40 or 50 or 60 years ago.

## 2.2 MINDSETS

Others spoke about underlying mindsets and ideologies.

i1: It's capitalism, which I have no objection to in itself. Trading – you and I trading stuff. That's okay. That makes sense to me. But there's a virulent form of capitalism driven through a neoliberal ideology. I'm afraid I can't avoid politics. But – political theory, I should say. I don't care about party politics. That's not my interest. Neoliberal theory is about where all this jargon, this managerialist crap is coming from...That's what's driving the system... It's built around money and power. That's not new ...I've worked in the sector for just over 40 years. On the fringe sector, if you want to call it that. In other words, where people have got no power in society. Aboriginal, homelessness, unemployed, people with mental health, street kids, etcetera. Now, if you live in that space for as long as I have, you get pretty bitter and cynical about how the system works. Because one thing I can put my life on – it's not about those people's needs.

i33: The current focus on ECD is driven by a couple of particular ideologies. One is the economic approach to things. The classic one is a dollar spent in early childhood saves \$7 from later services like juvenile justice, special education, welfare services, if you can give children a good solid foundation in early childhood care and development, then that saves money later on. That's the economic approach to this...The other one is the brain development analysis. Money spent in early childhood that develops the brain provides a better educational foundation. Those two ideas, one is pretty much a medical perspective and the other one is very economical perspective. They're pretty important drivers of a focus on early childhood at the moment. But drivers can be fickle masters.

## 2.3 TRENDS

There were different views on how much the system has changed over the past decade. Some highlighted ongoing instability in the system being driven by politics:

i18: I think there's a considerable amount of uncertainty in the sector, probably more now than there was even 12 to 18 months ago...I think now there appears to perhaps be more uncertainty for some people and for some users, as well as for the sector generally, about what are the expectations, what is most important for the sector and what should the outcomes be that we're looking for.

i24: I would have thought that some of the work done through COAG was actually an effort to unify the system in some way and to implement a national approach with a standards framework. What we're seeing is



a real dissolution of that currently. That was certainly in terms of a universal platform in the early years, that's what I think the COAG agenda was trying to achieve.

i23: I think the system has been in tension for some time and obviously there's political mileage out of mothers and babies, education, GDP, they're all political footballs. I don't think the system's quite settled down yet... I think there's an awful lot of tensions in the system and culture is probably what drives a lot of it... There obviously is support for those things in the community but there's uncertainty about how to maintain those agendas and the funding for those over time. I think it's largely because of our political structure.

In talking about trends, there was a concern expressed by several participants that there is a shift occurring away from play based learning to more structured programs. Some referred to this as 'schoolification'. Others questioned if parents expectations were the drivers.

i6: At what stage did teachers move from play based enquiry? ... What have been the drivers that have been pushing early childhood teachers to use that formalised pedagogy, sitting them in rows, direct instruction, weekly assessments that sort of thing that you expect in the older years of primary school?

i23: A lot of families, particularly in disadvantaged regions, what we call growth corridors, have indicated in some research that, for example, they are not particularly keen to access early childhood education settings because the education is play based and they might as well be playing at home, because play based activities you can get anywhere, even if the service is relatively inexpensive or free. So it's partly that obviously they may have some feelings of discomfort about participating in institutionalised programs because they're marginalised individuals or families, but it's also that they don't necessarily recognise the importance of play and how play can link to a whole range of developmental activities which are actually quite formal in their structure even though they may not look it.

i25: Some people think it's pedantic but I worry that we're going to see kinders with kids sitting in rows and putting their hands up and being very structured things more like school. Whereas I think we need – children really need good play based learning.... I know you put 50 educationalists in this room and they'd probably beat me to death with a stick and they might think I was anti education and I'm not, but I am anti overly structured programs for little children that are focused on them being able at the end of day to do x or y...it almost inadvertently reinforces this idea that if I'm sitting in some very structured program in a place I'm learning and if I'm colouring in on the floor of a childcare centre I'm being babysat, whereas I'm learning in both places. I've got the capacity to learn in both places.

## 2.4 AWARENESS

Others were more focused on how the national conversation around early childhood development had progressed. On this there were different views. Some felt that the 'conversation' around early childhood development had either not gone far enough or had gone backwards, at least from a policy dialogue point of view:

i14: I think the early years story or the early childhood development story has not been well understood by the broader community.

i22: The science is in around the early years. Everyone knows how important it is and what an opportunity it is in terms of overall child development in those first five years. Whether it's health, welfare or education. The economics is there too. For governments, the best savings, et cetera. Yet we haven't seen that translate into social policy that's really reflected on that... We haven't worked out how to package that here to hook people in to say, 'This is important whether I've got children or not'.

i21: Where I think probably two years ago we were having pretty significant conversations about even things like, what does the early childhood development workforce look like? Do we need specific ways of



training people so it's much more seamless? Somehow the conversation has gone back to early childhood development equals - and it's not even being called education and care - it's just being called childcare.

In contrast, other interviewees felt that policy makers and society more broadly was paying greater attention to the issue:

i2: I think every state government has early childhood on their agenda somewhere. Some states operationalised it better than others...You know, it's subject to the usual political ups and downs and funding and things like that. But I think it's uncontested. Federally, it still might be, but at the state level, and certainly with the previous government, the importance of early childhood development is an uncontested area.

i3: I think the other positive is that there seems to be a shift. Again, it's a very slow one. But in terms of community engagement, as being a key part of this process, you know, that seems to be getting picked up more and more. I think that's a really positive step. If I could wave my magic wand, that's what I would want to see a lot more of.

i6: In society I think that that the focus on the child and the family has really increased because of the long term social costs and the section of return on investment, where is it best to get the best outcomes for the whole of the economy and society.

i18: I think we're making progress in that we've got a much, much clearer idea that the early years matter and they are not just holding patterns until you grow up and be a real person.

i27: As far as social policy goes I think we're at one of the most unique moments in our history. We really haven't seen the social policy changes we're going through now since the seventies, through the establishment of Medibank, and some of the big family focused changes there. So that's 40 years ago and we're talking about a whole new generation here, so I think that's the greatest opportunity not just to have an agenda but to ask how do they intersect and leverage from some of the other agendas?...There are real opportunities for smart collaboration.

## 2.5 DRIVERS

Greater attention being paid to childhood outcomes was credited to different things such as: greater access to data and the Australian Early Childhood Development Index (AEDI); the push for greater participation of women in the workforce, and also the evolution of the sector over time. On the Australian Early Childhood Development Index (AEDI), comments included:

i2: There's no doubt that the whole social discourse has been changed. Communities understand the need for data, understand the need to reform ...there's no doubt there's an understanding in communities around the need to change things and do it differently. I don't know how widespread it is amongst practitioners, but you think it is...I think our experience of bureaucracy, at a state and federal level, is how increasingly risk averse they've become to any change. So change is slow and difficult. These are very, very hard problems, you know. I guess the other thing with quite a few bureaucracies, ministries, is that kids don't feature on their radar screens...Because kids are supposed to be healthy. I think that's where the AEDI's helped a lot. Because the data have shown that, hang on, kids aren't doing okay. There are lots of problems.

i17: What you're getting now is that's [AEDI] really informing policy because it's starting to get – there's a really good ground up ownership of that. Also a lot of local governments are using that for their planning purposes, for their development, their support service in their local government area and also state governments are using that information as a measure of the health and wellbeing of young children. So I think that's a real big driver, the national research, also some really great isolated examples of really good practice of joint services from the zero to eight year old space. So you're joining up child health and development with



early learning and there are some really good isolated examples of that happening around the country and that's getting a lot of airplay.

i21: Certainly one of the key levers there was the AEDI and actually looking at vulnerability and looking at kids. That focused on kids' development and what was actually happening in communities for children before they get to school which then, the different area that that looks at makes you actually concentrate on different parts of the system. I think that was something that greatly improved our ability to think holistically... With AEDI, where it's been able to be translated to action to the ground has made people think that and work in different ways. That hasn't been systemic. It's utilised a lot but it's been still pockets of utilisation rather than we're going to use this to actually think about which bits we need to improve in the whole ECD system, of wraparound provision for kids and families.

Several interviewees commented on the current government focus on childcare in relation to greater workforce participation:

i4: We have kind of an enormous push going on, both with the current government, but the government before it, to increase women's participation in the workplace. We're seeing a lot of penalties being imposed and, you know, loss of benefits if you don't return to work by the time your child's a certain age and that type of thing. So there's a real economic case that's been made for improving – you know, increasing women's participation.

i22: I just think to map out what a system would look like in terms of child development, it would probably look a lot different than what it does now - as an enabler for people to be back into the workforce... The system has been designed to meet adult needs rather than actually if we were doing what children needed, they wouldn't be leaving their parents at that time when it's a heightened time for anxiety of separation.

i24: There are different expectations of working class or single parent families in relation to early childcare versus other household types and class types. We don't seem to have resolved that. Indeed, I think that this current government is probably likely to consolidate reflex prejudice against some of those class ideas.

i31: The biggest issue is the very positive manifestation of the debate and discussion in the community around the role of early learning centres in delivering high quality education and in enabling higher participation rates for women in the workforce, and so that's most of the agenda at a substantive level which is being discussed. A lot of it becomes manifest in terms of cost and availability and quality and things like that, but ultimately it really is a discussion between those two perspectives, and I think the most heartening thing for me is the perspective of early learning and the development of children is starting to occupy a more prominent place in the discussion, and that's really good.

i32: I think it's not child focused. I think that there are elements, I think certainly there are large aspects of the quality standard that definitely are child focused, but if you listen to most politicians talking about the sector it's really about adults, and particularly about workforce participation, and we saw that really clearly in the productivity commission draft report, because they're recommending excluding almost all children whose parents don't meet a work, study or training test, excluding them from receiving Commonwealth subsidies. Actually it's kind of a mind boggling suggestion to my way of thinking. These are the very children that we should be going all out to embrace in high quality service provision. But I think the fact that that can even be countenanced as a serious policy position, and maybe in fact it will be adopted, I don't know, that just kind of says to me that Australia is really out of line with best practice internationally.

Others noted the evolution of the sector over time into one that had greater cohesion and maturity:

i3: Amongst professionals, I do think there has been a shift. I mean, everyone talks – well, everyone we come into contact with talks quality and talks evidence based or evidence informed.



i7: Early childhood and childcare as a formal, Government subsidised industry hasn't been around for that long. Back in the day it used to be the mum staying at home with the kids, but obviously that's changed a lot over the past 40 years. Sometimes I look at the way that it's evolved and I think about old cities like Paris and London and you know how they've got these tiny, little narrow streets that were designed for a horse and cart and obviously time has moved on and the city hasn't. I think child care is very similar.

i17: I think we're getting closer together. I think there's a lot more integration and we're seeing that... We just see there's a lot more co-operation, impact and support for each other to say that okay what you do in care it has a really beneficial of what goes into school and vice versa. We've got educators in care and we've got educators in schools and they've both got a lot to offer... The national partnerships in this area have really been beneficial in just having a dialogue, sharing practice and support right across all states and territories. I think that's been the advantage of the national partnerships.

i32: I think that it has to some extent grown in cohesion in the last decade or so. I feel there's a much stronger and more cohesive sector, although I still see substantial division within it. But I think as a sector and a system there's more maturity in the early childhood education care area than there was 10 or 15 years ago. People don't endlessly squabble about minor issues, people have been able to put their differences aside – to recognise differences, but to put those differences aside quite often in the service of bigger objectives.... the national quality standard and national quality framework, and perhaps to a lesser extent the early years learning framework are evidence of that maturity and greater capacity, even though I recognise that there are some quite strong differences of opinion within the sector about the detail and the content of each of those... I think that people see connections between the education in children and other demands of social policy that were either not known or not visible in past decades.

### 3 WHAT WOULD A GOOD FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

In response to the question 'what would a good future look like?' there were many different suggestions and themes raised. These included greater affordability & accessibility; devolution and empowered communities; greater valuing of the role of families; and a more seamless transition to school. Quotes have been organised into themes, with the topics that were most mentioned by interviewees included first.

#### 3.1 GREATER AFFORDABILITY & ACCESSIBILITY

For many interviewees, a good future is one where high-quality and comprehensive / integrated early childhood services are accessible and affordable to all Australian children regardless of location, socioeconomic status, or cultural background. This included respondents from government, academia, business and non-government. There was a sense that, while efforts are being made, not everyone yet has access to affordable services across Australia. Notably, several interviewees advocated free access to such services.

i6: If I was king for a day I would absolutely start with giving a commitment that every three and four year old child had free access to quality kindy. So two years of kindy and on the same, when I say free access, on exactly the same grounds now that we guarantee every child free and secular education in schools. So that's my first one. The second one is that every family, every pregnant woman, has free and long term and sustained support, that's certainly the research that we have seen is that in pregnancy when a mum has that community and professional support we know that that can really ameliorate the effects of poverty, of mental illness of social isolation, etcetera. So it's almost like as soon as you're pregnant you register and these services will be delivered to you.



i9: To have the affordability, the access and the quality. Those three elements. I mean, they're strongly debated around the country... for me too, you know, parents having the choice of the type and the agility to choose between settings. I don't think we're quite there.

i15: For disadvantaged children, a lot of experts will also agree that they should get two years of preschool, so they should have a three and a four year old program, and I think there's pretty strong evidence base for that and everyone's in furious agreement with one another. We haven't managed to achieve it despite having a national partnership agreement on it. We haven't managed to achieve a place for every child but we're at least walking in the right direction...A priority would be to strengthen the universal platform to actually say we can put our hand on our heart and say quality early childhood education is available everywhere in Australia and we've got to do a whole lot of work to get there because we can't say that the moment. We have variations in quality, we have problems with access, we have areas where there aren't enough services or no services at all...I think we need to find a way to make access to services free or very low cost...You need the parents to know that it's available, that they can afford it, and that children will benefit from it in order to get the participation rates up.

i31: I'd like the provision of those services to be done in a way which is affordable for everybody in the community, so we don't end up in a situation where you have the people who probably could take advantage of it most unable to access those services because they can't afford them. So I think those are the two sort of foundational things I'd like to see. There are a whole bunch of things which flow from that, in terms of say how you fund that, how you define quality in the sector so that you are appropriately regulating it, appropriately defining standards, and that you're driving continual innovation and evolution and improvement in what is delivered in a professional sense to educators and by educators to children. But really it's those two sort of elements, that we sort of think about structured opportunities for children in nought to five in the same way we think about high quality educational experience in primary and secondary.

i32: Another area where I think Australia is really certainly out of pace with international development is...we don't provide free services for many children. Even in England now every four year old and every three year old gets free early childhood education, and New Zealand the same and Singapore the same, and many, many countries. In Australia a number of children actually do get free early childhood education through their state governments, but it's just a matter of where you live, and you would only get a free service in long day care if you had a big label on you of disadvantage, poverty, maybe at risk of abuse and so on. It's sort of so far from being an accepted norm or even an aspiration, and I think that's a real shame that that's not in the debate in Australia.

The issue of participation were raised in the context of families choosing the access the services available.

i4: When you offer services, the people who are most likely to take those services up are probably the ones who need them the least. It's always the more vulnerable, the more disadvantaged, the people who are facing multiple challenges are the least likely to engage with new services. I guess, you know, one of the worries is will we just replicate those inequalities, moving into new ways of doing things? I don't think we know that yet.

i18: I think we do want more disadvantaged children participating in early learning and care. They're less likely to, but they benefit more. So we've sort of got the double bind of those who would benefit most are less likely to be there.

Linked to access were observations and concerns around the need for more integrated services. This was in terms of making the navigation of services less of a challenge for families.

i2: We know, anecdotally, kids and families are turned away from services all of the time. Sorry, you've got family violence? We only deal with mental health problems. Or sorry, you've got this. You've got to go somewhere else...If you go into most communities, there's services there. It's only the most remote areas that don't have a plethora of services. If you map them there, there's lots of services. And kids don't suddenly



come out of the woodwork with problems. There are emerging clues that things are going off track from a very early age. Most communities, young children are making contact somewhere with the service system... It's not as if they're invisible. So if we could reconceptualise some of those encounters that families have with a professional into a "platform" where we – where the professionals systematically elicits concerns and then responds, and where the community is mapped, so they know exactly where to refer to, etcetera. That's the best chance of a sustainable solution... not expecting that parents can navigate the services and the needs for their children.

i9: You've got to look from the individual's point of view. What does this look like from a child's point of view? I think, you know, not from the administrative point of view. Not from the bureaucratic point of view. Not from where it is. But what does it look like from a child's point of view? What would that journey best look like from a child's point of view?

i12: If everyone is on the same page then every single person is responsible to make the right outcome, not 'That's not part of my job'...If you can just ring one person and they can look after everything for you ...you can go to one place whether it's at the school or at the hospital or in the local library but when you are treated as a total person and all your problems 'Okay, we'll make sure that that gets looked at'.

i22: If you go to Woollahra in Sydney, the most expensive postcode, you probably don't need the depth of those services. In more disadvantaged areas, they're less likely to participate in any of those and have their needs met so they need to actually be integrated or they need to be able to readily access it and not have to navigate a system.

## 3.2 DEVOLUTION AND EMPOWERED COMMUNITIES

The need to empower communities and enable them to take control of their own future was a strong theme, particularly in relation to indigenous communities. It was raised by eight interviewees, again from both government and non-government perspectives.

i1: Well, I think, our solution is self-determination. Which is not original at all. Aboriginal people have been calling for self-determination for 200-plus years. We will never – or we have never allowed it, as far as I can tell. On the very rare occasions where we've pretended to allow it, it's been conditional on what we accept... [a good future] is one in which communities are given the capacity to run their own affairs... making Aboriginal people be responsible for designing, developing, delivering their own services. Which is control. But responsible... You have to put the resources in so that they can be self-sufficient or be self-determining, in some other language. That includes expertise in dealing with – at the coalface of dealing with white systems... All the inference from that and everything else is that where community has control, they get their act together. But they have to have control. You can't just put people out in the middle of the desert and say now, you can be now self-controlled, you know. You can run your own affairs. They've still got to have basic supports. There's still an infrastructure that they have to deal with, which is the white bureaucracy.

i5: We have a federal government who spends millions of dollars every fortnight in this jurisdiction through passive welfare. We then have a state government who spends millions of dollars every fortnight cleaning up the mess. ...I'd like to see much greater decision making devolved down to communities... we've forgotten that communities can deal with most of their own problems... we've forgotten how to be communities. .. The first thing you've got to do is change the way you do welfare. There needs to be a link between income and effort, income and dignity ... also empower people in remote communities - those people who carried traditional authority - to exert that authority, and that their authority is underwritten by a welfare system rather than eroded by a welfare system... It's only through community, in more recent times, in the last five years or so, starting to try and reassert some control over themselves that you are starting to see glimmers of hope...



i9: I suppose the enduring commitment to it. Not a flash in the pan response. Or someone blowing in from out of town to tell you what you should be doing. You have to grow it from within... So, you know, if you think of the city, it's different. But in some of the rural and remote communities, the best thing I think I can do is underpin the work of community and not come in with the best thing since sliced bread and tell them how to do it.

i11: How do you capture the investment of the local communities is I think the challenge for all of us and sometimes all of these players are around the issue including not for profit and others. While they're there for the right intent they actually create more of a problem...it's really about a community grown solution - trying to resolve with the community and for the community as a partnership. We know that works.

i12: It's about leadership and that leadership has to be local... communities actually know what their major problems are. I don't know I read somewhere in the paper that there are five families in one community that they know cause all the problems and yet everyone gets branded with it. So if you let the community take control and just say what if those five families don't co-operate but everyone else does you don't spend all your money trying to fix things that you can't.

i20: If I could be boss for the day, I'd be boss of DSS and I would say right, local government, state government, let's set up local coalitions to advise us on where the money should go, and then we fund communities, it's locally owned, locally managed and they come up with strategic plans and we fund them to do the strategic planning process and fund them to come up with common agendas. That's utopia in my books. One solution doesn't fit all, as we know, in communities. They're complex problems and need local solutions.

i26: i26: They [government] talk about consultation but they don't know how to do that in a genuine and meaningful way...This is about their [community] kids, their families, their communities... A good future is having any Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation having the same autonomy and respect as any non-Aboriginal agency out there...Give them the opportunity, it is empowerment and self-determination. Our focus should be about local decision making, people making their own decisions around children, young people and families...Manage the risk rather than avoid it. Otherwise you'll never know. Will government still be doing what they are doing in 20 years?

i30: I know we talk about engagement all the time and community engagement and we've controlled it with community or whatever. We don't do it well, we seriously don't do it well and it's tokenism mostly...There's just so much else we could do there and certainly as I say in remote communities we've got major problems because people and this is very specific although it is 85% of the land mass that I'm talking about being remote Australia, we don't have long term, high level facilitators available... Things that are really critical to do quickly is to grow a core group of people that can manage this work and they will in turn exponentially touch different lives and hopefully grow others.

Linked to the importance of empowering communities to design their own solutions were comments that diversity of approach needed to be valued at the local and state levels. Diversity was spoken about in terms of cultural diversity as well as valuing the diversity of services needed:

i6: When we talk about early childhood education and care system in Australia we're not talking about one system and I have heard the arguments that we should have – there should be a national system and that everyone, no matter where they are, it's the same. I am a strong believer in the federation and I do believe that there are good reasons why we might have a national quality agenda and that's good but ....Differences are just as good as the consistency and the sameness. I think a lot of reports the Australian Government sponsored reports and other reports are talking about the differences as if it was a problem. I don't believe that's true and I think there are very good reasons why states and territories may have different approaches and different models of service delivery and different models of funding ... it's about the fact that a community



in Mornington Island is not the same community as the inner city of Melbourne ... like any sector it will always be the differences that drive innovation.

i19: The way services have been delivered is a bit like pizza, to my eyes. It's got to be more complicated than that...Children are not widgets or commodities or pizzas. What we're talking about, early childhood services and we're talking about complex families and complex family life and the complex ways that families relate to each other. I think system thinking is the only thing that makes that manageable.

i32: I actually think we need a series of bilateral agreements between the commonwealth and each state or territory that recognises where each state is, and doesn't try to make Western Australia like Queensland or South Australia adopt the Tasmanian model, but respects what states have built but says 'we're now in the 21st Century, we've got a new set of national goals, objectives and challenges, what can we do collectively to make sure that the early childhood educational care system is doing the best for kids and for families?'. ...Canada had been building up – they had drafted these bilateral agreements between each of the provinces and the national government around the set of principles, and I thought gee, that's a really interesting model for Australia, because I think we're too large and too diverse - there are other objections to just having a one size fits all - and I think there's more we could do to bring things together.

i33: I'd also like to see a system which values and validates cultural diversity...there's a whole system of Aboriginal specific services around the country. They really celebrate the cultural identity of Aboriginal cultures in the area. They promote Aboriginal culture, they take account of the differing needs, they take better account of the differing needs of Aboriginal children by focusing a great deal on health and welfare and economics of the family users of the centre. That's an important system, it's an important system for Aboriginal children and families but it doesn't get the kind of support and endorsement and it doesn't get celebrated, it's kind of the poor cousin of the early childhood development system generally. The Commonwealth has put a bucket of these services all together and they've basically, not ignored them but they don't want to deal with them, they don't want to make any more services, they don't want to deal with their issues, they just try and fit them into a mainstream system.

### 3.3 GREATER VALUING OF THE ROLE OF FAMILIES

There was also recognition of the crucial importance of the home environment and the family that surrounds a child in determining outcomes. Again this was across academia, government and non-government, with examples of comments from interviewees below:

i2: A good future is making sure that we don't have those settings where kids experience stress. So that means understanding the importance of families...Right now, there's a complete disconnect between economic decisions and family decisions. So we have environmental impact statements if we want to build a road. But we don't have family impact statements. So it's recognising that many decisions that are made with good intent may have unwanted consequences by its effect on the family...The real question is how do we create the best environment for young children to grow up in, wherever they happen to be?

i4: One of the things that does concern me in relation to sort of the work in early child development area is the extent to which early childhood services – and this is not just childcare, but any kinds of services and supports for families in the early years – is the extent to which they are out of step with what families' capacity is... if the services aren't offering flexibility in their appointment times, then it is going to be hard for families to go in for their immunisation appointments and the health checks... Preaching to parents what they should be doing is not an effective way of engaging them in services. You need to actually think about, well, what is it that the parents want? What would they get out of it? How do you then use that as an opportunity to build on some other things?



i6: If we want to make the biggest difference in the longer term in terms of social, economic, health gains the earlier we start and connect with families, particularly vulnerable families, the better it will be for the child. So having the idea that we can't operate in silos but we have to come together and we have to look at what does each family need, when do they need it and how is it best to either deliver it to the family or connect the family with the service that can provide it.

i12: When you look at society families are breaking down. A family unit isn't what it used to be and they're more complicated and everything else. There has to be responsibility and accountability...We talk of disadvantaged people, they're getting looked after by the state as we should but often with no responsibility back to the state for what they're being funded for. If you're raising a child there's huge responsibility to do the right thing.

i18: If we genuinely valued what the parents bring to the early learning and care dynamic – our experience, we're working with disadvantaged families all the time, our experience is that families want the best of their kids, they don't always know how to get it but it's our role to help them in that, not make them feel bad parents or worse parents or not go, 'Don't you worry, we're the professionals, we'll sort it for your child'. We know how important it is to engage a parent in their child's learning and development. I think for disadvantaged families, that piece around the relationship with the early learning care setting is even that much more critical. It can either be that much more positive or that much more negative, and that can really then influence not only the early learning and care setting but then what is then taken into the schooling climate, etc.

i27: If we do work with kids, we can change their trajectories and pathways more than I think we often acknowledge. We can help families...How do you actually support families early, how do you actually give them the tools and the ability to be able to make good and sound decisions and choices? ...There's a real opportunity about how we support our families and support our communities and their roles as parents and families and not have to bring them all the way up into the child safety system.

i32: I do think that the capacity for families and children to move in and out of services according to their needs is really important, and one of the strengths of the Australian system has been that even when we've applied a work, study, training test to families in giving access to services – so for example at the moment – because we haven't introduced any changes yet – families can have access to up to I think it's 24 hours of subsidised child care if they don't meet the work, study, training test and up to 50 hours a week if they do. So that's really impressive. That says whoever you are you can have access to subsidised child care, and then when it applies this work, study, training test it's kind of like a really soft test...So I think we've got some really good things in our system that we should maintain, because we've spent a lot of time in the last couple of years talking about what's wrong with the system, and I think some things are really good, and the inclusiveness of current arrangements I think are really good.

### 3.4 MORE SEAMLESS TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

The concept of a seamless transition between early childhood services and formal schooling was raised by six interviewees, from a mix of academia, government, and non-government organisations.

i4: To me, an early childhood system should be what is wrapped around the parents and their young child in a continuous kind of supportive way. Typically, that support would be regarded, I guess, as commencing at birth. But it builds on what happens during pregnancy as well and, I guess, goes through as far as the start of kind of formal Grade 1, Year 1 of primary school.

i9: So what does the child's journey look like? Are they going to be bored by the time they get to school? ...how do you align the framework so that they don't disengage on entry to school because they've had a



wonderful play and they're suddenly in a very structured environment? You know, there are lessons for schools.

i11: This will vary in every state but we're all trying to do the same thing where you have a seamless approach to a child's lifelong journey into adulthood. Unfortunately that doesn't always work because there are too many other factors that influence. So where you have the opportunity to engage in a community from birth, link them to education, health and other services and have them accept that those other services are there for their support we get good outcomes.

i18: You ideally hope that there's a completely seamless experience for children and their families as they go through the early learning and care system, and all that might be related to that, all the early child health and education, etc. and then you hope that there's going to be a seamless move from that early learning care centre setting into the school setting, and you hope that for children and parents they almost don't notice the difference. That would be an ideal world. In some states that happens more than in others, and for some families it probably doesn't feel at all seamless and it feels very disjointed and very clunky... I think we actually conceptually need to think about children and their families having this ideally seamless journey where they're just moving to another stage but the institutions have some of the same qualities and characteristics, so respect for parents, shared responsibility for helping to foster great outcomes for children across a whole lot of domains, using a strengths based philosophy and approach, all of those sorts of things, equal contributors, etc.

i19: Our early childcare services need to be even better and the seamlessness between early childhood and primary needs to be even more seamless. It needs to be really, really supportive of children and families.

i32: I think we could be doing a lot more to have connections between early childhood provision and the school systems.

## 4 WHAT IS STOPPING US GETTING THERE?

There was a lot of discussion by interviewees about what is preventing the current early childhood development system from delivering on a 'good future' and better outcomes for children. Again, quotes have been organised into themes, with the topics that were most mentioned by interviewees included first.

### 4.1 FRAGMENTATION OF THE SYSTEM

One of the most common themes in the entire interview process was the level of fragmentation in the early childhood development system. Comments on fragmentation related to approaches as well as to actors and outcomes. It also related to divisions between health and education and between ECD and schooling systems. 15 participants made specific reference to fragmentation, silos, divisions or 'disconnects' in the system.

i2: We all look at early childhood through a narrow lens...We're very fragmented. We all tend to have our – you know, like the blind men and the elephant. We all tend to have a little piece.

i4: There seems to be a disconnect between childcare policy and early childhood services with the drive for parents to be more engaged in the workforce and to be seen to be contributing economically to the country...there's the recognition that you want really good quality childcare. But that means you need to pay your workforce more, which means fees need to be higher, which discourages women from returning to work. So it all gets very complicated in that way.



i9: We all rush around and we get up commitments and new policy proposals and it's kind of a bit fragmented. If we had more longitudinal and really clear commitment from all of those stakeholders to critically look at what we're doing and how we're doing. And we had the 10, the 20 year plan and we evaluated it with longitudinal data, it would be fantastic.

i10: It's fragmented. It's fragmented because there isn't the clarity of the outcomes.

i13: We know those zero to three years are formative not just because of education but it all goes hand in hand at that age. So it just seems a bit ridiculous that they all operate in their silos. Again, that's not just the Government sector, all the sectors struggle to have that shift in thinking and working together.

i14: I think across both indigenous and non-indigenous sectors the system is incredibly fragmented, or has been fragmented. I think there are encouraging signs, their moves towards a more holistic and integrated approach and that in the indigenous area I think a lot of the fragmentation has been driven by the funding models that have been very siloed and by government appropriations being dictated by data that's collected in siloes.

i15: There is a real tension between those working in social equity circles and those working in education circles...I think it's how you frame the different spaces but if you were talking social welfare and social equity type sector, they're very different players to those in education and care, and the primary – and I think this is where we have a disconnect, if you like, between two potentially powerful systems...This is where we get a bit of a clash of culture.

i17: When you asked the question to describe the ECD system I would say at the moment it's pretty fragmented.

i23: Australia's always had a hotchpotch approach to kindergarten/early childcare... the system for early years in relation to highly disadvantaged children in general is really quite problematic. It's quite a fragmented system...A few of the states have provided a range of kindergarten, preschool type services but they do it differently, provide different levels of hours and different levels of funding, and even different ages.

i24: If you were look into state funded early childhood programs for disadvantaged children you'd see a piecemeal response. You might have a tiny one, for homeless children here, and another one for children with parents with a drug and alcohol problem there, and another one with children whose parents have got a mental illness etc. It's a fragmented funding of early childhood responses as well as across states and territories, and in relation to particular issues, for those disadvantaged cohorts. The not for profit is trying to play catch up or trying to address the failings of the universal service platforms in actually delivering something for these kids.

i25: If you get a disconnect between the welfare systems and the universal systems then kids are not going to do as well because they're not – they're in systems that are helping address harm or problems they're suffering but they're not then in systems that help build their connections to school and learning and cognitive development and all the things that go with that which is about healthy relationships with peers and self-regulation and participating in teams and groups, all of those things kids learn in those settings. So I think over time there's been too much of a disconnect between the programs for children and families developing in the welfare sector and the programs for children and families in the universal sector. That's what I mean about this common policy thread. Children are learning wherever they are, children's learning needs to be privileged and we need a better understanding between what we do with a family and how that translates into a setting and then back out again.

i28: You've got a fragmented system; you've got the public sector involved, sometimes at the state level as a provider and a funder and sometimes at the local government level as a funder and a provider. You've got the Commonwealth involved very significantly as a funder, you've got NGOs involved, some of them quite large, others tiny, you've got the private sector involved. You've got a number of different segments to the



market, kindergarten, long day care, occasional care, out of home care, nannies at home, family day care, you name it. There's also significant variation from state to state in the way this is structured...There's also great differences and gaps in terms of the coverage and the quality from state to state and from segment to segment even from region to region. So it's quite a fragmented system.

i31: Well I think there are two very strong – and up until the last five years – quite disconnected traditions in looking after young kids...Whereas the kindergarten movement provided services which were more – you know, I would call it sort of 10:00 to 3:00 oriented – fitted better with family situations where there was a parent or another caregiver who could sort of look after the kids around those times, whereas the childcare industry was more around providing supervision for children that enabled parents to go to work.

i32: Childcare kind of veers – historically it's veered between being more child focused and being more adult focused and it never sort of settled down in to one or the other. So you've got these competing objectives.

i33: There's always been that funding division between what is called a preschool and what is called a childcare service and to the detriment of the ECD system generally I think. It's kind of put a wedge between those two systems.

## 4.2 COMPETITIVE FUNDING AND TERRITORIALISM OF ORGANISATIONS

Another common topic which interviewees spoke about was the challenge of collaboration across a range of actors and organisations, particularly in the context of competing for funds. There was a strong sense that current funding rules and processes were driving negative behaviours of actors in the system and not necessarily delivering the best outcomes for children. Yet everyone continues to 'play the game'. While funding was recognised as a crucial component of being able to implement early childhood development services, it was also perceived to be one of the drivers of 'territorialism' amongst organisations. These views came from a mix of interviewees, both in the non-for-profit sector as well as in business and government.

i1: You just have to play games. The trouble is, when you play the games, you get lost in your own game and nothing much changes... Government structures are funding so we are in competition, very often...The minute they talk about competitive tendering, which is a commercial idea, they're actually screwing our sector...Agencies were told that if they talk to each other, they would be disqualified from the tender. Which meant that agencies who had joint work or integrated work across different programs contributing to the one benefit suddenly were competitors... We all play the game because we want to survive. We want our agencies to survive.

i11: Once you make it an agency responsibility others wipe their hands of it. You have this abdication I suppose if you like. Equally we have large numbers of not for profits and other organisations in this space who have the same sort of territorial problems as everyone else and fight for their place in the sun. So how do you undo that in a way that doesn't become the battle in itself, to actually become the uniting force?

i12: Not just in this space just generally when you look at funding of any sort of not for profit model organisation that's trying to make change, the competition comes from the funding side of it. Everyone thinks if I share my information you might get the money next time. People try and keep secret their supporters because they're scared that they might end up getting less, rather than having an advantage you can enjoy together, some or many parts would actually make some greater impact.

i16: Everybody talks about collective impact. The problem with the not for profit sector which delivers most of these services is everybody is scrambling around for money so it's very hard from the get go to tell everybody to be collaborative when they know they're going to have to compete for a contract...There's a



danger in the sector where everybody has these aspirations that we can create this utopia whereby everybody is going to get on and there's going to be a collective impact. Unfortunately in a system where funding is quite scarce I think it's a little unrealistic...Potentially the great lie is that just because people work in the not for profit sector everybody is nice and therefore they're all going to get on and it's just not true. In fact, some of the most aggressive competitive behaviour occurs because people need that contract or they have to sack someone. As a manager if your choice is to compete really hard for a contract or fire someone, just for your own sanity you would probably prefer to win the contract. That doesn't make somebody a bad person, that's just reality. So this idea that we can all just move beyond that human reality because we're all so nice makes no sense...I don't think we should expect people who work in the not for profit sector to be so benevolent that they will act against their own economic safety in order to be collaborative like that... The great thing about NGOs is they're very dollar focused so just giving them a bit of an incentive one way or the other is going to have a massive impact.

i20: I think we definitely need more joined up solutions around common goals. That requires leadership from government...There was no mechanism for people to join up and go for joint funding to the government. It was all tendered, independent fights, competition, it brought out all of that stuff. On one hand we're talking all this language around collaboration but the system is still set up for competition and isolated impact...Whilst we continue down this competitive funding environment it continues to keep people siloed. That's a huge issue because it sets in place a load of behaviours...What's driven locally is driven for people wanting to keep their jobs and their jobs are linked to the funding and the funding is linked to tenders... We could spend a lot of money changing behaviours but those behaviours are part of a system. We can train people on collaborative practice but when the chips are down the people are part of organisations and some people have seen organisations fold. Most of the people in the service sector have lost their jobs at one point or another because a contract ended. They know personally the pain and the anxiety that goes with that. It just sets them up to behave in a certain way...

i21: You can do a lot at the local level and even a little bit higher, even towards some sort of state level of collective action and trying to do things differently but in the end that competitive funding model gets you every time. There's system things that bug you. You just keep whacking your head on the system's ceiling...I actually think what is needed is something that actually creates a bit of capacity building in that system to see how it can be win win for everybody. Where to start with that, because there's also territorialism within the NGO sector as well? It's just hard yakka and you have to see the benefits of working in a different way to actually work in a different way. Sometimes that's very hard and sometimes the bigger the organisation, the further away the people that make the decisions are from the ground. ...I think it's more not one way or the other, it's how we all fit together to do the work?... That's where you'd have to be targeting some of this energy if you're really going to get any change at all. Otherwise you're trying to play differently but you're still playing in the same playground.

i25: If you looked at a place and said from the pregnancy or birth point we identify this vulnerable mum, why don't we take some of the funding, push it together, look at the workers involved and say we're going to give you a consistent service between now and four... we'll give you a consistent worker and the plan and the intervention will be tailored to what you need and it will follow you through. We cannot do it. We've got part way there but to do it totally people have to give things up, they have to give up their ownership of their special program.

i26: Funding is a never ending fight for us.

i30: We know that we're not affecting major shift, certainly not affecting major shift across Australia in the way that we're working now. Yet we do it time and time again. Every year we come back or every six months, we come back in for the next bucket of money...There is all such good intention around it, people are committing their lives. At the same time we have this learning difficulty where we think the same old stuff



applied in that way - with every single person involved in that knowing that they're not going to achieve the outcomes that they necessarily aspire to then we're doing something very, very wrong.

i35: The whole competitive bid process in which not for profit organisations have to kind of compete against each other for private, state and federal funding, really does not drive the sense of community outcome. I think a lot of organisations have now almost been driven and caught in the trap of just keep doing what we're doing and providing and doing the service and the program delivery so that we get our next round of funding through, and I don't mean that in a negative way, I think there are very well meaning people within the sector, but the system the way it's set up, the way the funding structures are, doesn't really allow the organisations to look at each other, look at the efficiency of the way resources are used, the efficiency of how they monitor and evaluate, the effectiveness of programs when they're delivered as a whole of system.

Related to these comments were criticisms of short-term funding cycles:

i14: The Australian Government has tended to encourage numerous small NGOs to apply for buckets of money and the funding models have been very short term and you never get any continuity of programs because of the funding cycles chopping and changing all the time. You get no accumulation of corporate knowledge and expertise. So the rules change and you are back to square one.

i20: We need to move out of one year, two year, three year cycles.

i21: I think until the funding environment and the short term contracts is mitigated, that is the big obstacle really. I don't think people don't know how to do it. I think it's just they're constrained to be able to do things differently.

i24: There's some efforts to recognise children's needs and the centrality of an early intervention approach to those children in early childhood. It was never funded adequately, never systematically funded. Again it was disbursed, a few pilots here, a few pilots there, through all of those agreements. That means that those particularly highly disadvantaged children, young children, are being set up to fail right from the start.

i30: I'm seeing this unease around the short term funding cycles and the competitive nature of funding and all of these old clichés, the fact that we isolate and try to evaluate our own contribution which is almost impossible. Then by and large we have Government and funders that are very prepared to accept anecdotal evidence rather than any substantive data, hard data, and that leads to of course diminished accountability basically.

Two interviewees reflected on the way the market operates in the ECD system compared to other parts of the economy and made suggestions of how funding might be designed differently:

i28: How do we design the market incentives to give people the right incentives to provide quality childcare all over Australia? You've got to design the funding with that outcome in mind and that it should be driven by the funding following the child...My one thing is you can't just have one single payment system to support all this, the world is a bit more complicated than that... So while you can have a single market design it doesn't mean that you don't have multiple programs or instruments designed to work together as a bundle to address all those issues.

i31: The sector's not Robinson Crusoe with this issue. Most social service delivery, one of the big challenges is that the government is actually – it's sort of even worse – it's the regulator, it's the service provider and it's the specifier of the outcome...the separation of those three functions, of regulation, service delivery and service specification, has really been the process that's gone through most industries since the Second World War....splitting those three functions has happened in many parts of the economy but it's been very slow to happen in social service delivery.... If you took the government as the funder out of the mix or did it in a different way, and you were able to educate parents as to what high quality service delivery actually was,



which you may be able to do for deregulation, and you had a good regulatory framework, then I suspect that you'd be able to more efficiently allocate resources in the system overall.

### 4.3 FAILING VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Another common theme was the failure of the system to meet the needs of vulnerable children and families. This was in the context of social welfare, child protection and early intervention.

i1: Their [government's] solutions are punitive. I'll give you a sort of scenario. If your children don't attend school X number of days a week or whatever it is, we will cut your income. Now, how does this work? You've got a family that's relatively dysfunctional. Probably, the child's not going to school because the family is relatively dysfunctional. I've been to places out there – they don't have showers and there's 15 people in the house. How do you get to school after a night of listening to adults playing up – drinking or playing cards or just conversing and laughing and joking and whatever? There's no shower. You can't get access to the damn toilet anyway... How are you supposed to get to school? What's your incentive to get to school? You haven't had any breakfast, because there isn't any food in the place, because the bloody 15 elders have eaten it. What are you supposed to do? What's what the solution? We'll cut money. Now, okay, I'm dad. I've got a bit of an alcohol problem, whatever it is. I'm not coping with life. Little Johnny has had my money cut. What am I likely to do to Little Johnny? Is this really a solution we want? Is it a solution at all?

i5: The damage has been done over the last 40 years will be judged by history as being one of the most ill-considered periods of European settlement of this country. In that mix is the children. Parents who could not care less whether their kids go to school. Kids who could not care less whether they go to school... Abuse is actually not that common here. It is just a crushing indifference which then becomes manifest in simple neglect... We tear, through these debilitating policies of charitable intent, the heart out of the person's desire to care for their own children.

i15: How do we wrap services around vulnerable families?...All of these service systems are making decisions invariably based on whether the mother deserves or doesn't deserve their support, and not whether the children deserve their support. That, I think, is one of the biggest potential changes we could make in the way the service system works across the board, whether we're talking community service, health services or education services. It's got to be put the children first and decide what they need and support the family accordingly, and let's get away from whether the mum deserves it or not because punishing Mum is actually putting children's lives at risk....We have to get away from rationing services and kicking people out of services and having all these eligibility criteria's that determine whether you get support or not. These are all just barriers to doing whatever it takes to get people into a better place. It's hard for governments to let go of controls around cost, which is what most of those things are for, they're rationing because they want to control how much they have to spend on it but actually it's incredibly wasteful...There would have been hundreds of thousands of dollars spent but because it's all in different service systems at different times, and half of it would have been spent on denying them service...Maybe we should have more entitlement systems and maybe they would actually be cheaper than all these barriers that we put around services.

i20: What we've found through feedback from parents is just that the system isn't working for them. You go in to access something for a child and it's not until one of them is reported for child abuse that all of a sudden they get the support they need.

i22: Early intervention gets lip service. Everyone knows it's good to intervene early but everywhere is headed around basically to stop the flow into the out of home care system.

i34: I think there's a notion for families once you're a child protection family that child protection then takes care of care and support for you. Child protection, in most jurisdictions I think unless they refer out to another



program, is not designed as a service for providing family based intervention. The way that services have evolved is that they're more about making an assessment of the safety and risk concerns in families and then making a determination whether children can remain in that environment with supports if they're available or whether kids have to live somewhere else....families are not offered services early when their kids are really young or if they have been offered services then the services taper off because the point is to close the case... we think the kids are safe now so we're closing it off our books. If people aren't connected in then there's real risks about what might happen for those families if they're quite isolated and then there's a bit of a dearth of anything until preschool kicks in...There's a few pockets of different programs that are designed to work with those families but they're often pilot, it's not a broad system response and the broad system response that is offered to those families is child protection involvement. Child protection involvement is triggered once there is a suspicion that harm has already occurred or it's pretty likely to occur, so it's coming far too late, that kind of support and engagement for children and families. So that effective screening out of families of supports because of a lack of effective models of what you would do and there's a lot of debate around what effective models might look like. You then get of course a whole heap of other systems that might be triggered for vulnerable families like housing and police, juvenile justice for young parents and those kinds of things. So if you're a family with complex needs there's probably - the early childhood space could be quite cluttered with people that would not be the usual suspects in early childhood. You sit across a whole range of different Government portfolios if you're a vulnerable family.

While recognising some of the failures that have occurred, there was also the recognition by two interviewees that government can't be expected to do everything.

i25: Government can't take responsibility for every vulnerable child, that's essentially what families do. Government and the community and business may make certain services available to help families but it's when should Government step in and direct its resources more effectively to help redress the inequity that children can suffer from almost birth?...Most jurisdictions have tried to develop mechanisms to bring more of a whole of Government focus to vulnerable kids often off the back of child protection type crises. This is meant to be broader than child protection but not broad enough to incorporate every vulnerable child at every point in time. ... I think one of the big tensions in Government is should you build universal platforms that are for everyone and hope that vulnerable kids get the same access and the same benefits from them or do you have to target more of your efforts to assist vulnerable kids and build connections between the system of services for vulnerable kids and the universal platform?

i29: I think all jurisdictions are struggling with the best way to provide care for children that come into care. I think the best way is how you can prevent kids coming into care? We're struggling with it at the moment but every state has its turn where people are working with a family and then something horrible goes wrong and it's a massive finger pointing exercise. How do you make those judgements, how do you stop it tipping over? ... How do you get people to say at what point do people say we've now got to the point where enough is enough? ...Then it's a case of okay if you've decided that these things add up and that we need to step in and take the child away, are you able to guarantee that if you're taking that child away that their life is going to be better? We are reliant in all of these systems on volunteer foster carers, we're reliant on family members and if that doesn't work we're reliant on essentially institutional care where you're putting children of other children in a house or in a facility. Is that actually better than staying with the family? You can't leave a kid there if it's obvious they're being beaten or if they're being sexually abused that's an easy decision. But the others - because none of them want to leave their mum and dad, they're massively traumatised by being taken away, that trauma plays itself out. So some fosters carers can deal with it. Some can't. So then you end up with kids sometimes in multiple foster care places. ...When we get an early alert around a family how do we get in and engage with them in a positive way, not in coming to check?... You've got some sort of positive support that's not about going in assessing you and rating you and working out whether we're going to take your child away, it's a totally different way of working with then hopefully giving them some confidence.



## 4.4 RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

While there was not a lot of discussion of vested interests at a policy level, there were comments about the resistance to change that had been experienced 'on the ground'. This related to staff capacity as well as a fear of seeing education subsumed by health priorities.

i3: Some of the staff working sort of on the ground are, perhaps...overwhelmed or have been in their positions for a long time. A little bit resistant to change. They see it as - these sorts of things that we're trying to do as adding more work and not necessarily seeing the value...but I think, again, it's pockets. So there's - you know, there's some practitioners who are really - really get it and are on board.

i15: While there is absolute merit in the integrated service delivery model, there will be a whole load of people out there who will argue there is value in early childhood education in its own right and not just as a mechanism for delivering other service types. So they get a pushback on the integrated service model, and there are people who will say, "Actually, you know what, we just want to run a really good early childhood education program and that's okay."

i18: We had a little bit of pushback from the early years educators who are located in the centres based on school because they've come more of in the perspective of 'we don't really engage with parents because we're now in a school environment and you engage less with parents in a school environment', which sort of floors us a little bit....We're hoping that that's an atypical response but it is a response that we've had.

i19: We could get quite a quick change if professionals who engage with children and families were prepared to work in a different way where they consulted and they listened to the user voice and they made sure that parents understood... the truth is, if you're going to have participation in the workforce, you have to work in a different way. That's going to make you uncomfortable as a professional. That's going to take you out of your comfort zone. If you're going to sustain that over time then you need professionals with a very different attitude.

i20: I think there's a lot of fear in the communities where we work. If you try and bring in a change in practice, people are change adverse generally.... I think there's low capacity of staff. I think the staff are exhausted, I think they're underpaid. I think there's all those sort of issues. Then you try and do change management with people who don't know how to do change management - and I know because we've got some examples where we've tried to do things differently we've been blocked, blocked by local councils, blocked by big NGOs who have gone 'why are you doing it like that? We've always done it like this'. You're dealing with a tolerance for change which is pretty low. Combine that with people running local communities, so their local fiefdoms, it's really challenging at the coal face, where we've got a number of projects in communities, to try and bring around collaborative change. You get hit with a lot of resistance.

i22: You've got to start where they are at. Each centre is so different. Sometimes you can go fast and other times you've got to tread really carefully because there's no readiness for change. That's the other thing that's really important. If any systems change you have to test for readiness.

i25: There's quite a lot of opposition to it in many quarters ...You hit these big paradigms by which people and lenses through which people view the world and you hit a bit of self-interest and you hit really deeply held views about role and responsibility. People view the world strongly from a particular place and often it takes a lot of work to get people to see what might be able to be different.



## 4.5 INABILITY TO SCALE UP (OR DOWN)

A theme that was raised by seven participants from across academia, government and non-government organisations related to the challenges of scaling up. There was recognition of local pockets of innovation and excellence, but frustration that these programs had not grown in scale or influenced the nature of the overall system. Some felt this was something that needed to be remedied while others felt that scaling up was not the right approach given every context is different. Two interviewees commented on the importance of relationships at the local level, while several questioned what the best approach might be for scaling up.

i2: I think communities – some communities are doing fantastic stuff. Some schools are doing fantastic stuff. There are pockets of exemplary practice all over the place.

i9: We've got pockets of great things happening. How do you bring that together in a strategic overview and then start to set a pathway that ensures the certainty and stability for children?...Maybe you've got to embrace diversity? Because if you embrace the principle of local responses matter, then you've got to accept that the system sends the message of standardisation. But you've got to get the agility and responsiveness. And diversity does matter. The way in which you respond does matter in Wilcannia compared to, you know, North Sydney... What do you choose to standardise? What do you choose to localise? What are the universal platforms that we'd all agree in the charter or whatever it is? Then what do you leave?...How do you allow the local flexibility to meet those contextual situations?...The next challenge is how do you move from fragments of innovation and good practice to the distribution or dispersion of that right throughout your system? So everyone can tell you about 'oh, this works really well and this is fantastic'. The challenge for all of us is what mechanism do you have to disperse best practice so that it becomes mainstream and not the fragment?

i11: Often the best programs are localised, well almost entirely the best programs are localised and that's because you get buy in from the local group whatever they are...The hard bit here is when you talk along those lines people who are in those pockets of excellence become frustrated because they know it works for that particular community. When you interrogate why they work in those communities it all boils down to relationships. Replicating relationships is a really difficult thing...I think there are a number of programs both nationally and certainly within the state that in isolation have an impact, but how do you unite those programs?...How do you scale those up and is that the right process? Maybe the right process is to almost do community by community and address the issues of that community?

i12: The principal discovered that pretty much all the children in her school who were getting referrals to go and see a child health nurse were never going because they come from dysfunctional families who don't have a car or going to jail or just don't have the capacity to get up in the morning and take their kids to appointments. So she, after many cups of coffee with the health department, convinced them to locate that child health nurse on her school grounds and it made a huge difference. So again that wasn't new money it was about being aware of what resources existed and what was and wasn't being acted. So now the Government is getting value for money by having that resource located on the school grounds and it's engaging with the babies at birth, immediately with the parents. So just things like that are those frustrating points because it's just so simple and it makes a lot of sense but for some reason we can't get traction to do that sort of thing at scale.

i13: There's pockets of success but there seems to be a lack of ability for that to all come together and for there to be a cohesive goal that everyone is working for in early childhood, but that I find very frustrating because if you're not measuring something and understanding what's working and what's not, it's very hard to be effective or adapt to new things. It seems a bit like flogging a dead horse and a few good things just coming out and about and everything just throwing their hands in the air because it's too hard or too expensive to do it properly.

i21: A lot of the good stuff that's happened at the moment is because people are actually just being creative around the edges and doing their own thing regardless of what the system is telling them to



do...Where it works really well is where there are good structures in place at a local level but that local organisations and often small ones are able to actually do the work that they do because they have the individual relationships with families. We need to be able to work through them...I've seen some really good examples of this where big NGOs have contractual arrangements with government, but they actually subcontract still to the very small organisations to actually work with the families because that's where the trust is. They benefit from having the levels of support and the big infrastructure of a big organisation but can actually do their work and are financially viable in doing that work. That's a win win situation and I think it can work really well...The taking away of small community is not necessarily intentionally but the system just makes it unviable for so many players in this to exist.

i23: I think Australia has a history of funding a lot of work in the health, disability and other sorts of spaces through pilot work. Again, because we fund pilots you tend to get pockets of excellence and expertise but they never get a chance to spread their wings because rather than extend the pilot they just fund some other pilot somewhere else. I don't think our opportunities and understanding of how to integrate those services together has been fully realised... they send up signals that the system's not really funding systemic change, it's funding little ideas here and there so it's in effect a kind of tokenism.

Conversely, there was also an acknowledgement of the difficulties of the reverse – of starting from high level policy and translating this to actions at a local level.

i9: You can all the best policy intent and tell the narrative of what it should be. But if you can't get through the barriers of implementation - and the trust and collaboration and communication that's needed, then you won't actually operationalise good policy intention.

i11: I don't think anyone in any head office wouldn't say the same thing. We can design the policies and whatever which we know are actually going to work. What actually is the problem, are the issues that unfold between the policy and the child are numerous and trying to line them up in such a way that is a positive outcome for everyone including the child and the people engaging with that child is a very difficult thing to master. The larger you are the more difficult that becomes.

i16: I do think the general sector is too aspirational... I've seen too many programs, too many ideas, too many innovations that are great on paper, they're inspiring but they don't work.

i19: I'm absolutely fascinated by how you can have a fantastic concept but rolling it out to scale usually becomes a bureaucratic nightmare and you end up with a fairly weak model.

## 5 SYSTEM BLIND SPOTS

Interviewees were asked if there were any blind spots in the system – things that they felt were being overlooked and not part of the current dialogue around early childhood development. The following includes some different examples which again shows diversity in their perspectives of the system. The 'blind spots' mentioned included: economic inequality; mental health; foetal alcohol syndrome; linking in with adult services; family daycare and child neglect.

### 5.1 ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

i7: Looking at those maps it's just so depressing when you just realise the disparity between the affluent parts of Sydney and the boondocks of the Northern Territory...There's a whole social equity argument in there as well.



i21: The magic wand that I would wave if I could is to alleviate poverty. Really, all of this, that's a huge statement but so much of what we do or so much of what is an absolute imperative to early childhood development and a kid's wellbeing needs to be driven by the mitigation of poverty. If you don't have a roof over your head and you're worried about where the next meal is going to come from, you can be certain that you won't be focusing on going to your Triple P course down the road or learning to be a better parent. You can't do that stuff. It's pretty basic Maslow's Hierarchy stuff. You've got to have basic stuff. We don't do what we need to do in this country about really looking at those, the drivers that come out of poverty and where that takes us. Then we just continue to keep trying to put Band Aids on them. If I had a heap of money tomorrow, I'd be putting it in the homelessness space and a whole lot of other spaces that revolve around that. Then your social determinants change for those children and they're just in a better place. It's about access but it's actually about being able to function in the places that children turn up, in school or in childcare or anywhere else. They're behind, we know. You've only got to look at AEDI for that. Not all kids that walk through that school gate are on the same level playing field...The redistribution of wealth and all of that stuff...people are making conscious decisions not to actually address it because there's too much at stake for other reasons for them politically. We can go on and on and on about how we need to get it right at the local level and that NGOs need to play better together and all of that but actually that's just actually shifting the blame as far as I'm concerned...It's the bleeding obvious but nobody actually wants to look at the bleeding obvious...Then we just want to blame everybody for not being able to pull themselves out by their own boot straps.

## 5.2 MENTAL HEALTH

i10: The typical growing trend we are seeing at the moment, and which is alarming – mental health has been on the increase for a while. But you're now seeing children of parents who are not in a bad enough position from their mental health situation, who therefore can't get support, at risk of abusing their child not because of any intent, but because of their lack of cognitive ability. That's blocking the system.

## 5.3 FOETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME

i5: Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is part of the early childhood picture, as far as I am concerned. So we are talking prenatal children as well as antenatal children...Do we confine a mother who is engaged in such damaging behaviour as to be regularly picked up publicly for intoxication, where the risk to the unborn child of FASD is so pronounced that it requires some form of state-sponsored intervention prior to the child being born? Now, I know that's a tough question. I don't relish, in any way, having to ask it. But knowing the impact on both the child and the subsequent impact on the community, it's a question that has to be asked.

i12: I think when you look at teenage pregnancy and all these children that are being born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, I think we have to talk about that. So we're talking zero to three, we actually if we really want to see the difference we actually have to engage with the pregnant mother and have a relationship where they're being mentored by an elder in their community or by the parents, or another responsible person, especially when they're these young teens and things but it's almost like case managing but every child. It shouldn't just be – it's what parents do where they're educated and understand because they know that's part of what you do as a parent.

## 5.4 LINKING IN WITH SERVICES FOR ADULTS

i25: One of the things that I think is being missed is that there are lots of services and programs that interact with adults which with just a little bit more effort could take into account the impact on their children. So



this is the debate we have constantly with adult mental health services and adult drug and alcohol services and some of the other services that vulnerable adults will engage with and where the adult is seen as the primary client of the service....the scan of a baby's brain with a depressed mother is the baby has a much less neural activity in their brain because the baby of a very depressed mother gets very little stimulation, it doesn't get a lot of touch all that stuff. So it actually has an impact on brain development. Scan forward to a child of three with a mum on regular heavy medication who sleeps a lot, who struggles to stimulate their baby, what I think is missing is the clinician treating the mother seeing a role for themselves in how they take into account the impact on the child because it's a missed opportunity. If you think about it from a public health perspective there is an opportunity there for an opportunistic intervention which might be as little as take this info sheet about – these are the three things that your illness may be having an impact on your child and here's what can help. Playgroup. One day a week of childcare... There is a complete disconnect between what we do for adults and parents and what we do for children.

i34: The early childhood system for families with disadvantage is pretty big. It includes things like drug and alcohol services, mental health services, a whole range of different services that may never recognise that the children of their clients they also have a duty of care to. Sometimes there may be fear of asking whether their clients are parents because they think that means I've got to then make a notification rather than being able to say well parenting is as much a part of someone's life and it's a pretty big part of someone's life, as much as whether they have a job or what their education level is. ...So it's more that people are not asking something because you don't want to know the answer because you might have to do something about it. Children not necessarily being seen in those systems....sometimes it's a blind spot because it's just not being aware that that might be something and sometimes it's a deliberate blind spot as in it might hurt my engagement with my client if I talk about it.

## 5.5 FAMILY DAY CARE

i32: I feel that family day care doesn't get the attention that it should get in the system as a whole. I think a lot of people sort from centre based positions have a slight attitude looking down on family day care, that it's not as good, and yet I think it's got a real place in the system and I think it's such a shame that while we're debating nannies now – so the productivity commission really put that on the agenda – I think we could be thinking of much more creative ways of managing home based care, whether it's in the carer's home or the child's home, through the existing systems that we have like family day care, rather than going out to reinvent the wheel again with nannies.

## 5.6 CHILD NEGLECT

i34: Neglect is probably the thing that other adults are least likely to do something about, they're not going – so hungry, skinny, dirty kids - the other adults in the community are not necessarily going to go talk to the parents about that. Whereas they might do if there was another kind of maltreatment, because the parents might be a bit scary or how do you start a conversation about that....Concerns around neglect are most likely to be the type of concerns that are screened out of child protection systems. So they're not necessarily even going to get screened in. Often because the kinds of things that are notified that might be indicators of neglect, if you like, might not reach a threshold, where something that's an indicator of child sexual abuse for example, like a child disclosing, or bruising or clear signs of physical or sexual abuse are more likely to get screened and prioritised higher. When things are screened in they're the least likely to get a higher priority, they're also less likely to receive intensive support. It might be minimal intervention if you like unless something is really down the quite chronic, not even chronic but quite obvious children are starved or the level of filth is so high that no one could question it, those kinds of things. Often it's almost built into the system to allow problems to get



worse before assistance is provided because it has to get to that level to then get screened in to then receive a response. ..Neglect can sometimes be a hard thing to pinpoint what it is, but I think it's that broader system response around making people more aware of children, the fact that adults wouldn't respond to clear signs of child neglect by doing much except for maybe making a report about it, is a pretty scary thing... I think child neglect is seen as not as much of a problem as other forms of abuse, unless children die from it really. So that's probably the biggest area that more could be done around.

## 6 POSSIBLE LEVERAGE POINTS FOR CHANGE

Linked to thoughts on what a good future might look like (see Section 4) there were ideas about how this future might be achieved. As above, quotes have been organised into themes, with the most spoken about topics included first.

### 6.1 CREATING A SHARED NARRATIVE AND COMMON LANGUAGE

Linked to the perceived need for greater engagement with parents was a sense of many participants that a greater public awareness of the value and importance of early childhood development was needed, informed by a consistent narrative, shared language and proactive communication. Almost half of all interviewees raised points around the way the early childhood development message has been conveyed. This related to comments on the need for a clearer narrative, a national conversation and the current failure to effectively communicate the value of early childhood development:

i2: Prevention's a hard sell. Building capacity's a hard sell. Because they're invisible...And there's nothing to open. There's no three more social workers to announce...Why isn't it a BBQ stopper? Why aren't people marching in the street? We're not having a debate about whether school teachers should be trained or qualified, are we? And yet, the years before a child goes to school are infinitely more important than the school years...So why haven't we succeeded in putting that into the ether? That's a really important, challenging question for us.

i4: This is an area where you really want lots of different disciplines involved. You know, your GPs, your maternal and child health nurses, your childcare providers, your early childhood workers, your employers. Each of those sectors comes with their own language and their own understandings. That's often one of the really big barriers to working together, is finding a common language and common – goals that can be expressed in a common language.

i11: The understanding of the broader community can't be about the two year old child. It has to be about the influence on that two year old child to allow them to contribute back to society when they're 25 or 45 or 80 and I'm not sure that we have sufficiently made that connection for society. I think there's been lots of attempts at it but I'm not sure that we've sufficiently done that in a way that is one, believable and two, actionable by the whole society about investing in those young people.

i13: The politicians struggle to convince the public that having a win in the early years is a real win. They'd rather talk about we increased attendance at primary school by x amount but they see it as too long term to talk about early childhood. But if we can help change the dialogue around if a three year old is succeeding at three then they're likely to stay on a trajectory of success for the rest of their life and not end up in prison and unhealthy, all of that... I think that's something that peak body perhaps has struggled to support the Government in articulating in terms of to the public.



i15: We give conflicted messages to women about going back to work. So all the single mums that got shifted off parenting payment onto Newstart the message being you need to go back to work now, but we don't have a national dialogue going on about that; what should be happening for young children, where should they be, what is the right number of hours of care and education for a one year old and a two year old and a three year old, and how important is the quality of those programs?...This is generally where it just needs to be a national conversation. We need to sort this out. We need to be able to say to parents, "This range of options is okay for children, and you need to make the best decision for your family within that range of options." ...These are the kind of messages I think we need to be giving parents and the government has been traditionally shying away from that and leaving it to private providers to pitch to parents about the relative benefits of long day care. I don't think that's where we want that conversation to lie, I think we need to be having a national conversation about what's good for babies, what's good for toddlers, what's good for pre-schoolers and how important the quality is.

i17: If we really want to make an impact we've got to work with the children's first teachers which is their parents and families... the work has been done, it's just a matter of how do we take it to the next level to get it out there into the public domain?... That's where we don't have a joint enough approach to that, that's why I think it's still fragmented in lots of ways. I think everybody knows that it's a good idea and it makes sense to invest early and co-ordinate and complement services and all the rest of it in the early years but it's actually getting that message out to families is the tricky part. It's a state responsibility I suppose and it has different air play in different states. In the difficult fiscal environment we're all in at the moment it's not getting a lot of airplay. We don't have anybody that disagrees it's not a good thing to do. But who's going to fund what?

i18: There's a bit of a disconnect between what the general public think the purpose of ECD is and what the experts, broadly speaking, would say needs to happen...I think we do need the general public to understand what we need early learning care centres and settings to be. In a public policy and in a political sense, unless the general public understands that an early learning and care setting is really important for the quality of children, their wellbeing, etc. that it lays the foundations for how children do at the school and well beyond, then we'll never have the impetus for the real investment in that space. So there's a political will that's only going to be driven by a deeper public understanding. That's in a longer term piece, that takes a while to build. We've got an ageing population so we're going to have less and less people who've got kids in the early learning and care setting so that becomes a difficult trade off to argue for in a public policy sense and in a political sense but we sort of need that to happen.

i22: The early childhood system and in particular when you're looking at early childhood education, whether it's long day care, preschool, that's seen as an enabler for workforce development. We haven't been able to sell the message that this is really good for kids. Where there's disadvantaged children, when they're three, four, this can close the gap on disadvantage prior to them starting school. People don't care about that...When those professionals are in the same room, they don't understand each other yet a lot of the time they've got the same agenda to get the right outcomes for children.

i23: It's about valuing children as well, valuing human beings. I think it's a hard sell because it's such an obvious one...Most of us are on the same page, come from the same backgrounds, charity, benevolence, personal development, professional development, learning, those are the things we aspire to by and large. But a lot of the promotion work is done quietly and I don't think there's a huge effort to promote those values externally. I don't think anyone takes real responsibility for it.

It also included comments on the potentially positive role of a consistent narrative and proactive communication:

i1: We need to partner with as many people as possible so that we can influence the change that we're hoping to get...I think there is something that all these voices can do, whether in unison, which would be nice, or independent of each other, which is how we operate, because we're all egotistical kind of creatures.



Organisationally, as well as individuals, as humans. Or we can start to sing from the same song sheet, which is a bad sign.

i6: One of the major drivers I think to being able to get the best that we can in terms of the return on public investment and the best outcomes for children we have to find a common goal and we have to find commonalities in terms of language and in terms of what we do. Part of trying to get everyone to work together and to see it in a holistic way is to talk about what are we doing all this for. That is part of what we're trying to change in terms of the narrative, because as you know from a government perspective governments talk about their remit and they talk about their functions, they don't necessarily talk about their clients or recipients of their services. To get people to work together and we've found this with our early year centres and our children and family centres, we talk about it as a co-design, co-ownership. We have to start from what is this all about, what are we really here for and to talk about outcomes rather than inputs and outputs and so that's why we always talk about the child and family as a reason why we're doing what we're doing.

i9: The public awareness and the communication strategy that this matters - this actually matters for us as country, for the values that we hold. You know, at one end, it's the productivity. It's about the early intervention. Has a huge economic benefit at that end. The other one...you want to maximise the choices. You want to maximise the opportunity and the life chances. The life chances that people have...How do you create the forums to have the conversations?... We just don't capitalise on it. We don't add value to what that would mean and be brave enough and have the professional courage for us to take different approaches...to actually say we need to stop doing this because we know the investment in doing that would be a better benefit for children if we did that instead. Then communicating that clearly.

i11: History shows us that where you have a strong and vocal champion, normally at a very high political level, making simple statements, those simple statements tend to galvanise a better vision and direction. For example, if a Prime Minister of any political persuasion made a statement that the early years are the most important for our society. If that were true then the behaviours of everyone associated with that issue would suddenly change...In my head it's similar to the no smoking campaigns, the Slip, Slop, Slap campaigns, the measles campaigns where there's a consistent message coming from a whole range of high profile people but the message is very simple and it is supported by future advertisements et cetera. You rarely get change in a society without it and it's almost at that level that I think it needs to happen so that agencies, not for profits and others start to re-focus in a common way.

i12: Everyone that's working in this space needs to be able to come together as a common message and you need to make it as simple as possible for Government. At the moment all the peak body and research groups and all of that are saying something similar but it's very easy for it to get missed because it's not simple. ...I think by pulling people together and having that common message ... I think it's about a partnership, so it's not just up to Government.

i14: I think the thing that is the new development in science and brain science around what we're learning about the epigenetic effects on development, that's terribly important information that's not well understood by the general community. It's still very new as a science but its implications are really important ... It's quite a complex story but finding simple language to get that message across is going to be very important.

i17: I suppose it's a bit like you have a national campaign for safer roads or national campaign for smoking, anti-smoking, things like which states and territories will support and do it in their own way as well. It takes 20 to 30 years to make some sort of change in that area but it's having that national message it's - that's the lack of the system.

i23: We would certainly want the merits and value of early childhood education understood by the public in all regions, particularly disadvantaged regions. It's not just a question of making it free, it's a question of making it culturally desirable, that all families, but particularly families who might have traditionally struggled,



that they should want that for their families and for their children because it's so useful in assisting their children to do well at school and in life... Somebody has to take up the cudgels about promoting that message, those values. What governments tend to be pretty good at is creating structures and to some extent funding to support those. They're not always particularly good at selling the message. That's partly because the more you sell the message the more demand you create, so there's an inherent tension for governments in creating service demand.

i27: When you actually ask families what do you think will make the difference? The thing they always say to you is education. So I don't think we have to convince the public or community that early childhood is something that is a missed opportunity. I actually think people get this even if they've had poor family environments themselves or poor parenting practices that they've experienced. They just might not know what to do... People don't want to be hit around the head that they don't know what they're doing or that they're in some way less than an ideal parent... It's about building the knowledge and I think the actual messaging itself is going to be quite critical. I think that's part of the challenge in this space you're talking about - how do you do it in a way that doesn't alienate or get people offside and that isn't just a matter for those people or them. It rings true for all of us. On a different day and in different ways, we all have our moments... So I think one of the challenges is how do we make it sound like people aren't being preached to or lectured at or somehow feel a bit dumb or daft?

i30: What we need to do is develop this business case that says if you apply things here for ECD and I feel strongly that's that the starting point, this is what happens and this is what it saves us... This is the financial difference. And I'm not separating the socio economic impacts from that, I'm just saying there's a whole lot of enablers that will actually ensure that the story can get out and the way of working is seen to be valuable... I think the body of work around return on investment in the business cases is essential to do now.

i31: I think it's a discussion and a conversation which needs to be borne out in the public, in the press, in what we hear politicians say, in what information gets given to parents when they walk home from the hospital with their babies. That whole first level of parenting skill support that new parents get is pretty oriented towards child and maternal health. I'm not suggesting it shouldn't be, we shouldn't take away any of those things, but I think there's opportunity for a conversation about early learning in that framework as well... It's probably too much to draw an analogy with immunisation, but there's a broad acceptance of the value of immunisation in the community; certainly not universal, and that's probably a good thing as well, but the whole system is geared towards encouraging parents to get their kids immunised. I mean if we could do the same thing with early learning, personally I think that would be fantastic. You're providing education to parents, you're providing information of the benefits of participation in that program, you're providing easy access to high quality service. Why wouldn't we do that with education in the same way we do with health?

## 6.2 PROVIDING STRONGER EVIDENCE AND EVALUATION

Remaining responsive to the latest research was seen as an important by some involved in service delivery and policy development.

i9: We should always be agile and responsive to the latest research, to the challenges of service providers, to what's changing in education from what research is telling us about neuroscience and where that kicks in, and have those open conversations to you position the very best from all of those aspects.

Others saw research as a means of raising awareness of the importance of early childhood development and influencing policy making.

i11: I think you can probably track it back about 20 years but certainly in the last ten there's been an increased level of awareness of the importance of the early years and getting it right not only for education but



health, and the long term future of the nation. I think research has really ramped up the outcomes or the effectiveness of, an early years approach can have on a society. So that's made a big difference in terms of investment both in education, health and a range of other areas, but it's also created probably unintended consequences. With a ramped up investment comes a level of accountability at a range of levels including political about what difference does that make and that then puts different pressures on programs that probably weren't intended.

i17: That's the thing governments only listen to - what's going to be good bang for their buck? Until you've got some concrete evidence to say 'if I put a dollar in the front end I'm going to get seven times that amount at the back end', so that's where Hertzman's work comes in...Heckman's work in Canada in relation to investing in the early years. ... then you've got Hertzman's work in the Canadian instrument called the Early Developmental Index ...and Hertzman's work obviously in British Columbia about the vulnerabilities of children coming into the school already behind the eight ball.

i25: I think one of the big developments probably in the last ten or so years, ten to 15 years, is this gradual understanding, but it is pretty gradual, by policy makers and others that there is a – and it's in some ways the neuro science arguments have brought us to understanding - that there's quite a strong interplay between environment and genetics on the development of brain architecture and capability

i29: [Fraser Mustard] I think he was pivotal in engaging people who wouldn't have otherwise been engaged in discussions about the importance of early childhood... When you have someone like that sit and explain it to you it makes all the sense in the world. I think perhaps our early years educators already knew all of this stuff. But it was to a large degree it was information that was held in house so you had people in health and people in education who knew all this stuff and talked to one another about it but didn't understand why no one else got it.

There was a sense that more evidence could be built on what works and doesn't work in the Australian context.

i9: What's the research telling us? What do we know from the data from the field that is working and not working? What is the evidence that we have of successful things? How do we share that?...How do you look at things and say that's a really great innovative program?

i12: There's no national measurement or no accountability to say what works and what doesn't work. It's a bit of let's try this; it's not co-ordinated...We actually want to action and measure and say okay here's a line in the sand, even if we choose 20 sites that have already been identified by the Government as lower socio economic problem areas and they're already building some sort of childhood centre. Do the measurements and have buy ins from different not profits that are going to be running those because they've tendered for them but there's no standardisation here. But work out what are the key elements that should be measured and if there's something you could come up with, what are those things that are the most important things that we should look at that should be provided and in this case they are different but that seems to work.

i17: Okay, we're heading down this path of the joined up stuff, joining up the zero to the child development and the early childhood education and care, joining all that up on school sites or pretty close to school sites to a hub and spoke model. How about let's look at the collective impact of that or let's look at the research on that because around the world there's hardly any examples of where that's really well researched. That's where we want to head, but I tell you what there's not a lot of research around there to say actually what's been the impact...We want some Australian examples, that's what we want...If that opportunity came forward I would say let's look at what's working really well. Let's look at some examples, case studies of really good practice in different context, what's the shared learning out of those and how would we capture that? ...What's going to be a contributor? States and territories at the moment, unless the Australian Government takes the lead, are not going to contribute money because they just don't have the money in the states and they're going to get less of it because of the way the GST is structured.



i18: I think trying to tap into what is looking like giving us some real benefits in trying to understand are these early learning and care centres – are these integrated services for example, is that what we want more of, what's going to change the game, really? Where should we shine the light? What do we concretely want more of? There's not a lot of sharing across those. As far as I can see, there's not a lot of sharing across what's great practice and really working well - trying to bottle that and trying to think about can we replicate that and to what extent?... I think perhaps the two bits around what's working well that we want more of, equally what's not working well and we want less off. I think sometimes we don't ask the second question. ... Particularly when you have state jurisdiction and things look and sound different but are they the same? It's probably unlikely that all the states and territories will implement exactly the same initiatives but what is absolutely core in these types of integrated approaches, perhaps is the way to go.

i19: It's very unfashionable in government to go back and look at projects that you've tried out before... We've got to learn from mistakes in the past...

i22: I think the evidence is a bit light on the ground. It's a very strong logic model to integrate service delivery. However, we don't have an outcomes framework around that that's showing us that this is good for child outcomes. The suite of services, it all makes sense and I don't know whether we don't have the evidence because we ask the wrong evaluation question or we put the wrong evaluation around wrong parts of the integrated service delivery. It takes a long time to do it well.

i30: Critically I think one of the things that we don't have is a common robust evaluation framework around the outcomes that we actually need... Certainly there are many of them [groups] around Australia that are saying okay we need to find these case studies around Australia and we need to show people what they look like and expose people and map the impact that they're having or the effect they're leading towards or whatever and the process successes so well. So evaluating the framework and the process as well as evaluating the project outcomes. So that's really important.

i34: In the social welfare space there's not a pool for evidence based practice that there might be in health for example. If you're doing a medical procedure you pretty much want to know it's going to do what you want it to do. In the social welfare space there's more of a sense of those programs can be developed by the practitioners themselves because they've got a particular professional qualification or the engagement is really important but the behavioural change or the change that you want to see happening for kids and families isn't as important... my one magic wand thing is getting evidence based practice for the really vulnerable families.

i35: I think to a certain extent one of the lessons learnt is that not everything perfect is overseas. Usually we are inspired by examples from overseas because some have taken the effort to document and communicate them. I think there's fabulous examples of what has been natural collaboration and organic work that has happened here in Australia. We need to put effort into capturing those learnings and that knowledge, that experience and translating that into a format that's acceptable for others so that we have Australian case studies and examples that we can hold up and say this is the right way to go about this for our communities and for our kids.

The ability for communities to access data and monitor results at a local level was suggested as an important leverage point by several interviewees:

i14: I think one of the keys to this is that and particularly in the indigenous space there's such variability of need between communities that a one size fits all approach is doomed to failure. Things need to be place based and in order for things to be place based you need information that's relevant at the local level. So it's no use looking at working out development a program – unless you have data about your own community about what other kids are tracking, compared to say similar communities or other children in the state or all Australian children you're flying blind... So it's really important I think to develop data systems that supports local planning and I think that's been one of the real benefits of the Australian Early Development Index in that it has given



communities a regular snapshot of how their kids are doing every three years and that it's broken down at a community and regional level, that information is available at both levels...I think the future would have more comprehensive data systems that can allow our communities to track how they're travelling and that they need to monitor not just the outcomes of development like AEDI, school attendance, NAPLAN results and things like that, they need to be monitoring what we know are important determinants, early determinants of how kids are doing. That can be some of the early health stuff, it can be the factors about levels of employment in the community, it can be a range of things that we know of like nutrition that are important or even things like the rates of smoking in pregnant mothers. Those things all make a difference. Those are the things that I think communities need to monitor and talk about so that they know that these things make a difference over the longer term.

i20: I've got a bee in my bonnet about measurement and tracking actual change rather than just project outcomes that don't actually make a difference at a population level. I think we need better systems around quality data and access to data. That's a whole other project, that. I do think that if people want to set concrete goals in their community they need to have access to data so that they can work out their base lines and work out where they're going. I just think people find that just too difficult...The AEDI has been amazing. At least with the AEDI you can go into a community and say right, it was 22% this year and in five years time we want to make it 11%. You know that this data's going to come out in three year cycles. If only we had that for youth unemployment and mental health, homelessness, do you know what I mean? Those data sets are so critical to mobilising people. That whole people entitled to their opinions but they're not entitled to their own facts. If you've got the facts you can keep bringing people back to it.

i21: It's building the capacity of people to be able to utilise it in their own context and then to bring it in and line it up next to other things. ... if you put all of those data sets together you start to get a much more holistic picture about what we actually need to be doing in the early childhood development years.

i35: I think the AEDI to a certain extent is still very reliant on the formalised school system which absolutely is critical to it - but what about those earlier measures and how do we get some very simple tools and measures that grass roots organisations are equipped to build resources to capture it?...it's actually thinking more holistically around what it is that you're going to evaluate, doing those baselines, setting it up, making sure that those communities are then trained and given the resources of which to measure and that we all agree that we're all going to track and measure the same thing in the same way.

There was also a suggestion that greater sharing of data between difference portfolios such as health and education would be useful:

i14: Until very recently there's not been the possibility of integrating data about communities, about families, about children, about their health, their development, their school engagement, their school participation and school progress but there are now possibilities to do that through confidentialised linkage of data systems. I think that's been a really important development that will allow for a better weighing up of what are the best leverage points and what are the best – how can you develop better synergies and less wastage in the efforts that are being made?

i22: I'd try and integrate the systems somehow. Education, health and the welfare type support systems would need to talk to each other and collect data over time. For instance, when we try to do longitudinal studies, the health data doesn't speak to the education data, doesn't speak to the community services or child safety data. That's insane. How can we not stitch those together so we can see what are the things that, systems wise, could help children optimise their development?

i30: I think there is a massive data literacy problem in Australia ... it is so rare to find people that are data literate that have the capacity to collect data, analyse data and interpret data and we just don't have those people. It's not considered a mainstream requirement in anyone's day job, so I think that's part of it. But I think



also very much there's a 'knowledge is power' part unfortunately and I think that people are protective of their space. Again I don't think people know what it looks like when you pull this altogether. I think they'll find duplication, I think they'll find conflict in terms of the data, I think then that will require each agency to actually challenge what they're doing as well...moving up from that, a consistent shared measurement platform would be very, very helpful. The willingness to share data even within and across Government departments hasn't been there.

And while monitoring and evaluation was seen as important, it was also recognised that the time delay between benefit and cost impacted on the ability to get early results (similar to the point above about the time delay making it hard to generate resources to meet costs):

i16: Whether you're talking about Government or philanthropists or anybody else really, generally everybody seems to be moving to a world where there's got to be some sort of pay for performance metric or we've got to focus on outcomes not inputs. Now that's really easy to say, the challenge with early childhood of course is that you don't necessarily see the impacts of what you're doing for a very, very, very long time. It's not like I can go and build the best early childhood centre that anyone could ever design in Claymore tomorrow and the next year we could observe all these outcomes. We could observe some things but we couldn't observe the impact on year 12 completion rates, juvenile justice, teenage parenthood, anything.

### 6.3 BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF PARENTS

Related to the importance of valuing families was a sense that there was more that could be done to work with parents in ensuring the best outcomes for their children. As part of this was the sense that most parents really wanted to do the best they could for their children, but didn't always know how:

i4: How do we learn to be parents? How do we learn what we do with our children? You know, one of the biggest demographic changes we've had in the last 30 years has been the very high mobility of the population, combined with the – in some ways, the emptying of communities. So these days – you know, I grew up living within a block of my grandmother for most of my life. I don't even live in the same country as my mother now.

i9: You want your children to have better than what you've had. There's no parent out there who doesn't want that good start.

i19: These are children who have been excluded at school three or four times. They're not even living in the family home, some of them, by 16, 17. The whole thing has unravelled for them...Their parents haven't learned the advocacy, mediation, brokerage thing that the average middle class parent just assumes. If your kid comes back from school and they're unhappy, you know you have an entitlement to go in and talk about it and deal with it. You have a skill set to do that.

i25: The biggest actors in the early childhood space in my view are parents. Good or bad, right or wrong, the biggest actors are parents...it's not what happens at kinder and child care and other settings is not important, but it's that what happens at home is the single most biggest influence on kids.

i29: I think the other thing that we hadn't been doing well was engaging with parents so that they understand. I think the circumstances impact but I think every parent that has a baby, they hold that little baby and they look at it and they want the best that can possibly happen for that child in its life... If they understand what they're doing impacts from the moment the child is born, not when it can have a conversation, then parents are likely to change the way they do things...You can absolutely terrify parents to the point where they're frozen with what do I do? Am I doing the right thing? And they're full of anxiety... one other point that I think we lose sight of and I think it's important. I think our expectations of parents and our view of good



parenting has changed enormously over the years...I have a very strong view that the most important thing in a child's life I think is to know above all else they're loved.

i34: Any parent is not going to go back to somewhere where they feel judged ...We spoke to families who were engaged with family home visiting programs where the referral process happened very much behind the scenes, it wasn't well you've got x number of risk factors so here's the program for you. It was more "Hey Julie can come out every couple of weeks and she will give you some information about your baby" and that kind of thing, where it's non-judgemental but it's seen as pretty normative to get support in that time...When you frame it in terms of the child's development, most parents have aspirations for their kids, they want their kids to be able to thrive, they may not know how to get there or they may not be in a position to get there, so helping with knowledge and assistance and all that kind of thing is, as you say, starting from assumptions of most parents want this, why would this parent be different, how do we get there. That then helps remove the judgement and the parent is part of the same team.

There was a sense that parenting had to some degree been overlooked by government and 'professionals' in the sector:

i4: A lot of the policy focus, at the moment in Australia, is around early childhood education settings, and how do we deal with the quality of that? But that is still a smaller fraction of the time compared to the time that children spend at home with their parents. So I think we've got to have our services geared not just to providing high quality services for the children when they're not with their parents, but also supporting parents to provide the best environments they can.

i15: Parents are an inherent part of children's lives but it's primarily about the child and secondly about the parent not the other way around.

i25: Governments have traditionally stayed out of the family home particularly during infancy and early childhood. The Government is more comfortable interacting with families around school and the expectations that families send their kids to school, obey school rules, participate in the school environment. So Governments are very comfortable in the space of school. But in the family home Governments tend to offer parenting programs and reserve their intervention in families for children who are at extreme risk as a last resort...Most of the research says you can provide kinder and childcare and all these things but what happens at home has the single biggest influence...Should Government intervene more at home? You shouldn't take that question off the table and then it's a question of how and who for? Government provides a bunch of things in home, it provides for very vulnerable families, a bunch of in reach home visiting programs, it provides parenting programs, it provides settings for children, it provides playgroups. What it doesn't have is a common policy thread that joins up all of those activities.

i27: We really need to come into the 21st century, we actually need to not just see it as an education challenge but as something about how do we actually support families and children and communities best to enable them to realise their potential!

There was also the observation by some interviewees that a lot of awareness raising needs to be done for parents to appreciate the importance of early childhood development:

i31: I'd like to see a broad appreciation in the community at large – so really amongst parents – that having some structured and formal early learning experiences for their children in those preschool years is able for their development, and so the parents wanted to access – I'm not talking 8:00 'til 6:00 five days a week, but some level of engagement so that kids had a chance to learn from other kids and from professional educators the sort of skills that will help their brains develop in a way which will allow them to fully participate at school. So that's the first thing, I'd like parents to fully understand that.



This was also accompanied by discussion of how to best intervene to help parents without alienating them:

i11: How do you make sure that increased investment is not about blame because parents don't need to be blamed for their child's position they need to be helped to find a better way forward for not only their child but themselves as well in most cases. Once you get into that grey area of could it be you're blaming me there's a level of suspicion that just erupts and that in itself starts to create some problems...How do you then support a parent to be positive about growing up without blaming? How do you support the child protection workers and education and health and all of the things start to flow from that point? I'm not sure we've actually challenged it from that angle

i19: Our job is to develop children who are ready to learn and have a disposition to learn and have strong self-esteem and self-efficacy. So these children grow up believing they can make a difference...the setting needs to be very strongly linked to the home education that's going on because we also know from the research that far more learning goes on in the home...unless we engage the parents equally in that process we've blown it... Families feel very judged. If they're marginalised families they feel so judged and actually for them, there appears to be a barbed wire fence around the building and it takes quite a lot of wire cutting to knock that down.

i29: The mums come into the children's centre and for some of them it's learning how to play with their children. If you've got parents that have lived their whole lives in detention, actually in a refugee centre, they didn't actually learn play themselves, so they're teaching them to play and read. The results of it have just been phenomenal. Some of the mums haven't been able to read either so they learn at the same time as they're reading to their babies. It's a really good way of engaging with those families.

i33: Building in adults to the program, or building in a partnership with adults in early childhood I think is a good future... The Early Years Learning Framework really mandates that. You've really got to be engaging – it recognises that education happens best when it happens as a partnership between families and the ECED centre.. Not just stuff that happens during the day in the program but it's actually engaged with parents as well. Parents are aware, parents can follow up, parents understand what's happening for their child at preschool or in early childhood. ECED staff need to understand what is happening for individual children at home in families too.

## 6.4 VALUING EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT FOR ITS OWN SAKE (NOT JUST FOR ECONOMIC REASONS)

Several participants felt that a lot of the current framing of the early childhood development system related back to the way that early childhood development is valued by society. This related to several aspects including valuing children and early childhood development for its own sake, as opposed to linking its value to 'adult' outcomes such as workforce participation and productivity. It also related to the desire to see early childhood development become a 'social norm' that is accepted like formal schooling is today. On valuing children, comments included:

i7: I would always argue that the child's best interest should be at the heart of any decisions that get made. So that would just be my personal philosophy but I know that that's possibly not all that realistic in an economic sense.

i9: I think it's a value and a belief system. I actually see underneath that is a value and belief system about the nature and type and the valuing and the humanity and decency and not getting tied down in the red tape and, you know the funding debates can happen. The regulation debates can happen. Every day of every year, children are in that system. The clock doesn't stop while we have the debates. Every day matters....I think the recognition and acknowledgement that this does matter and we've got it on government's radar that early childhood does matter.



i11: There are societies out there that do value their children in a different way and maybe we should look at how do they actually as a society articulate that into the broader community? I'm thinking there are cultural differences obviously in many countries that we wouldn't or couldn't replicate but certainly there are some countries like the Canadians, like the Fins, who have addressed this issue so why wouldn't we have a look at some of the things they're doing and see how we could adapt them here?

i15: We would argue the child has an inherent right to have early childhood education regardless of what decisions the parent is making, or capable of making, at any given time. Particularly when you have parents at the bottom end of the labour market who are in and out of work all the time and it's not fair on the child that they're going to lose their entitlement whenever the parent is out of work, they'd be in and out of services...If we took the orientation that every child has a right to have early childhood education, in fact we should be encouraging parents to use early childhood services even when they're not working because then that gives the child some stability and some opportunity that is not in conflict with the parent but separate to the parents' needs.

i21: If you look at the countries where it does work well, they've got an inherent value of children and families in their society...I actually think it is a children's rights issue, that we just don't have that value. If that were to shift, and I don't know how you'd get that at a national level, but if that were really to shift, a whole lot of things would just fall into place behind it.

i23: I think we're still relatively immature compared, say, to the Europeans in terms of our thinking about where our values lie with respect to a number of those issues and therefore what we might want to advocate for and fund... I think one of the reasons that the Europeans have traditionally done better is because they've got a stronger social welfare system. In many cases that welfare system is embedded in their constitutions. There are certain rights embedded in their constitution, rights to certain basic freedoms, but also certain services and public goods, such as education, legal representation, a whole range of those things that aren't a part of the Australian constitution, or at least not to the same extent, and that are also contested values. I think that puts us slightly behind the eight ball and makes the argument a little bit harder.

i24: In terms of what should the future look like, we think that universal service platforms or mainstream service platforms like early childhood should be universally accessible to all children, including for us, the most disadvantaged. That stems from a set of ideas around rights and responsibilities and ideas around social citizenship, people's entitlement to belong, and to be able to act in their own interests and other's interests.

i31: I think it does come back a little bit to community attitudes, as to the importance or otherwise of engaging in these structured opportunities for kids to learn.

In relation to formal schooling, comments included:

i15: You would be hard pushed to find a parent who doesn't think that their child has a right to go to a public primary school, even if they choose not to. If they choose to send them to a private school or home school them, they still value the right to go to the public school and get that education. We don't have that same expectation for the early childhood program, but we should...I think it actually needs a structural shift. It does need families' attitudes to shift but it also needs governments' to shift.

i22: Early childhood education has got a different identity than school based education as well.... When early childhood education is in the education space it's dominated by the school system. I think its voice is minimised within the juggernaut of the bigger education system. I do think that early childhood development needs its own identity because of the critical timing factors at play. At the moment it seems fairly fragmented.

i33: We can argue about all sorts of things about schools but they are an accepted part of a child's experience. Yet we can still have that discussion about early childhood services like 'are they better off at home?'. Early childhood services are part of a child's experience as well. They might go to them from six



weeks or they might go to them from two and a half or three or four, but they're still part of a child's experience. So valuing them as an accepted part of a child's lived experience seems to be still lacking. Policy makers and funders there are still obsessed with 'what are the outcomes' and so on... The provision of services and a focus on early childhood is important for its own sake rather than the economic benefit that you get out of it or the medical benefit that you get out of it.

This was linked to the idea of wanting early childhood development to become the 'norm':

i13: If I could click my fingers I would love to see the federal Government announcing a really cohesive plan to make this a national priority and something that's systematised to a degree that it doesn't rely on a one off amazing principal somewhere or something like that, it should be something that's the norm.

## 6.5 FINDING WAYS OF WORKING BETTER TOGETHER

Several interviewees spoke of the desire to work differently. Related to this desire to work differently was the recognition of both the difficulty and importance of working together in different ways. This related to numerous concepts such as collaboration, collective impact and co-design:

i8: In this whole space of working together, co-ordination, collaboration, there's all these terms thrown around and everybody has a totally different understanding, so we have very confusing language...Receiving a sponsorship amount or a lump sum of money to go and deliver a service is one type of relationship, getting together with three or four other organisations on a very challenging issue that no one has the solution to is a totally different type of arrangement. That's where you get the transformation, the co-creation, the co-design.

i19: Co-design means what it says. It means that actually people may come up with ideas and there may have to be a negotiation exercise. The professionals may not always get their way and maybe they have to listen to the community's priorities. If you have purposeful co-design and co-construction then you will get high levels of participation. If you get high levels of participation, communities will own those services and they will have a service which is much more likely to be responsive and flexible enough to meet their needs...Once you open the Pandora box of community participation, you can't close it again because those people have a high expectation of feedback, engagement and participation. They absolutely know when it's tokenistic...We need to be working collaboratively in a much deeper way.

i22: When you're in a partnership environment people have to leave their organisations at their doors and sign up for a new vision and purpose. That takes a maturity and organisations not just to be vying for money but to sign up for a purpose.

i21: I actually think that a lot of these big conversations, we lose the child at the centre of this. Just really bringing it back to the fact that we're all actually here for the same purpose and the purpose is that child sitting there... We so often get caught in the methodology of how we're going to do something or it's this approach or that approach. We're going to measure it this way, we're going to measure it that way. We're going to govern it this way, we're going to govern it that way. We lose sight of actually going, hey, let's just come on and get something done here because while we're sitting around talking this is still happening.

i30: What I'm seeing at the moment is a tiredness for the way that we have been engaging, that the long term stakeholders have been engaging. But also an understanding that the easy work perhaps has been done now so we have to think and work very, very differently if we want to achieve the outcomes which we're aiming for and that's in the short term even, but of course in the longer term...A very, very rigorous form of collaboration actually hurts. It hurts all of the stakeholders to actually engage in a space which is fully aligned – chunks get taken out along the way and once you're aligned you have this extraordinary strength and wonderful



things can happen. The growing group of people that are understanding this also realise that there is an urgency to make the difference.

i35: We would like to see a system in which organisations and individuals within them are supported and are trained and their capability has grown and their skill set is expanded to encompass this space of collaboration so that they actually have the basic tools on how to go about it, so to break that chain of competitive bid funding. Then to also really have an agreed focus that we all work together on the same shared social outcomes for kids zero to eight. That we literally put all efforts to focus on the same thing at the right time in the right sequence and we agree what that should and could be and then everybody pushes together. At the moment there are so many fantastic pieces of work happening but it's not consolidated.

It was suggested that overcoming difficulties in collaboration required both greater capacity as well as organisational mandate.

i8: Usually partnerships or cross collaboration happens when one person from one organisation initiates it. One has got an idea they go to another person, they get a couple of people organised, there's a great idea. But then what they have to do is they have to sell it back within the organisation... Unless you get that engagement, commitment and ownership right through an organisation and right through all the partners you're not going to actually get too far... We often think of the partnership as just a couple of people sitting at the table but it's much bigger and broader than that. Unless you have all the organisations, the same strength and capability and knowledge and skills around partnering, if you've got one weak blade well then the helicopter doesn't take off, it just starts spinning around and around and doesn't get anywhere

i30: We need to grow capability in that area [collective impact] because it is categorically very different to the way we've been operating before. ..There are very few stakeholders, NGO service providers, governments or philanthropics, whoever it might be, very few stakeholders who actually know what this work looks like... it is about devolved accountability, explicit accountability, shared measurement systems across all of the stakeholders. It's about neutral driving facilitation, about when we say common agenda it's about full on alignment, it's not just a peripheral interest where you meet once every month to make a shift, it's about deep skin in the game... So that's what I see unfolding, we're not there yet.

i35: Everybody agrees it's important and yes we should do it and everybody has both the appetite and the potential to do it, there's certainly the desire but what happens if you do not skill and set the foundations up around collaboration right from the outset and give people the skills on how to go about it, as soon as things start to get tough they will revert back to the behaviours that have given them success in the past. But what we're actually trying to change is what is what we define as success.

Associated with the issue of capacity was the issuing of resourcing different ways of working together:

i21: The work that it takes to make this new way of working work is never resourced... When you get a funding contract to deliver something and you will be lucky if you've even got anything that says, "Put one cent towards administration," let alone what it actually takes to form a productive collaboration to make things actually work in a different way. Where I've been involved in things that have really worked in terms of quite true collaborations, they've taken hours and hours and hours of un-resourced time off people who are just committed to doing that.

One reason given for the difficulty in obtaining resources was linked to the time delay between cost and benefit:

i21: The actual pay off for all of that is a long way down the track and that's the problem. If you're going to start in a green fields place and with say a play space collective impact type thing that you'd envisaged, there's so much. You could spend a year just working to get everybody clearly on the same page, how you're actually going to make this work, get all the, "This is mine, that's not yours," that sort of stuff on the table. All of that before you ever walk out and see a family under those new circumstances. That's the first thing. The second



thing, while you're doing it, it's got to be concurrent with whatever's happening in the space at the time. There's plenty of reasons that make it hard.

## 6.6 MOVING TO HIGHER PAID & BETTER QUALIFIED STAFF

Most of the comments related to pay and qualifications were in relation to childcare workers. There was a shared view that they do not get paid enough. There was also a view that more qualified staff were needed in childcare.

i7: A lot of child care workers obviously earn a pittance and it's obscene and because of that they tend to live in the less affluent areas where there's less demand for child care workers. So you've got all those child care workers who then have to travel to...where there's demand for places. So I think the wages definitely need to be addressed ...Who's going to travel for four hours a day to earn not very much money? It's absurd. That's another thing that drives people out of the industry and you get that huge turnover of child care staff, which is a whole other issue in itself...To me the good future would be a child care system that's affordable, that's accessible, that has staff who are well trained and well qualified and also well paid. To me, that's the only way you're going to have a more sustainable system. Of course where that money comes from is another question...It would be nice to see a little bit more Government support for child care. If they think they can get away with having fewer carers or fewer workers and workers who are less qualified I think that's wrong footed.

i9: If you're thinking about having a magic wand to wave and what would early childhood education and care look like, it would be a vibrant, agile, fully qualified workforce...it's about the qualified staff, the diagnostic capacity, understanding of early childhood development, being able to read the indicators of things. Being supportive to a whole range of different caring and parental environments out there, where parents want their young children to be in a good, nurturing, safe environment while they continue to participate, part time or full time, in the workforce.

i17: I think the big one for us is I think that we need the universities and the tertiary institutions to have a big buy in in this space as well and to engage in them. So at the moment it's pretty limited... research, advice, I think also their courses, the way they structure their course work as well...on the ground they have a lot of relationships with each other but in their faculties and in their course work there would be very little mention of co-operation and integration possibilities.

i18: I think the quality measures that are in place, I think are really important. So having people who are trained and experienced and have good professional development who are well remunerated; the remuneration levels are not anywhere near as good as teachers in schools.

i19: Having some fantasy that it's okay to pay your childcare worker what you pay your cleaner or the lavatory attendant in a public lavatory. I mean, that is not okay. They are a professional early educator...those people, we should be honouring them in every conceivable way. They should have good pay, good conditions of service. Fabulous professional development. Then we could be secure that our children and our grandchildren are having the best possible start. Without that, why are we surprised at the 25%? I'm surprised that the children achieve as well as they do...The thing that really pisses me off is nobody questions, and we've had primary education for a hundred years, nobody questions that we would pay teachers proper salaries...Nobody would question that a GP is properly trained and has a proper ongoing continuous professional development and good conditions of service. Why would we question early childhood?

i22: I think we need to retrain the workforce. There's room to have integrated child development education and practitioners. Maybe practitioners for the early years that actually can work across health, education and welfare. At the moment they have a different language. If we have people who are really, really strong on child development through various lenses, we'd have a workforce that could meet the varying needs of parents to positively impact on child outcomes...I'm thinking university system. Those three things would sit in three



different faculties or four different faculties. There's some stitching required together to bring those together because they're all working with the same people in the same age group. That would help bring greater understanding across those three. They can still have their own distinct functions but it makes no sense to have them totally operating independently and having one lens over what constitutes childhood development.

i23: Early childcare workers are not really traditionally highly regarded, or certainly not well paid....I think we value education in Australia, I'm not sure we value education for young children very highly yet. I think there's a level of immaturity in understanding exactly what early childhood education is or why it's important.

i33: I think that commitment to more highly qualified staff is important and I'm not talking everybody needs to be university qualified, not at all, you don't want everybody university qualified. Working in early childhood is not the same as being a parent. Staff need skills in understanding the system and in working in a group care setting, an educational setting...Another good future would be better remuneration for people who work in early childhood; they work for terrible money and terrible conditions. Their health is threatened in all kinds of ways, not just catching things from the children but it's stressful work. It needs to be better remunerated but it also needs to be a better environment– it needs to be more staff friendly. The ratios that they work in are pretty difficult if you keep them to the minimum standards.

## 6.7 ADDRESSING THE 'GAP' AT 2-3 YEARS

Several participants spoke of a gap in services and attention that existed for 2-3 year olds compared to the health focus in the first 12 months and the preschool commencing at 4 year. It was perceived as a potential leverage point.

i6: A lot of greater focus has to be on the zero to three and a lot of focus also has to be on the five to eight year olds. We're really underselling the sector to only talk about that year before formal schooling.

i25: I think there's a gap really from one to three or four depending where children are either in childcare or they're at home... I think what you'll find is for some of the most vulnerable children their vulnerability increases substantially in that one to three or one to four year period... we know quite early a large number of the kids who are going to be vulnerable and we know quite early there are various ways that we can identify those families and those children, particularly that one to three gap where I think lots of those more vulnerable kids get behind. I think we need to have a strong policy view about what would be on offer. How would we think about what is on offer to those children and families in a more proactive sense from Government and how do we do that? This is where we get into the age old debate about universalism and targeting...I think we need a mix but I'm not a big fan of putting all the money into more universal because I think the average middle class person benefits enormously from that and many of the most vulnerable don't benefit nearly enough for the size. And Government says 'but we've just invested millions of dollars and you're telling us you still need more for these people?' So I think we need a more targeted approach for a bunch of kids. It might well be just really good subsidised child care options which of course aren't particularly on the table at the moment... I think we should have ways to more actively monitor access for kids in that one to three space and I think we should have more levers to press with parents to proactively encourage certain sorts of behaviours.

i28: It's really a patchwork quilt of stuff that's mainly for four year olds, sometimes for three year olds much less for anything younger. Maybe with a bit of support more at the health end for the first six months through maternal child health, but from six months through to three years, not much at all and when it is there's not much quality.

i29: I think that from my perspective the gaps that we might have is between for example, if someone gets the home visiting service for 18 months, we see them and we think this family needs a bit of support to get them through for whatever reason, if they get that and then we don't see the child until they go to kindergarten – I think there's an area there.



## 6.8 ENGENDERING TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

Interviewees commented on the difficult but essential task of building trust when working with communities. It was seen as a crucial ingredient in successfully engaging families and building participation.

i9: When I look into some of my communities and the women will say sure, access. You know, we've combined care and put a non-government provider close. But the reason why those kids aren't accessing is I'm too ashamed to bring them to school, because I've got my black eye. Really big issues. But there's got to be a trust, too. There's got to be trust to know that. So if you localise it and the trust between all of the players at a local level in some of the areas that are -- you know, have a whole lot of challenges in them, then trust is a really big thing... You know, it's not the service. It's actually the social underpinning fabric of why things are like they are in a particular context. Having the trust to be able to listen and learn from women in the community about the underlying reasons for why we have issues -- it's a really big thing for them to come forward and share it with you.

i11: It's where the services are either perceived not to be there or suspicious in the minds of others that the services tend to be not as effective. I think that's the key area for any policy person, particularly in a bureaucracy, is how do you give enough confidence to a community to say that their children are the most important thing that we have as a resource and that as a society through these bureaucracies and other organisations that we can make a difference if we all play on the same team?... To build the trust you've got to have strong relationships but for that to happen you've got to have belief that you can make the difference. That's a very difficult thing for a policy person to line up because you're relying very much on the workforce understanding the direction and that when they go into these communities commit to it day in and day out to make that difference.

i29: I think delivering the messages in ways that are not threatening and not stigmatising to parents is really important. I think providing comfortable places for mums and dads to come where they can receive those messages without feeling like I've come here because I'm a crap parent... I think the personalities and the people delivering the messages are really important. Their background, their attitude is really important.

i34: We went to about eight different communities, each one had the exact same urban myth about the preschool where there was some bruising on a child, no one actually knew the family but this urban myth had proliferated around the bruising. It was actually birthmarks but misinterpreted as bruising and the child welfare came and they took the child and the child was never seen again - that urban myth which makes families really scared about asking someone for help. And where there were places where you could ask for help like a parent helpline for example, families just didn't know about it. They just didn't know that there was a thing that you could ring to just ask for a bit of support or to get linked into something into the community or just to discuss something.

## 7 CONCLUSION

These interviews show that there is a widespread awareness that the early years of a child's life have a profound impact on their future health, development, learning and wellbeing. They also show that the goal of reducing the proportion of children identified as developmentally vulnerable is widely shared. Linked to this was the desire to help children that are disadvantaged realise their full potential. This was at least partly driven by the recognition that, while improvements have been made and the majority of children are doing well, Australia is not performing as well as it could. The failure of the system to help vulnerable children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds was of particular concern. This is in the context of the number of policies, programs, strategies and investments into ECD being at its highest point ever in

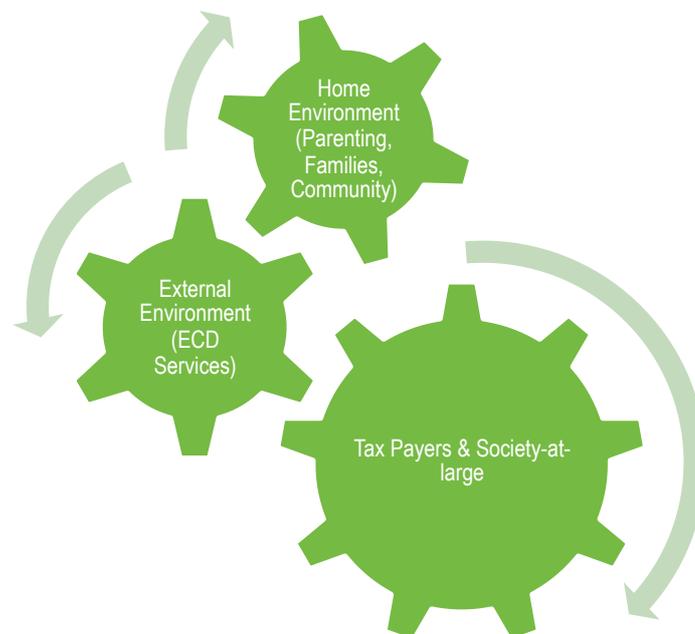


Australia's history. This is also in spite of what seems to be a shared understanding of what we need to do at a technical level to deliver better outcomes for Australian children.

The problem seems to be an inability to act on what we know and where we want to get to. This is partly because, as is evident from many of the comments above, there are no silver bullets or easy fixes. Changing the system is tough and takes patience. It also requires action at the individual, organisation, and system levels. To quote one interviewee "there are no simple things you can do – otherwise they would've been done very, very quickly, a long time ago".

The good news is that, despite the many challenges raised, there were also many concrete suggestions of possible solutions. Framed very simply, proposals to improve the system can be thought of in three ways, each reinforcing the other:

1. The tax payer and society-at-large (such as greater public debate and awareness on the importance of ECD)
2. Cohesion in the external environment (including ECD services such as early childhood education, learning, care, health, child protection and out-of-home care)
3. Capacity in the home environment (including parenting, families and community)



## 7.1 THE TAX PAYER AND SOCIETY-AT-LARGE

At the tax payer / society-at-large level, there was a desire to see society **valuing the role of families and the importance of early childhood development for its own sake** (not just for economic reasons). This was driven by a desire to see early childhood development become the 'norm'. For example:

If I could click my fingers I would love to see the federal Government announcing a really cohesive plan to make this a national priority and something that's systematised to a degree that it doesn't rely on a one off amazing principal somewhere or something like that, it should be something that's the norm.

One rationale is that such values would generate a willingness on behalf of tax payers to support the actions that are needed in the 'in-home' and 'out-of-home' services contexts. In particular, tax payer support would be crucial to ensuring the greater affordability and accessibility of out-of-home services.



There was also an assumption (or hope) that greater tax payer (and voter) support would potentially also facilitate a willingness on behalf of governments to support alternative funding arrangements of the sector that promote greater cohesion (and less adverse competition), as well as greater resources to pay for qualified and trained staff. **Moving to higher paid & better qualified staff** was seen as a solution in itself – with the hope that this would mean staff would have greater capacity to adopt new approaches and innovations. For example:

If you're thinking about having a magic wand to wave and what would early childhood education and care look like, it would be a vibrant, agile, fully qualified workforce.

In order to better communicate to wider society the values of ECD, the common view was that there needs to be a greater shared narrative and common language across the ECD system. On **creating a shared narrative and common language**, interviewees referenced previous national campaigns related to smoking, sunscreen, immunisation and drink driving. For example:

I think it's a discussion and a conversation which needs to be borne out in the public, in the press, in what we hear politicians say, in what information gets given to parents when they walk home from the hospital with their babies...It's probably too much to draw an analogy with immunisation, but there's a broad acceptance of the value of immunisation in the community; certainly not universal, and that's probably a good thing as well, but the whole system is geared towards encouraging parents to get their kids immunised. I mean if we could do the same thing with early learning, personally I think that would be fantastic.

## 7.2 COHESION IN THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT (ECD SERVICES)

In terms of out-of-home services, the most significant challenge appears to be the degree of fragmentation amongst different types of services and organisations in the system. The common view was that there needs to be much more cohesion and integration in the provision of services, with less territorialism between different organisations and disciplines and much better ways of working together. On **finding ways of working better together**, there was a common view that short-term funding cycles and the need to constantly compete for funds promoted competition at the expense of collaborative endeavours. For example:

We would like to see a system in which organisations and individuals within them are supported and are trained and their capability has grown and their skill set is expanded to encompass this space of collaboration so that they actually have the basic tools on how to go about it, so to break that chain of competitive bid funding. Then to also really have an agreed focus that we all work together on the same shared social outcomes for kids zero to eight.

It was thought that greater cohesion would potentially help in **addressing the 'gap' at 2-3 years**, when many children miss out on required ECD services, as well as what needs to be a more seamless transition to school. Solutions proposed included free access to external ECD services for all children, regardless of the occupation or 'worthiness' of their parents. For example:

If I was king for a day I would absolutely start with giving a commitment that every three and four year old child had free access to quality kindy. So two years of kindy and on the same, when I say free access, on exactly the same grounds now that we guarantee every child free and secular education in schools.

## 7.3 CAPACITY IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

In the home, the biggest issue was the capacity of parents, families and communities to provide a positive and nurturing environment for their children. There was a view that creating this capacity could be achieved by raising the awareness of parents of the importance of ECD. This would also help address the issue of the gap in ECD at 2-3 years, if parents



new that their children needed to be accessing external ECD services by that age. The suggestion was that ECD service providers need to work with parents in a non-threatening environment to develop the skills required for appropriate parenting. On **building the capacity of parents**, interviews spoke about recognising the crucial role of parents and creating programs that help engage parents rather than alienating them. For example:

I think we've got to have our services geared not just to providing high quality services for the children when they're not with their parents, but also supporting parents to provide the best environments they can.

Delivering this was also thought to require **engendering trust and engagement at the community level**. One suggestion for achieving this was to further devolve ECD responsibilities to communities and to empower them to manage their own service delivery. Creating capacity at the community level across the system would overcome the need to scale up or down approaches, something which has been a struggle for many public and private sector service providers. For example:

If I could be boss for the day, I'd be boss of DSS and I would say right, local government, state government, let's set up local coalitions to advise us on where the money should go, and then we fund communities, it's locally owned, locally managed and they come up with strategic plans and we fund them to do the strategic planning process and fund them to come up with common agendas. That's utopia in my books. One solution doesn't fit all, as we know, in communities. They're complex problems and need local solutions.

In terms of the **blindspots** identified, they largely related to the home environment (economic inequality; mental health; Foetal Alcohol Syndrome; linking in with services provided for parents; child neglect). Overcoming these blindspots would be helped both by building the capacity of parents and families, as well as stronger more cohesive out of home services that do not let child fall between the cracks in the system. This is in turn is of course driven by society-at-large accepting and valuing the importance of both ECD and families.

A lot of the suggestions for improving outcomes for children are hypotheses rather than guaranteed solutions. And the system is adaptive and complex. This makes **providing stronger evidence and evaluation** a priority. For this, suggestions included learning from existing Australian case studies and linking practice and evidence more strongly.

We want some Australian examples, that's what we want...If that opportunity came forward I would say let's look at what's working really well. Let's look at some examples, case studies of really good practice in different context, what's the shared learning out of those and how would we capture that?

In conclusion, interviewees both recognised many of the complexity and challenges in the ECD system as well as the potential to work differently in the future. There was awareness that shifting the system is beyond the capacity of any single organisation and that business as usual is unlikely to dramatically improve outcomes for children. What this means is that individuals and organisations in the ECD system need to find ways to get off the hamster wheel, take the time and space to identify improvements to the overall system and then make them happen. This isn't just about specific project or programs but also the underlying mental models, systemic structures, and human behaviours that drive the results we collectively achieve.

It is hoped that this synthesis report, with its diversity of perspectives, experiences and knowledge, provides one such means of reframing, reflection and stepping off the hamster wheel. It is but a small part of what we hope is a wider effort to shift the system and do things differently in the future.



## ANNEX: INTERVIEWEES (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

**Greg Antcliffe**, Director, Professional Practice, The Benevolent Society

**Prof Fiona Arney**, Director, Australian Centre for Child Protection, South Australia

**Prof Deb Brennan**, Deputy Director, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales

**Rachel Browne**, Social Affairs Reporter for Fairfax Media

**Dr Michele Bruniges AM**, Director General, Department of Education and Communities, New South Wales

**Gill Callister**, Secretary, Department of Human Services, Victoria

**Ian Dixon**, Principal, DIXON Partnering Solutions

**Dr Eric Dommers**, A/Manager, Research and Policy, Early Years, Brotherhood of St Laurence

**Hon. John Elferink MLA**, Minister for Children and Families, Northern Territory

**Jo Ferrie**, Manager Social Investment, Woodside Energy Ltd

**Nicola Forrest**, CEO, Minderoo Foundation

**Anne Hampshire**, Head of Research and Advocacy, The Smith Family

**Steve Hawkins**, Chairman, Advisory Council for the Benevolent Society

**Garry Hewitt**, A/Executive Director, Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning, Department of Education, Western Australia

**Ross Hughes**, Executive Officer, Aboriginal Early Childhood Support and Learning Inc

**Frank Hytten**, CEO, Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

**Diane Jackson**, CEO, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

**Megan Keyes**, Manager, Translation and Knowledge Exchange, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital

**Rob Koczkar**, CEO, Social Ventures Australia

**Dr Michelle Lucas**, former Director, Intercultural Leadership & remoteFOCUS, Desert Knowledge Australia

**Prof Shelley Mallett**, General Manager of Research and Policy, Brotherhood of St Laurence

**Hayley Martin**, Minderoo Foundation

**Jane Meyer Tucker**, CEO, Good Beginnings

**Jan Nicholson**, Inaugural Roberta Holmes Professorial Chair, Transition to Contemporary Parenthood Program, Judith Lumley Centre, La Trobe University

**Prof Frank Oberklaid**, Director, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital

**Samantha Page**, CEO, Early Childhood Australia

**Colin Pettit**, Secretary, Department of Education, Tasmania

**Hon. Jennifer Rankine MP**, Minister for Education and Child Development, South Australia

**Jenny Riley**, Head of Community Impact, United Way Australia

**Prof Sven Silburn**, Director, Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research

**Gabrielle Sinclair**, Deputy Director-General, Early Childhood Education and Care, Queensland

**James van Smeerdijk**, Partner, PwC

**Cathy Taylor**, Deputy Director-General for Child Family and Community Services, Queensland

**Angela Webb**, CEO, The Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat, New South Wales

**Dr Margy Whalley**, Director, Pen Green Research, Development and Training Base and Centre for Children and their Families, Corby, United Kingdom