

## The Early Years Commitment

# Start Strong Sector Consultations

Summary Report: Community Preschool Services - September 2022

### The Department of Education (the Department) engaged ARTD to consult with Community Preschool Services (CPS) on proposed changes to Start Strong including the implementation of new Affordable Preschool funding.

Expressions of interest were requested from services to participate, and different service types from a range of locations were selected for an online workshop (90 minutes) or interview (30 minutes). This is a summary of what we heard.

#### Weighting and scaling of funding

**We asked services whether the Start Strong proportionate funding model incentivises participation in 600 hours of preschool and promotes equitable access.**

We heard that it does incentivise enrolment for 600 hours, but the 600-hour model does not work for

all families who need more than two days per week, preferably at one service (e.g., children with disability, or children experiencing family trauma).

Services also want funding to continue to be based on enrolment, not on attendance.

#### Approach to spending rules

**Overall, services supported flexible spending rules rather than prescribed spending rules, although some called for guidelines about what the funding cannot be used for.**

Services want to be able to look at increasing spending

on staff qualifications and salaries to attract and retain staff and on infrastructure (buildings and environment). They are keen to save and invest surplus funds for long-term projects and being permitted to justify this later on in acquittal forms.

#### Financial year to calendar year funding cycle

**Services support the transition from a financial year to calendar year funding cycle, consistent with many of their existing internal systems.**

Views diverged about whether Start Strong payments should be in December or January.

A December payment may assist services to pay wages over the holidays and prepare for the next year.

#### Timing and method of data collection

**Following nearly three years of fee-free preschool, we are proposing to undertake a data collection to better understand fees in the community preschool sector (before fee relief is applied).**

We asked services on the timing and best ways to collect this data. Participants generally agreed there is no perfect time to collect data on fees.

On balance, a one-off fee structure data capture would be better held in early 2023 (February) rather than the end of 2022. The end of year is busy and decisions are often still being finalised for the following year. The survey should ask for overall fee structures, not by individual child. As an ongoing collection, they agree that the August Preschool Census is the best mechanism to collect this data.

## Role of Early Childhood Teachers

**Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) can have many roles, particularly in smaller services where they are also Directors and may be the only ECT on staff.**

They may develop and oversee the delivery of preschool programs and deliver the programs themselves in both small and large CPS. Filling ECT roles can be difficult, especially in regional and rural areas, including casual relief for sick leave. Lack of pay parity with primary school teachers is a key factor.

Services want high standards in early childhood education and would like to see more ECTs in the sector. If there is a change to the requirements of an ECT in the Start Strong program, services want to contribute to how we define program 'delivery by an ECT'. We need to ensure that ECTs and educators are recognised for their skills and the valuable contribution they both make to their service.

## Perspectives on mandatory Transition to School Statements

**Services want to provide professional assessments to support children, families and schools in the transition to primary school, but they have concerns about mandatory Transition to School Statements (TTSS).**

Many services (particularly in regional/ rural areas) have relationships with local primary schools and have their own transition processes. They do not want successful processes, that are inclusive of families and have a written and verbal component, replaced by a mandatory TTSS that schools may not read.

They would prefer to implement a 'transition to school collaboration' without mandating the TTSS format. Services encouraged the Department to consult with primary schools about the TTSS.

## Support for ongoing quality improvement and reflective practice

**CPS value reflective practice but their ability to engage is inhibited by staffing constraints.**

Networking opportunities and communities of practice are welcomed, as is any training that works with services to improve quality within their own context. Internal and external mentoring arrangements were highly recommended, as was supporting staff to attend professional meetings and conferences.

## The proposed Digital Hub

**The proposed Digital Hub was welcomed if it co-exists efficiently with existing data collection systems and does not create additional administrative burden.**

The extended pilot period with a diverse range of services was encouraged to ensure issues are resolved prior to a full-scale rollout. Services would like to be able to provide feedback when it is released.

## Implementation support with Affordable Preschool funding

**Supports to implement Affordable Preschool were encouraged, but prompt information prior to implementation is most important to enable services to plan for the upcoming year and update families.**

Roadshows were recommended, with webinars that enable services to have their questions answered. Recorded webinars released soon after the event are vital for services unable to attend on the day.

## Find out more

We will work with families, communities and early childhood education services as we roll out these changes, so that no child misses out.

For more information about the Early Years Commitment, visit our website, follow us on Facebook or send us an email.

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