



4 February 2026

Queensland Treasury
Queensland Government

Via email: budgetsubmissions@treasury.qld.gov.au

Re: 2026/27 Pre-Budget Submission - A focus on Foundation

Dear Treasurer and Minister Langbroek,

The Australian Childcare Alliance Queensland (ACA Qld) are pleased to share its vision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for 2026/27.

The Queensland Government has made notable progress in early childhood education, with a commitment to improving child wellbeing and developmental outcomes for kindergarten children, and reforms that have spearheaded vital child safety responses. The Crisafulli Government has been instrumental in driving much-needed change, prioritising child safety and improving the systems and programs to ensure children have the best start in life.

In 2025, the ECEC sector experienced a remarkable wave of reforms, investigations, and policy shifts at both local and national levels. Driven by genuine concerns about child safety, affordability, and workforce sustainability. Each inquiry, review, and legislative change significantly transformed how early learning services operate across Australia.

The In Plain Sight Review makes clear that child sexual abuse in early childhood settings was not the result of individual failure alone, but of fragmented systems, under-resourced workforces, weak prevention capability, with an absence of integrated intelligence below the criminal threshold.

The Review explicitly cautions against transactional or compliance-only responses, calling instead for prevention embedded into everyday practice, workforce capability and wellbeing, early detection and early intervention and organisational safeguards.

While all these reforms share a common objective of improving outcomes for children and families, their cumulative impact has placed significant pressure on services, early childhood educators/teachers, service leaders and approved providers. The pace, breadth and interaction of these reforms underscore the need to ensure the system remains safe and sustainable with a prioritisation of a valued workforce.

ACA Qld's 2026/27 Budget asks that these recommendations be directly designed and operationalised in collaboration with the ECEC system, and in consideration of the efforts implemented nationally, to prioritise early intervention and workforce capability.

The Queensland early years system can achieve significant gains, with critical investment in children aged 0-3. Our previous ACA Qld Pre-Budget Paper and subsequent advocacies outlined the importance of early intervention, which the Crisafulli Government will achieve through the Healthy Kindy Kids initiative.



This program will provide greater support to children and families, ensuring their developmental needs are identified and addressed as a core component of wellbeing and school readiness.

The ACA Qld greatly appreciates its relationship with the Queensland government and the Department's Early Childhood Education and Care team. Together, we have successfully co-designed and delivered policies and initiatives that reflect the lived experiences and needs of children, families, and the sector.

We thank you for considering this budget paper and look forward to designing the right ECEC system for Queenslanders, advancing the education of our youngest and supporting children achieve their best start in life.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M Fitzsimmons", written in a cursive style.

Majella Fitzsimmons
President

Table of Contents

A focus on foundation: Queensland’s youngest	4
Babies and Toddlers Thrive Fund	5
Two Years of Kindergarten as a Child-Safety Measure.....	7
Qld Small Businesses & Workforce Needs	9
Mandatory teacher registration in Queensland.....	11
National Issues	12
About Us.....	12

2026/27 Pre-Budget Submission

A focus on foundation: Queensland's youngest

ECEC services are often safe, accessible environments where families can receive critical support. The ongoing national and state child safety commitments, through policy and legislative amendments, will see more early learning services achieve the safety practices and wellbeing protocols that many early learning providers already apply.

ECEC is especially valuable for children and families facing disadvantages, where services commonly act as community hubs, offering support for individuals affected by domestic violence, financial vulnerability and psychological distress. Services connect families with health and parenting information, or with housing or disability services and offer protective factors inherent in quality ECEC. Many services are integrating wrap-around supports, as evidenced in National Quality Framework ratings.

The In Plain Sight Review emphasises that early childhood environments are frontline protective systems, not just education settings, and that strong relationships, supervision and consistency are important measures to child safety and strengthened wellbeing.

Queensland, and much of the country have invested heavily in four-year-olds through access measures to preschool and kindergarten programs. In addition, Queensland's Healthy Kindy Kids checks provide vital screening for vision, hearing, speech, and language for this age cohort to support school readiness.

Extracurricular and enrichment programs are disproportionately targeted at kindergarten-aged children, and for this reason, ACA Qld asks the Queensland Government to place focus on its foundation, supporting Queensland's youngest.

Our budget asks the Government to address capability and program gaps, which will curb delayed early intervention, reduce workforce burnout, and bolster inclusion outcomes, with a decrease in downstream demand on health, disability, and child protection systems.

We seek the Government to strengthen the sector's capacity and practice in responding to children's needs by expanding the delivery of best-practice, accredited programs in neuroscience, developmental and cognitive psychology to support child well-being, along with parent knowledge and practices.

There is more to gain for Queensland children and families by expanding the existing free-kindy program to include three-year-olds, with fee relief that reflects common workforce arrangements.

We seek the government's acknowledgement that small to medium-sized, family-owned ECEC operators are deeply embedded in their local communities. Their reputation relies on community trust, and their business sustainability depends on consistently providing safe, high-quality ECEC. Government support can be achieved through proper ECEC planning, preventing oversupply to protect smaller owner-operators and ensuring that planning targets locations where ECEC is needed.

Babies and Toddlers Thrive Fund

ACA Qld member services are reporting a growing number of toddlers presenting with developmental delay, behavioural dysregulation and early indicators of neurodevelopmental difference.

While diagnosis may not always be formalised at three years of age, early identification of risk and developmental vulnerability is feasible. By three years of age, most children have reached a stage at which developmental patterns are sufficiently established to distinguish typical variation from emerging delay. Queensland could achieve greater educational and societal outcomes through protective and wellbeing promotion measures for babies and toddlers, with support given to their parents and early childhood educators.

Queensland has an opportunity at the intersection of health, parenting, and early development to engage families during the period of highest parental anxiety and developmental plasticity, and to establish support that operates parallel to and integrated with ECEC.

This opportunity arises through a focus on age and time in history. Education and care for children under three now differ significantly from those of past generations, as societal changes have driven a rapid shift towards shared care between home and external settings and learning in neuroscience, developmental and cognitive psychology, and attachment practices.

Queensland families would benefit from additional support through the establishment of system navigator - mothercraft nurses, piloting a coordinated model that supports families with healthy parenting, identifies developmental and safeguarding concerns earlier, and strengthens child safety through shared oversight and capability working in parallel with the ECEC sector.

There is an opportunity for the government to solidify investment to extend the reach of critical programs, build on current government investments in Autism Queensland to include three-year-olds, and offer more sector support through its Early Years Inclusion Services.

Budget ask 1: *Infants and Toddlers Thrive Fund*

Establish an Infants and Toddlers Thrive Fund comprising three core areas, each connected and essential to providing the very best start in life for Queensland infants, children, and parents.

a) Building Foundations, Early Years Wellbeing

Core age-group: 0-5 year olds

Deliver the Wings to Fly™, Pathways to Resilience program to all ECEC centres, prioritising high-need SEIFA regions and sub-populations with low AEDC data. This program supports educators and parents in developing the knowledge and skills they need to deliver vital support for children's social and emotional wellbeing from birth to six years old.

It is regarded as one of the best professional development and capacity-building workshops in the sector, but it is not afforded to many.

b) Mothercraft Nurses as System Navigators

Core age-group: 0-2 year olds

Establish a Queensland Early Years Navigation Pilot, embedding mothercraft nurses for families and children under two, as formal system navigators working in structured partnership with ECEC services.

The pilot would operate through each Department of Education's regional offices as a referral pathway from ECEC to specialised child and family support.

There would be three core functions of mothercraft nurses:

1. Shared development and connection made by ECEC services to further support families
2. Provide parental advice and individualised support
3. Establish escalation pathways that focus on early identification, child safety, and clinical connections.

c) Expand Autism Queensland's Early Years Inclusion Services

Core age-group: 3 year olds

Expand Autism Queensland Early Years Inclusion Services, to provide resources that empower and upskill educators, with supplementary resources provided to parents and families to support three-year-old children.

ACA Qld members report positive engagement with Autism Queensland, which supports approved kindergartens to be inclusion-ready for children with additional and complex needs. ACA Qld is raising awareness and connecting members with Autism Queensland services, but note there is an important cohort of three-year old children who would benefit from this integral support.

Important gaps can be remedied in the Babies and Toddlers Thrive Fund:

- Developmental divergence and early risk identification
- Coaching and escalation pathways
- Resilience and self-regulation
- Strategies for trauma-sensitive environments
- Complex family engagement



Two Years of Kindergarten as a Child-Safety Measure

For nearly a decade, including at the 2025 federal election, the Australian Childcare Alliance (National) has advocated for a series of commitments focused on equity, with a clear vision: a nation that protects its children protects its future.

The 2025 abuse allegations have prompted a succession of state and federal reviews, further exposing systemic failings in regulatory oversight and information-sharing practices. These failures have not only damaged children and families but have also undermined trust in the sector.

The ECEC sector should have no room for providers or individuals who do not prioritise the health, wellbeing, and safety of children in their practice.

The overwhelming majority of ECEC providers deliver a profound, positive impact on children's health and safety. In fact, for many families, ECEC services serve as an integral and accessible source of guidance and support. This support is particularly vital for families experiencing disadvantage, where early learning services become safe environments for those affected by domestic violence, while offering pathways to health care, housing, disability or other essential support.

To ensure child safeguarding practices are upheld in Queensland, ACA Qld delivered Safe Spaces, Strong Voices, which supported over 1,000 early childhood education and care organisations across Queensland in creating environments that comply with the Child Safe Organisations Act 2024 (the Act).

ACA Qld delivered 11 face-to-face roundtable sessions, seven webinars, and produced and provided resources to support diverse service styles and geographical locations in meeting their obligations under the Act. After our sessions, 89% of roundtable participants and 74% of webinar participants stated that they have more knowledge and felt more confident about implementing the Child Safe Standards and the Universal Principle.

100% of all participants requested similar sessions to support the implementation of the Reportable Conduct Scheme in July 2026, which ACA Qld will self-fund to establish and deliver to the sector in Quarter 2, 2026.

As the sector and systems strengthen child-safe practices, Queensland remains the only major Australian jurisdiction without a funded three-year-old kindergarten program. Children who miss out on early learning before four-year-old kindergarten are more likely to start school developmentally behind, particularly in language, self-regulation, and social skills.

These disparities are especially significant for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and become more challenging and expensive to address once formal schooling starts. While Queensland's four-year-old kindergarten program has delivered strong participation and school readiness outcomes, evidence indicates that a single year of kindergarten is insufficient to fully address early developmental vulnerability.

Introducing two years of kindergarten will lead to better outcomes for Queensland's unseen and underrepresented children. Children should be able to access high-quality early childhood education in their communities and in residential care settings, strengthening their life trajectory towards a brighter future.

In addition, the current four-year-old kindergarten hours (15 hours) do not reflect the realities of workforce participation or children's developmental needs. Moving to 30-hour kindergarten for four-year-olds would require an investment of a similar scale to the existing Free Kindy program, while extending 10–15 hours of fee relief to three-year-olds would require an additional \$120–\$225 million per year, subject to uptake.

Budget ask 2: *Offer two years of fee-relief kindergarten*

Expand Free Kindy to include 15 hours of fee-relief for three-year-olds and increase four-year-old fee-relief kindergarten to 30 hours.

Introducing two years of kindergarten will result in greater outcomes for Queensland's unseen and underrepresented children. Children should be able to access high-quality early childhood education in their communities and within residential care settings.

Access to two years of kindergarten strengthens a child's life trajectory toward a brighter future, with an increase in fee-relief hours reflective of workforce participation needs.

Qld Small Businesses & Workforce Needs

Small to medium-sized, family-owned ECEC operators are deeply embedded in their local communities. Their reputation relies on community trust, and business sustainability depends on consistently providing safe, high-quality ECEC.

Owner-operator providers have greater proximity to daily practice, continuity of staff, and direct oversight of recruitment, induction, and compliance. These practices are unique to their operating context and enable faster identification and management of risks related to child safety, educator conduct, and regulatory breaches.

Small owner-operators make up a large share of the market: 79% of approved providers operate a single service, and 1% operate 25 or more services. Without considering this differentiation, Australia risks undermining the benefits of smaller private service providers as a wave of smaller providers exits the market.

This is a direct consequence of the growing unease among operators who face daily challenges amid negative discourse, financial reform uncertainty, and increased compliance requirements. Their departure is a significant loss to the communities they serve and their uniqueness within the market.

To protect smaller and medium-sized owner-operators and our diverse ECEC market, there must be consideration and documented differentiation that separates small and medium owner-operators from internationally owned operators, and effort to support their viability.

Our members, who are predominantly small- and medium-sized business operators, grapple with oversupply. No level of government has made any commitment to consider the impacts of geographically clustering early learning services and the unique challenges this poses for small and medium Australian-owned and operated providers.

The workforce shortage exacerbates the issue, leading to competition to attract staff. Smaller operators cannot compete with larger providers and face commercial uncertainty. The introduction of Development Approval-mandated needs assessments would require the ECEC developer to pay the Government to undertake demographic mapping that applies strategic thinking and represents proximity boundaries to other ECEC providers.

Budget ask 3: *Support Queensland-delivered ECEC*

Embed infrastructure policies that avoid concentrated clusters of ECEC services and ensure business viability and ECEC growth in areas with the greatest need.

The sector needs data-driven infrastructure planning to prevent ECEC clusters and to protect small and family-operated ECEC providers.

The purpose is not to inhibit new centres from opening, but to prevent the obstruction of existing services' ability to access staff, operate at the highest child-to-educator ratio, and prevent an oversupply in areas where the State needs services elsewhere.

We seek the Queensland Government to promote and advocate to the Federal Government for the expansion and extension of the Paid Practicum Subsidy as soon as possible to meet existing workforce needs.



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Mandatory teacher registration in Queensland

In late 2025, the Queensland Government released a consultation paper proposing to mandate Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) registration.

Our submission, shared in December 2025, affirms support for professional recognition and child safety actions in principle but finds that the proposed model of mandatory ECT registration is not yet fit for purpose in the Queensland ECEC context.

In particular, the proposed framework extends a school-centric registration model applied to fit within the ECEC setting. This includes failing to recognise the significant risks arising from the cumulative regulatory burden and misaligned sequencing with current reforms and treating ECEC providers as employing authorities under the QCT framework. This would impose school-equivalent compliance obligations that smaller operators cannot adequately fulfil.

Without significant modification, the current model risks undermining workforce stability by failing to recognise the sector's year-round delivery model, mixed staffing structures, the prevalence of single-ECT services, and reliance on small and medium-sized providers.

A central finding from our survey of over 180 educators and service leaders is that workforce capacity and operational realities have been underestimated in the implementation and achievement of mandatory ECT registration through a mentoring program.

Evidence from ACA Qld's peer mentoring program shows that even well-designed, flexible mentoring models fail under current staffing pressures, limited non-contact time, and burnout. Without funded release time, accessible mentors, and ECEC-specific standards and exemplars, the transition from provisional to full registration is considered unlikely for many teachers, thereby increasing the risk to the sector's workforce.

We propose clear policy guardrails for ECT registration in Queensland, and to achieve the desired outcomes of ECT registration in Queensland, advocate for funding that:

1. Establishes an ECEC-specific registration pathway (either within QCT or through a dedicated ECEC body) and, within this process, adopts strength-based language; and
2. Integrates ECT registration reforms with broader workforce and kindergarten expansion strategies, and ensures any registration model is properly funded, staged, and contextualised.

Without these safeguards, the submission concludes that the costs and risks to workforce viability, service continuity, and access outweigh the anticipated benefits.

National Issues

The National ACA pre-budget paper represents the voices of over 3,900 services across Australia and focuses on four interdependent priorities including child safety, inclusion and additional needs, parental choice and a mixed-market system, and workforce stability.

Understanding the national context and needs of non-aligned providers supports discussion in important forums such as the Education Ministers Meetings. ACA Qld strongly recommends that the Queensland Government consider the National pre-budget paper as a blueprint for ECEC advocacy in 2026, highlighting Queensland's needs on national matters. The full version of the paper is available [here](#).

Among the budget asks within the 4 priorities, there has been a standout need sought by Queensland members:

1. Implement the delivery of the comprehensive, interactive National Educator Register to support employment practices that build a child-safe culture and environment.
2. Simplifying the applications process for inclusion support and to deliver the full recommendations made by the Productivity Commission Inquiry into ECEC on Inclusion Support.
3. Provide certainty beyond the existing Worker Retention Payment by committing to a sustainable funding model that delivers higher wages in line with the Fair Work Commission's gender-based undervaluation decision at the conclusion of the payment in 2026.
4. Extend the allocation of the Paid Practicum Subsidy program to support more Early Childhood Teachers and educators in completing the practical components required for ECEC qualifications.

About Us

The Australian Childcare Alliance Queensland is Queensland's leading peak body, advocating for the non-aligned (typically small to medium-sized, family-owned and operated) Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services.

We represent the knowledge, skills and lived experience of over 1,040 ECEC business owners who employ approximately 19,200 Early Childhood Educators/Teachers. These educators educate and care for around 209,900 children of 289,900 parents geographically dispersed across the state, from Far North Queensland, west of Mt Isa and south to the New South Wales border.