

CELEBRATING PROGRESS

APRIL 2026

MAKING THE STARTING BETTER GUARANTEE A REALITY FOR FAMILIES



Acknowledgements

CPD acknowledges the many stakeholders pursuing a better early childhood development system for Australia and their tireless efforts to achieve better outcomes for children and families. CPD particularly wishes to acknowledge the work and contribution of the Early Childhood Development Council and Steering Group in the development of the Starting Better Guarantee.

CPD is also grateful to all who have provided contributions and feedback on this document.

About the Centre for Policy Development

The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) is an independent, not-for-profit policy institute with staff in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Jakarta.

Our vision is a fair, sustainable society and wellbeing economy that serves current and future generations in Australia and Southeast Asia.

Our mission is to help create transformative systems change through practical solutions to complex policy challenges. We tackle the hard questions, working towards change that is systemic and long-term.

Through our work, we aim to contribute to governments that are coordinated, collaborative, and effective, with an eye to both the near and longer term. We strive to build a social services system that helps people and communities to thrive now and in the future, and drive shifts in policy making practice with a focus on wellbeing and sustainability rather than primarily economic growth.

CPD uses a distinctive Create-Connect-Convince method to influence government policy making.

We acknowledge and celebrate Australia's First Peoples.

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Making Australia the best place to be a child and raise a family

Raising children is the most important thing we do—not just as families, but as a society. The evidence is clear that a child’s earliest experiences establish foundations for life.

Guided by the expert advice of the Early Childhood Development Council, the Starting Better Guarantee was launched in November 2021 and brought together extensive research, consultation and evidence. The Starting Better Guarantee envisions something ambitious – a national goal to make Australia the best place to be a child and raise a family. It proposes an entitlement for all children and families to a set of high-quality, affordable and connected services in the early years on which they can rely, with additional targeted support for those who need it most.

The Guarantee is based on evidence that a robust, well-connected early childhood development (ECD) system will lift educational outcomes, tackle entrenched disadvantage, improve gender equality, boost productivity, and grow our national economic competitiveness.

Great progress has been made towards the Starting Better vision. This accomplishment is a testament to the many years of dedication, collaboration and hard work of so many across the ECD sector, philanthropy, government and academia.

We knew that it would take at least a decade of sustained effort to deliver the Guarantee in full. Halfway in, we can already celebrate significant success. By taking stock of how far we’ve come, we aim to harness momentum towards the full realisation of the Guarantee, and ensure that every young child has what they need to thrive.

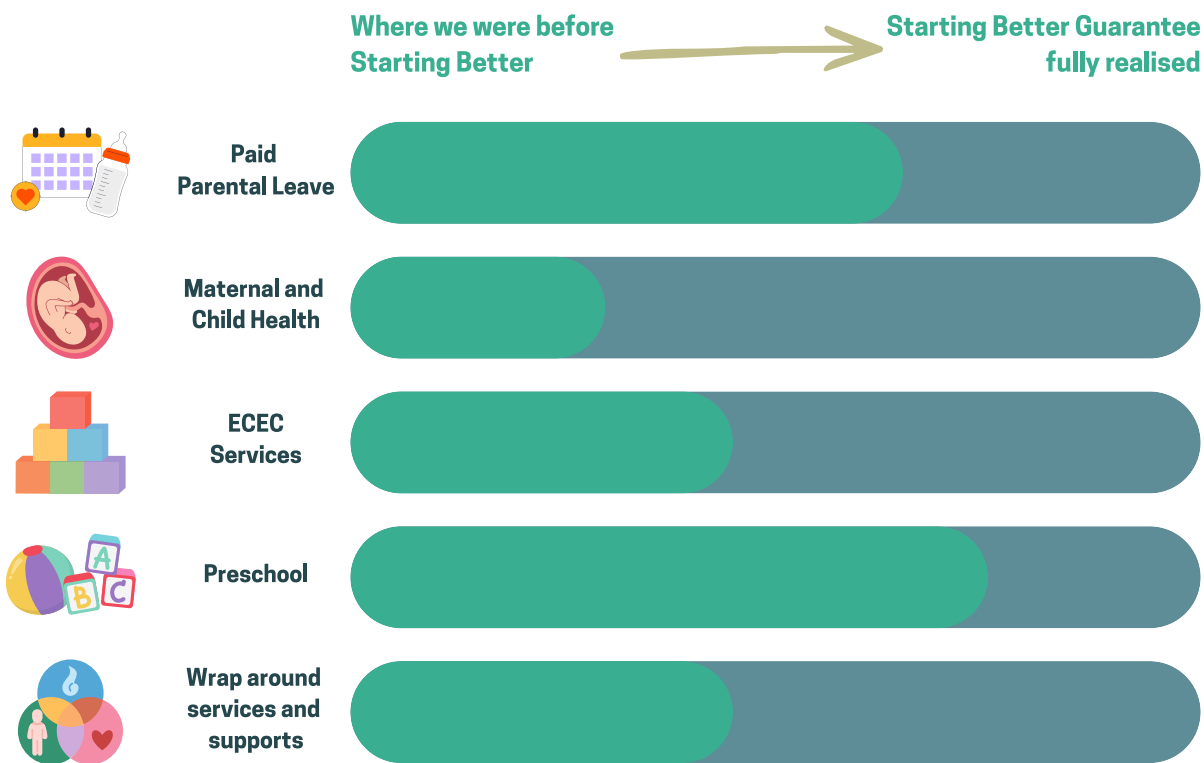
Reform is progressing and the momentum we have all built places us in an excellent position to continue advocating for the Starting Better vision.

The core elements of the Guarantee are:

- **One year of paid parental leave**, shared between partners.
- **Universal access to maternal and child health care**, consistent across all states and territories, with additional home visits for families needing extra support.
- **Three days (up to 30 hours) of free or low-cost high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) per week** as soon as families want it, with additional days for those who need it at minimal cost.
- **Three days (up to 30 hours) of free or low-cost high-quality preschool per week** for the two years before children start school, with additional days for those who need it at minimal cost.
- **A wrap around “navigator” service for families who need extra help** to find and access suitable supports, as part of integrated whole-of-family early childhood service delivery.
- **Developing better mechanisms to provide seamless support for children** from the day they are born, including more effective transitions from early learning to primary school.



Celebrating progress toward the Starting Better Guarantee



Note: This document highlights a range of key policy achievements. To maintain brevity, some updates or initiatives may not be detailed individually, though they remain vital to the success of the Guarantee.

Paid parental leave

The expansion of Paid Parental Leave to 26 weeks is a significant win for families, ensuring that parents can be home with their children in the earliest days. Momentum continues to build towards allowing both parents to take more paid parental leave and increasing entitlements.

Key reforms against the Guarantee across the last five years:

- In 2022, the Australian Government announced that the **paid parental leave scheme will be expanded to 26 weeks (six months)**. Rolled out over four years, the scheme expands by two weeks a year until reaching 26 weeks in July 2026 with families receiving around \$24,000 total. At least 20 days are reserved for each caregiver, while single parents can claim the full entitlement. It also increases the amount of leave that parents can take at the same time, from two to four weeks.
- In March 2024, the government announced it would **pay superannuation on government funded Parental Leave Pay**. Under the new law, eligible parents with babies born or adopted on or after 1 July 2025 will be paid superannuation, based on 12% of their Parental Leave Pay. The first payments will be made from July 2026.



Maternal and child health

Recognition of the health systems' foundational role in supporting healthy development in the early years continues to grow. However, efforts are still needed to create national consistency across child and family health services, including a more seamless and easy to navigate path across the range of health services families and children interact with.

Key reforms against the Guarantee across the last five years:

- **In 2025, Thriving Kids was announced.** With an initial \$2 billion in funding over five years from the Australian Government, the program will deliver supports for children outside the NDIS. It is intended to identify and support children with developmental delay and/or autism with low to moderate support needs, and their families, carers and kin. It is an opportunity to establish additional mainstream and community supports nationally for children aged eight and under with additional developmental needs, and their families.
- **State and territory health departments have launched health and development strategies,** including A Great Start for All Queensland Children, the First 2000 Days Framework in New South Wales and the Best Start for Canberra's Children Strategy in the Australian Capital Territory. A similar framework is currently in development in Western Australia.
- **South Australia committed to two additional health checks in 2021,** at 12 months and 3 years and introduced the Early Years SA app, containing information for parents, a spot to record growth and development milestones and reminders for development checks, immunisations and dental checks.
- **In New South Wales, Brighter Beginnings launched in 2022,** funding health and development checks in preschool settings, expanding Aboriginal Child and Family Centres across the state, expanding nurse home visiting programs through Sustaining NSW Families, trialling a digital baby book and making pregnancy family conferencing available to more parents across New South Wales.
- **In Queensland, Putting Queensland Kids First launched in 2024** and included \$65.5 million to roll out nurse home visiting statewide.





Early childhood education and care and preschool

Significant progress has been made in designing and delivering universal ECEC in Australia over the past five years. The announcement of the Prime Minister's ambition to deliver universal early childhood education and care as his legacy marked a turning point in ECEC reform. This is coupled with significant expansion of 3- and 4-year-old preschool across states and territories.

Key reforms against the Guarantee across the last five years:

- **Investing \$4.6 billion over 4 years from 2022-23 to make ECEC more affordable:** This investment lifted the Child Care Subsidy rate from 85% to 90% for families earning less than \$80 000, with subsidy rates then tapering down as income increases.
- **Removing the Activity Test and legislating the '3 Day Guarantee':** Parents no longer have to work or study to be eligible for childcare subsidies. Every child is now guaranteed at least 3 days of subsidised ECEC.
- **Growing supply through the Building Early Education Fund (BEEF):** The \$1 billion fund provides capital funding to build new and expand existing ECEC services in areas of need, including the outer suburbs and regional Australia.
- Delivering the **ECEC Workforce Retention Payment with a \$3.6 billion investment**, providing a 15% wage increase for ECEC workers over two years from 2024 until November 2026. This was followed by the **Fair Work Commission releasing its provisional decision on gender-based underevaluation** which recommended up to a 27.8% increase to the Children's Services Award in April 2025.

- **Undertaking the Early Education Service Delivery Price project:** The government is working to determine the reasonable cost of delivering safe and high quality ECEC. The findings from this work will inform the government's decision-making about the pathway toward universal ECEC.
- Continuing to build the evidence base through the ACCC Inquiry, Productivity Commission Inquiry and South Australian Royal Commission.
- In 2025, Commonwealth, state and territory governments committed to a number of new safety and quality measures, including strengthening regulatory responses to poor quality ECEC service delivery, and enhancing deterrence through tightening entry gateways to the ECEC sector, a National Educator Register, mandatory national child safety training, and improvements to the monitoring and regulation of Working with Children Checks.



Preschool reform agreement

Supported by billions of dollars in both Commonwealth, state and territory funding, all states and territories currently deliver at least 15 hours a week (600 hours a year) of 4-year-old preschool in the year before a child starts school. Some states have started rolling out free 3-year-old preschool programs.

Key reforms (in addition to 15 hours of 4-year-old preschool) against the Guarantee across the last five years:

- **South Australia:** 15 hours per week of 3-year-old preschool will be rolled out from 2026. Preschool Plus will deliver 30 hours per week of 3- and 4-year-old preschool for children who need it most by 2032 and is accompanied by the Preschool Boost program, which provides a range of additional programs to 3-year-old preschool services to address developmental vulnerability.
- **New South Wales:** The Start Strong for Long Day Care program started in 2023 and allows access of 600 hours of preschool in the two years before starting school (for 3- and 4-year-olds).
- **Tasmania:** The Early Learning for Three Year Olds initiative aims to increase access to early learning. Trial sites commenced operation in 2025, with further sites underway in areas where there is low or no capacity of existing ECEC services.
- **Victoria:** Free 3- and 4-year-old kinder was introduced in 2022, offering between 5 to 15 hours per week of free 3-year-old preschool which will increase to 15 hours per week by 2029. 15 hours per week of free 4-year-old preschool increased to 30 hours per week from 2025. This begins the transition of 4-year-old kinder to 'Pre-Prep', which will be available across the state by 2032 and commenced in 2025 in six local government areas.
- **Northern Territory:** Children in very remote areas can access 3-year-old preschool.
- **Australian Capital Territory:** In 2024, 300 hours of free preschool per year was introduced for 3-year-olds.
- **Western Australia:** From 2026, five public schools in Western Australia will pilot free full-time Kindergarten, with more schools joining in 2027. This is intended to inform the expansion of full time Kindergarten in Western Australia in the future.





Wrap around services and supports

Recognition of the effectiveness of wrap around services and place-based initiatives in better delivering services to families that need them has grown significantly and is reflected in the formation of the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children (IDAC) and Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment (PLACE). The Guarantee envisioned that local approaches would be embedded within system design and work continues to grow a progressively universal and integrated system that supports all families to thrive.



Key reforms against the Guarantee across the last five years:

- **IDAC formed in 2022.** It is a 10-year collaboration between government and philanthropic partners to improve the health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families by working with communities to make long-term, intergenerational change.
- In 2024, Commonwealth and philanthropy partnered to develop **PLACE, a national, independent, not-for-profit organisation** dedicated to supporting the needs of local communities. \$19.3 million over five years from government is matched by philanthropic partners Minderoo, the Paul Ramsay Foundation, the Ian Potter Foundation, the Bryan Foundation and the Dusseldorp Forum.
- \$50 million in BEEF funding is matched by IDAC to deliver **\$100 million to help build or expand integrated and holistic early learning services** in areas of need.
- The **Office for Early Childhood Development** was established in South Australia in 2023 as a system steward, with a focus on how to integrate services, systems and data.
- **State and territory governments are increasing support for integrated and wrap around service delivery initiatives**, such as the expansion of four new child and family learning centres (CFLCs) in Tasmania in 2025 and 20 new integrated hubs in South Australia by 2032.



Realising the vision

Building on the significant progress made over the first five years of the Guarantee, there are clear reform opportunities for government to prioritise to make Australia the best place to be a child and raise a family.

Looking back at what we have been able to achieve gives a sense of hope that full realisation of the Guarantee may be in reach. This has been a collective achievement from the work of countless people over many years. But there is more work to be done.

Over the next 1- 2 years, the reform agenda should prioritise:

- Continuing to expand paid parental leave towards one full year's entitlement.
- Putting in place the architecture for an equitable, safe and high-quality universal ECEC system. This includes agreeing on clearer roles, responsibilities and governance arrangements across levels of government, prioritising provision planning and building high quality supply, and implementing funding reform to improve quality and equity.

- Agreeing on consistent outcomes for an equitable, progressively universal child and family health system in every jurisdiction. This should include endorsed national guidelines that inform developmental monitoring, and a national data collection and evaluation mechanism.
- Ensuring that all reforms embed a person and place centred approach, prioritising place-based initiatives that provide wrap around care and connect parents with the support they need.

By celebrating the enormous achievements that these changes represent, we can help maintain the momentum for reform of an early childhood development system that supports all children and families to thrive.



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