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Draft Submission on the National Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

Local Government NSW (LGNSW) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the National Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper.

LGNSW is the peak body for local government in NSW, representing all NSW general purpose councils and related entities. LGNSW facilitates the development of an effective community-based system of local government in the state.

To meet the consultation timeframe, this is a draft submission until it is reviewed and endorsed by LGNSW's Board at its next meeting, and any amendments will be forwarded in due course.

Established LGNSW positions

The LGNSW Policy Platform sets out the policy positions of LGNSW and is established through motions voted on by councils at LGNSW Annual Conferences. A resolution from the 2022 Special Conference was that Local Government NSW strengthen its support for early childhood education and care across Australia, through its formal support of the 'Thrive by Five' campaign:

That Local Government NSW formalises its support of Thrive by Five on behalf of the local government sector and their campaign to advocate for high-quality, universally accessible and affordable early learning and childcare across Australia.

In addition to being a broad campaign to make early learning childcare system high quality and universally accessible, the 'Thrive by Five' campaign also has findings¹ that the vast majority of Australians recognise that play-based learning is essential for the brain development of children between the ages of zero to five. Play-based learning takes place in many of the settings provided by local government including playgrounds, parks, local community centres and libraries.

Local government in NSW

As the level of government closest to the community, local government in NSW plays an importance role in the development of children in their first five years. Councils in NSW provide a range of direct services and social infrastructure that support children and their families in their local community. The largest proportion of children aged 0-5 years with 31.6%² of the Australian population lives within NSW and local government is best placed to directly impact early childhood outcomes in the community.

With 128 councils in NSW, over 300 Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) services are operated or coordinated by local government, including pre-school, long day care, family day care, mobile care, occasional care, vacation care and outside of school hours care. Almost half of all NSW councils operate centre-based ECEC services, and council-run ECEC services tend to be very high quality, with a greater proportion of services exceeding the National Quality Standards than for-profit services.

Many of these ECEC services cater to a high number of vulnerable families and children with disability – the types of clients often turned away from private ECEC providers. Already councils are widely valued as affordable childcare providers, offering a critical service to disadvantaged families. In rural NSW, councils are sometimes the only providers of childcare services. In an increasingly difficult economic environment, there is very real concern that some councils may be forced to withdraw from this space, leaving families without the excellent and affordable childcare services they need.

It is thus critical that local government services be eligible for all state and Commonwealth funding support for the ECEC sector, on a level playing field with all other providers. In 2020 as the COVID pandemic resulted in lockdowns, the decision of

¹ The Australian Early Learning Monitor, August 2022. [TB5-2210-PRES-ELM-National-Results.pdf](#) (thrivebyfive.org.au)

² National, state and territory population, September 2022 | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au)

the then Australian Government to exclude council ECEC services from JobKeeper eligibility placed these services at risk of closure. This was a particular concern in many regional areas where council-run services were the only provider, but impacted council services across NSW. One Sydney council estimated it would lose \$3 million over a three-month period as a result of this decision and would struggle to keep its ECEC service's doors open.

Ultimately, the NSW Government was forced to intervene with an \$82 million support package for council run services. However, this highlights the importance of ensuring council-run ECEC services operate on a level playing field with other providers, to ensure the communities that rely on them are not unfairly disadvantaged.

The pressures on the current workforce and resourcing of the ECEC sector remains an urgent issue for the ECEC sector and this needs to be reflected in the Early Years Strategy as well as broader Commonwealth policies for the early childhood outcomes.

In addition to the provision of ECEC services, NSW also has more than 360 council-run libraries and 25 mobile libraries that attract tens of millions of visits each year to both the libraries and library websites. Public libraries in NSW provide both direct services and provide social infrastructure that is important to early childhood outcomes, reaching those who may not already be in more formal learning settings. These libraries are easily accessible to community members, with more public libraries in NSW than shopping centres.

Public libraries in NSW³ already provide early childhood literacy in the community and are uniquely placed to reach children not in formal early childcare, providing library activities like 'storytime', 'baby rhyme time' and 'toddler time'. These activities are often under-recognised in policy and funding and are professionally designed early literacy sessions that promote and develop literacy acquisition for young children and provide caregivers with the opportunities, training and tools critical to their children's development.

Library early literacy outreach programs and partnerships also work with childcare educators, parenting groups, health providers and other community groups to have the widest possible community impact. Surveys of library staff show they have high

³ 'Learning Starts at the Local Library: The Role of NSW Public Libraries in Solving the State's Early Literacy Crisis' prepared by the Insight Centre for NSW Public Libraries. [Read-and-Thrive-Research-Report.pdf \(readandthrive.com.au\)](https://readandthrive.com.au/Read-and-Thrive-Research-Report.pdf)

awareness of the need to draw in and build trust with 'hard-to-reach' families who have not visited the library previously, especially for libraries serving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, refugee communities, and families experiencing intergenerational illiteracy.

Local government in NSW also provides social infrastructure and associated services directly to young children. With more than 400 public swimming and ocean pools, over 1800 community and public centres, and over 87 hectares of open space, these are key spaces that provide opportunities for both play-based learning as well as formal learning and spaces for young children and their families to connect. Providing these spaces as well as accessible key infrastructure such as footpaths means that parents and their young children can move easily and safely around the community; positively contributes to the health and wellbeing of young children and their families.

Coordination and Collaboration

As part of the 'Thrive by Five' campaign, a key issue that has been raised is that currently early childhood development is disconnected and incoherent. That there are five systems that relate to early childhood (childcare, preschool, child health, family support and child protection). The five systems are shared between Commonwealth and State/Territory government and also between ministries and departments within government.

Local governments tend to be the provider of last resort where there may be gaps in community services. Local governments tend to step in when services are essential and not being delivered efficiently due to lack of coordinated policy by State/Territory or Commonwealth. If councils didn't step in, communities would miss essential services like childcare and health. A coordinated effort from all levels of government is required to ensure that community needs, specifically younger children can be met.

LGNSW acknowledges that the National Early Years Strategy will have a Commonwealth Government focus, but the Strategy must also seek to provide for a coordinated and collaborative approach to early childhood development and remove silos across all levels of government, acknowledging the role of local government in outcomes relating to the early years. A part of this is directly acknowledging the role of and investing in local government as it has a key role in impacting the outcomes of early childhood years.

For further information, please contact Karen Rae, Senior Policy Officer – Social and Community on Karen.Rae@lgnsw.org.au or 9242 4059.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'D. Thomas', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Damian Thomas
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