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Scaling Child and Family Hubs: From special projects to system-wide integrated care for children and families experiencing disadvantage

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Abstract

Child and Family Hubs are a promising model of integrated service delivery, offering families access to education (including Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)), health and social services, and parenting guidance. They provide a place where families build relationships and connect with professionals who know them and their story, and can support them to get what they need, when they need it. Evidence shows hubs improve: school readiness and academic outcomes; service access; early identification of developmental needs; child health outcomes; and family engagement and wellbeing.

This article provides an overview of the current hubs landscape in Australia, the evidence for integrated service delivery and current policy opportunities for expansion and systematisation. While hub models exist across Australia, scaling them beyond special projects into government systems remains a challenge. Systemic implementation requires reform at all levels, including governance, regulation, funding, planning and practice. This process takes resources, skills, political will and intentionality, but ultimately delivers better outcomes for children and for taxpayers through avoiding long-term costs and better use of existing investments in the service system.

Current momentum to embed hubs within early childhood systems is building and this article outlines an ambitious 5-year agenda on how it could be taken forward. It includes case studies such as the Our Place model in Victoria and identifies policy opportunities for expansion. Key recommendations include establishing a national taskforce, aligning funding and governance across jurisdictions, supporting ACCO-led models, and introducing long-term funding and shared data frameworks to sustain integrated, place-based care. Together these developments could see a strong foundation for systemisation of hubs within our early childhood systems to improve outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage.

Keywords:

community, early childhood, early childhood education and care, integration, schooling.

Introduction

By the time children in Australia start school, nearly one-quarter are developmentally vulnerable (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024). These vulnerabilities are disproportionately higher among specific groups, with 42.5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, 34.7% of children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, and 35.8% of children living in remote and very remote areas identified as developmentally vulnerable. These inequities track forward to adulthood (Hertzman et al., 2010; O'Connor et al., 2020) and correspond with the incidence of family adversity (O'Connor et al., 2020) and the broader social determinants of health (Marmot, 2005).

Effectively meeting the diverse and holistic needs of children and families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, requires integrated responses. Multi-sector and multidisciplinary approaches that focus on early intervention and prevention are essential to addressing inequities. Single interventions alone will not create the changes required. However, our service system currently focuses more on symptoms than root causes and operates in silos. This paper provides a compelling case for government to invest urgently and ambitiously in developing and sustaining integrated early interventions approaches, such as Child and Family Hubs, embedded within our early childhood service system. This requires joint leadership and new ways of working from all actors across the system.

Child and Family Hubs support families from pregnancy to the time their children complete primary school, providing access to a wide range of supports and services, all in one place. This integrated approach reduces barriers for families accessing services, eliminating their need to travel to multiple locations, repeat their story to different service providers and navigate complex systems. By bringing together supports across health,

education and social care, as well as providing parents and carers with the opportunity to build social networks, hubs build trust with families, connect services and families, and provide opportunities for family support and early identification of child health and development issues. Beyond parenting programs, hubs may also offer programs for adults related to literacy, nutrition and food preparation, career readiness and vocational training.

Child and Family Hubs are typically situated within settings where families are already engaged in their everyday lives, thereby reducing barriers to access and increasing opportunities for early support. These locations include Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services (such as centre-based care, kinder and preschool sites) and primary schools. Hubs may also be co-located within community-based organisations, primary health care services or delivered through virtual or online platforms. Further, for decades, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) have provided their communities with unique forms of culturally responsive care and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. ACCOs have led the way in integrated service provision, providing holistic care within centres that have built deep connection, trust and cultural pride and strength.

What is the evidence for Child and Family Hub models?

A compelling and growing evidence base from Australia and abroad is demonstrating the value of integrated practice and its ability to generate myriad benefits for children, families and communities. Evidence indicates that hubs lead to improvements in children's school readiness (Telethon Kids Institute & Minderoo Foundation, 2014), parental knowledge and confidence (Moore, 2021a; Taylor et al., 2017), and increased service participation and engagement of children and their families (Our Place, 2025).

Furthermore, hubs have been shown to support early identification of developmental vulnerability (Edwards et al., 2020), offering both better outcomes for children and families and cost efficiencies for government. In 2024, the economic cost of late intervention for children and young people in Australia was estimated at \$22.3 billion annually, with analysis highlighting the need to invest in integrated and wrap-around models, including hubs (O'Connell, 2025).

ACCO hubs are also more successful than mainstream services at developing and sustaining long-term and trusted relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, providing more regular and consistent opportunities for assessing and supporting children showing signs of developmental or health challenges (Campbell et al., 2018). These services enhance child development, strengthen cultural identity and promote wellbeing by embedding cultural child-rearing practices within holistic, community-led models. ACCOs are particularly effective in addressing developmental vulnerability through early identification, culturally safe, strengths-based relational engagement, and wraparound support that builds trust and sustained participation (SNAICC, 2024a).

Children with access to hubs show improved educational outcomes, reduced hospitalisations and lower rates of serious youth crime (Carneiro et al., 2025). Integrated hub models have also been associated with improved child mental health symptoms (Honisett et al., 2022a; Olson et al., 2021). For children with neurodevelopmental disorders, integrated hub models demonstrate significant reductions in conduct disorder and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms, alongside long-term clinical stabilisation and increased rates of developmental screening (Hayre et al., 2025).

Practitioners working within integrated service models report optimism about their professional role and value the rewards of inter-professional collaboration (Wong et al., 2012), and services report increased worker retention (Barbee & Antle, 2011). Finally, hubs deliver strong returns on investment, generating an estimated \$3.50 in social value (including improvements in quality of life, employment gained and improved development outcomes) for every \$1 invested (Community Hubs Australia, 2024). This evidence provides a compelling basis to invest in Child and Family Hubs.

Child and Family Hubs across Australia

There are more than 460 Child and Family Hubs operating across Australia (National Child and Family Hubs Network, 2025b). The configuration of services and supports within these hubs varies, reflecting the availability of local services, available funding and community priorities. Many hubs have emerged independently in response to local circumstances, resulting in considerable diversity in their development journey, governance arrangements and service models. This is particularly the case for ACCO-integrated early years services, which emerged over decades in response to the unique and often complex needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Funding has similarly been fragmented, drawing on a combination of short-term philanthropic investment, state and federal government initiatives and

reallocation of existing organisational resources (Social Ventures Australia, 2025c). Hubs often happen because of individuals or small groups creating spaces and working hard to build child-centred experiences in the face of complex and fragmented external service systems.

Until recently, there was no national mechanism to facilitate coordination, knowledge exchange or capacity building across the hub sector, acknowledging though that different models and groups have developed some of their own networks and learning opportunities; for example, the ACCOs. The establishment of the National Child and Family Hubs Network (childandfamilyhubs.org.au) represents a significant step towards addressing this gap by providing a platform to promote collaboration, accelerate learning, strengthen the collective capability of hubs and advocate for policy and funding support.

Despite growing interest, the current reach of Child and Family Hubs falls well short of community need. Many high-need areas lack access to a hub (Social Ventures Australia, 2025b), and existing hubs often face major sustainability and operational challenges (Social Ventures Australia, 2023). The collective challenge to our governments is to move beyond treating hubs as individual projects and reform practice, funding, legislation, governance and regulatory models to embed hubs consistently within our early childhood service systems and support them where there is need. In addition to integrating education, health and social supports, the place-based approach of hubs builds community leadership and ensures services reflect the needs of their communities, promising to be still more transformative, and shifting towards a future state where service models are there not to manage symptoms, but to unlock potential. This shift demands cross-system commitment, resources, skills, political will and time. While complex, undertaking this collective endeavour promises to deliver better outcomes for children and more efficient use of public investment. With key foundations in place and momentum building, this paper explores how we can reach a tipping point for action and focus collaborative efforts over the next 5 years to embed hubs into early childhood service systems.

Barriers to systematising and scaling Child and Family Hubs

Embedding Child and Family Hubs within Australia's early childhood service system is constrained by policy and structural barriers across local, state and federal levels. Below, we examine key obstacles that must be addressed to enable scale and sustainability of hubs.

A busy and fragmented policy environment

The multi-sector and multidisciplinary approach of hubs means that they operate within a busy and fragmented policy environment spanning a range of government departments, including health, education, social services and disability services. This complex policy environment makes it difficult for policy makers at local, state and Commonwealth levels to navigate and design coherent and multi-departmental policies, programs and funding mechanisms to support hub systematisation. The busyness of this policy environment was illustrated by a 2022 scoping review

identifying 37 Australian Commonwealth and state government policies that referenced early intervention in childhood adversity across health education justice and social service departments (Honisett et al., 2022b). This busy policy environment is indicative of a fragmented government operating across departmental silos and developing policy responses often in isolation from other departments.

Siloed governance and accountability

Services that operate within Child and Family Hubs are typically funded, governed and regulated by different government departments, private sector, philanthropic organisations or non-profit partners, each with their own objectives, timelines, accountability mechanisms and reporting systems. This fragmented landscape places a heavy administrative burden on hubs, limits collaboration, restricts resource pooling and makes joint strategic and operational planning and local adaptation more difficult.

Previous research has shown that inconsistent and poorly delivered services can lead to ineffective and even harmful outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2009). A major barrier to more equitable and responsive service delivery is the lack of relevant, timely data (Molloy et al., 2025). Current funding models often prioritise siloed and activity-based accountability measures – such as enrolment numbers and session times – rather than indicators that reflect meaningful progress.

Hubs need consistent, evidence-based lead indicators to track whether they are being established and embedded as intended and are reaching families most in need. These indicators enable timely, actionable insights that help hubs and stakeholders identify challenges early, adapt practice and strengthen outcomes for children and families. They also make it possible to spot patterns, share innovations and drive efficiencies across hubs operating in similar contexts. Without such measures, policy makers and practitioners are left relying on lag indicators – like long-term health or education outcomes – that offer little real-time guidance for improvement. Crucially, indicators of success should reflect what communities value most: children who are healthy, safe, nurtured and have a strong sense of belonging.

Regulation

Multiple layers of regulation and professional oversight further restrict collaboration at multiple levels of the system. Services within a Child and Family Hub may each be subject to different data protection rules, sector-specific regulations or employment laws that make information-sharing difficult. Staff may have different professional registration requirements, privacy obligations, employment arrangements and clinical governance protocols. These differences can limit staff ability to share observations and seek collaborative solutions for children and families, and share planning, funding and performance data across portfolios. In practice, this can lead to duplication, missed opportunities for early intervention and siloed decision making.

Cultural safety

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse families, this service-system complexity is often overlaid with persistent experiences of cultural unsafety, prejudice and racial discrimination in service settings, be they health, ECEC or disability services. While many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have access to ACCO services that recognise, celebrate and strengthen the unique cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, many other families attempt to navigate services where cultural safety is not embedded as a core service element and in which their culture is not normative, in which they are consistently treated as other, and in which long histories of institutional racism have left their mark. It is unsurprising that, after centuries of forced child removals, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families hold deep and well-founded fears that seeking developmental support from an early childhood service may result in their child being removed. Ongoing institutional racism and the alarming reality that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are removed from their families at more than 11 times the rate of non-Indigenous children have understandably led many families to disengage from the very services intended to support them (SNAICC, 2024b).

Ultimately, without deliberate policy and system-level alignment across governance, funding, regulation and cultural safety, Child and Family Hubs are left to navigate these complexities alone. This limits effectiveness and stretches already limited resources, placing the burden of coordination on individual staff or community leaders, rather than embedding integration in the system itself.

Case study: Yappera Children's Service Co-Operative

Yappera is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) in Thornbury, Victoria. The co-operative has operated since 1981, providing high-quality, culturally grounded and holistic health and education programs. Yappera means 'Belonging Place' and aims to be a 'gathering, learning and wellbeing space for Aboriginal children and their parents, carers, families and community in Melbourne' (Yappera Children's Service, 2020).

Yappera, like many Child and Family Hubs, faces significant administrative burden related to sourcing, applying for and reporting for grants and funding. In an environment where employees are already overstretched, this pulls staff away from their central work supporting children and communities. Yappera Chief Executive Officer Stacy Brown says she has seen her role shift from leading pedagogy to 'being consumed by administration' (Social Ventures Australia, 2025c: p. 22): 'The burden of reporting across multiple funding streams has become overwhelming. With up to eight different funding sources, each requiring separate, often quarterly reports – covering data, compliance, KPIs, budgets, and milestones – it's an immense administrative load'.

Funding integration ('glue')

Despite widespread recognition of the benefits of service integration, the core conditions that enable it – known as the 'glue' – remain largely invisible in policy and funding frameworks. This 'glue' refers to the relationships, people, systems and backbone supports that hold services together with a shared purpose to reduce complexity for families, meet their needs and improve outcomes for children. It is multi-dimensional: it is not a single role or process, but a set of interconnected components tailored to the unique needs of each community (dandolopartners, 2024; Social Ventures Australia, 2025a). These elements are essential but often misclassified as overheads or added onto existing roles without dedicated resources or authority.

Reviews of service delivery consistently identify lack of leadership and cross-system support as key barriers to collaboration, with practitioners constrained by role definitions and accountability structures that discourage integrated practice (Moore, 2021b; Neilsen-Hewett et al., 2023). When the 'glue' is underfunded or overlooked, integration efforts stall, community outreach is limited and services risk becoming fragmented and reactive rather than coordinated and preventative. Without structural support, integration relies on individual champions, placing an untenable load on community and service leaders, creating key person risk and contributing to burnout (Social Ventures Australia, 2025c).

Integration is not achieved through co-location alone; it requires sustained investment in the time, leadership and skills needed to build trust, align service cultures and coordinate across sectors.

Recent financial analysis of 13 Early Childhood Hubs found that hubs with funded 'glue' secured 22 times more services than those without, established and operated strong governance structures and supported higher levels of integration (Social Ventures Australia, 2025c). As highlighted by Social Ventures Australia (2025a), 'glue' is not an optional extra; it is the infrastructure that enables integration to move beyond aspiration into sustained practice.

Workforce shortages

Workforce shortages across early childhood service systems, as well as in the other sectors from which hubs recruit their staff, present a major challenge for the effective scaling of integrated models. According to the 2024 ECEC Workforce Capacity Study, for example, Australia is experiencing a shortfall of around 21,000 qualified ECEC professionals needed to meet existing demand, with an additional 18,000 staff needed to meet future demand (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024: p. 8). To effectively attract and retain staff, hubs need to be able to offer adequate pay and conditions. This includes professional supports that recognise the challenging and often psychologically demanding nature of this kind of work (Social Ventures Australia, 2023). Secure, long-term funding also supports hubs to offer security of tenure to their staff. In contrast, high staff turnover and frequent disruptions in care serve to 'undermine children's ability to establish secure expectations about whether and how their needs will be met' (Moore, 2021b: p. 26).

Other barriers include competing with employers in similar sectors (e.g. schools, disability services), short-term funding contracts, remote location of hubs (which has implications for housing availability for staff as well as a smaller workforce), minimum qualifications needed for staff and poor provision of childcare for staff (Social Ventures Australia, 2023). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years services face particularly acute challenges attracting, retaining and supporting their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce (SNAICC, 2023). The vocational and tertiary systems responsible for educating service professionals often struggle to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, many of whom have obligations in their communities that prevent them from studying remotely.

Policy opportunities for scaling and embedding hubs within our early childhood service system

Communities and families advocating for a better future for their children have been successful in increasing momentum for improved integration in the early years. This has contributed to a historic wave of early childhood reviews, inquiries, commitments and policy changes that focus on integration to centre around the needs of children and families:

- The Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 commits the Commonwealth Government to better coordination and integration of early years policy and programs (Department of Social Services, 2024);
- The Building Early Education Fund is a \$1 billion investment by the Australian Government in the development and expansion of ECEC (Department of Education, 2026). It includes \$50 million toward co-investment opportunities that support the building or expansion of integrated services in areas of need. Philanthropic partner Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children (IDAC) has committed to up to \$50 million in-principle funding (Ministers of the Education Portfolio, 2025);
- Thriving Kids is a new national system of supports for children with developmental delay and/or autism and their families (Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, 2026); and
- The Service Delivery Price project aims to articulate reasonable costs of quality ECEC service delivery, and will inform future funding reforms (Department of Education, 2024).
- The Productivity Commission's *Delivering quality care more efficiently* report highlighted the need to support integrated care and service delivery (Productivity Commission, 2025).

These initiatives represent a major opportunity to invest in Child and Family Hubs. By embedding these models into the design and rollout of programs, governments can tap into evidence-based, practical, scalable and locally driven solutions that meet families where they are.

There have also been significant investments made by state and territory governments and philanthropy over the past 5 years to increase the number of Child and Family Hubs. These include:

- 50 new government-owned and operated early learning and childcare centres in Victoria - predominantly on school sites and with spaces for additional service delivery and investment in the integration glue (Victorian School Building Authority, 2025);
- 20 integrated hubs in South Australia by 2032 (Government of South Australia, 2025);
- A commitment to four new Child and Family Learning Centres in Tasmania, taking the total number of Child and Family Learning Centres around the state to 22 (Premier of Tasmania, 2024);
- New South Wales' Government commitment to establish six new Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (Department of Communities and Justice, 2025);
- FamilyLinQ launched as a collaboration between the Queensland Government and The Bryan Foundation with two integrated school-based hubs (FamilyLinQ, 2024); and
- Partnership between Commonwealth Government, Northern Territory Government and the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory that includes funding up to twelve Aboriginal Community Controlled Children and Family Centres to provide coordinated solutions to complex issues relating to family safety and child development (Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2025).

While these investments, alongside the broader policy reform agenda, are major steps towards integrated place-based service delivery as usual practice, they remain limited in addressing acute need and don't tackle the challenge of embedding Child and Family Hubs within our universal early childhood service system. The current situation remains fragmented, with variable investments at a jurisdictional level that lack national oversight, planning or stewardship. There is now an opportunity to go beyond piecemeal solutions to tackle how we embed Child and Family Hubs as a key component of the early childhood service system.

Priority areas to scale and embed hubs within our early childhood service system

Governance and accountability

Scaling and embedding integrated Child and Family Hubs within the early childhood service system requires a **structured governance approach** operating at multiple, interconnected

levels. Strong system-level governance at the national and state levels must be complemented by robust local hub governance and genuine community accountability to create a cohesive, coordinated framework for change.

At the national and state levels, effective governance depends on aligning service systems across Commonwealth, state and territory jurisdictions, and key portfolios including health, education, justice and social services. One mechanism to achieve this could be the establishment of a National Child and Family Hubs Taskforce – a proven approach within the Australian Public Service to address complex, high-priority issues (Australian Public Service Commission, 2021). With decision-making and coordination functions, the Taskforce would work to create an agreed partnership approach to governance and converge siloed policies – such as Thriving Kids, the Building Early Education Fund and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – to maximise impact. It would also address persistent barriers such as limited data sharing and inconsistent regulatory frameworks.

Ideally, this Taskforce would drive the development of national practice and evaluation frameworks for hubs, strengthening the evidence base, ensuring consistency and accountability and supporting the balance between national ambition and local flexibility. Crucially, governance must also embed self-determination and genuine partnership by deliberately transferring power to communities and community-controlled organisations and resourcing them effectively to close the gap.

At the local level, hub governance structures are essential for building a shared vision, distributing power and fostering joint ownership among services and supports. Embedding mechanisms for genuine community voice – such as feedback loops and community-led governance structures – ensures that hubs reflect and respond to local priorities and contexts.

Ultimately, true accountability in hubs extends beyond organisational performance measures to a collective responsibility for improving outcomes for children and families.

Case study: Our Place: Enabling integration through shared governance

The Our Place approach shows what is possible when children and families experiencing disadvantage can access everything they need to thrive in education, from birth, through the front door of their local school. It is a place-based approach that integrates Maternal & Child Health, early learning, schooling, health and family services and adult education and employment. The approach is currently operating for a 10-year period in nine communities in Victoria: Carlton, Doveton, Frankston North, Mooroopna, Morwell, Corio, Robinvale, Seymour and Clayton.

The Our Place approach has been possible through a unique 13-year partnership between the Colman Education Foundation and the Victorian Government. The partnership requires governance that enables philanthropy and government to work together and support multi-jurisdiction, cross-portfolio integration in each community. This includes:

- At the community level, a Site Partnership Group, chaired by the Department of Education, comprises principals, early learning providers, local councils, service agencies and Our Place staff. These groups oversee implementation and co-design strategies that respond to local needs; and
- At a state-wide level, a Partnership Management Group coordinates learning and problem-solving across sites, while an Inter-Departmental Committee, chaired by the Department of Education Secretary, enables whole-of-government support.

Lessons from this governance model are being captured for use by others seeking to undertake similar partnerships (Our Place, 2023). Maintaining authorisation from senior leaders has been critical in ensuring the partnership remains a priority despite shifting policy environments and leadership changes. Equally, governance has needed to outlast individual relationships by embedding formal structures so that turnover in schools, services or government does not derail progress. This includes the use of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) across the various levels of governance as well as Terms of Reference agreements. Site operating protocols and 'ways of working' are determined by the Site Partnership Groups on individual sites, captured and reviewed accordingly, with arrangements between the site and visiting service providers captured via the MOU. These arrangements embed practice principles and ensure that there is ongoing consistency in approach. Position descriptions for Our Place staff provide clarity to partners around expectations and outcomes. Together, these arrangements show how governance must be both relational and institutional, continually balancing accountability with flexibility to keep partners focused on shared outcomes.

Key policy opportunities related to governance and accountability are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Policy opportunities – governance and accountability

Phase 1 (1 year)	Phase 2 (2 years)	Phase 3 (5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a national taskforce involving the Commonwealth Government, willing states and territories, local government, philanthropy, service providers and ACCOs to advance systematisation of Child and Family Hub models. • Ensure the design of Foundational Supports (Thriving Kids) enables children to receive the supports they need in Child and Family Hubs, including on school sites. • Include Child and Family Hubs as part of place-based policies and resource communities with seed funding to consult, design and upskill on hubs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a National Early Childhood Partnership Agreement or equivalent with clear responsibilities for Commonwealth and state and territory governments. This should include a specific agreement for ACCOs under the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership. • Review national governance, architecture, standards, data, policies and initiatives across early childhood systems to enhance support for Child and Family Hub approaches. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a Commonwealth-led national hubs growth strategy. • Systematise Child and Family Hub models in specific settings in the relevant national architecture and policies. This may include stronger incentives and accountability for integration in the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement for school-based hubs and the National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care. • Agree on cross-government data frameworks and data sharing protocols.

Funding integration

Adequate and sustainable funding mechanisms are crucial in systematising Child and Family Hubs. To date, funding approaches in Australia have been piecemeal, short-term and fragmented across jurisdictions and portfolios, limiting the ability of hubs to scale and demonstrate their full impact. Notable exceptions to this have included The Tasmanian Child and Family Learning Centres, the NSW Aboriginal Child and Family Centres and the philanthropically supported Our Place model in Victoria. Expansion has largely relied on one-off grants, local champions or pilot

funding. National analysis highlights that the absence of pooled and long-term funding streams prevents hubs from scaling and leads to duplication or service gaps even when hubs exist (Deloitte Access Economics, 2023).

A secure, long-term, flexible funding model sufficient to meet actual costs of hub set up and delivery is critical to ensure the sustainability and viability of hubs and their delivery of critical integrated services to children and families. This includes infrastructure, 'glue' and, where necessary, service funding (Social Ventures Australia, 2025c).

Dedicated and sustained investment to establish new hubs, including capital funding to build, expand or refurbish community assets such as schools and neighbourhood centres, ensuring fit-for-purpose infrastructure, is critical to foster integration (Social Ventures Australia, 2023, 2025c). Ongoing maintenance and building management costs where hubs own buildings, or property rental and related costs where they do not, are also important to include in funding models.

‘Glue’ funding is core and non-negotiable for effective functioning of hubs. Building and sustaining service collaboration, reaching families not accessing services, developing trusted relationships, supporting families holistically and ultimately improving child and family outcomes depends on providing sufficient long-term funding to the ‘glue’ that holds integration together. Research demonstrates that hubs with funded ‘glue’ secure significantly more value in services for their community, have stronger governance structures and support higher levels of integration (Social Ventures Australia, 2025c). At an estimated \$560,000 per annum, ‘glue’ funding for a metro hub to serve 100 families, including up to 200 children, with relevant additional geographical loadings as needed, it is a low-cost high-impact investment in these children and families (Social Ventures Australia, 2025c).

Additional operational funding may also be required for different services to ensure viability in communities with significant socioeconomic disadvantage and/or complex needs (National

Child & Family Hubs Network, 2025a; SNAICC, 2024a). Recent research highlighted a viability risk for hubs with ECEC; for example, with long day care provision requiring cross-subsidisation from other staff and financial resources (Social Ventures Australia, 2025c). Many hubs also face challenges in offering sufficient services to meet community needs, citing long wait lists and lack of critical services, like allied health.

A long-term adequate and responsive funding mechanism requires deliberate Commonwealth leadership; leadership in policy, and leadership in partnering. Communities know what they and their children need to thrive. Leadership in policy means committing to the growth of a strong, high-quality hub sector through long-term, pooled and adaptable funding arrangements that resource both integrated infrastructure and the conditions for integration. Leadership in partnering asks governments to cede power, control and resources over services to communities. Embedding incentives for better integration into system-level policy levers is also critical, ensuring sustainability and scalability across jurisdictions. Where this essential investment is made, hubs can be established in areas of priority need, build trust, adapt to community priorities and deliver accessible, holistic support for children and families.

Key policy opportunities related to funding are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Policy opportunities – funding

Phase 1 (1 year)	Phase 2 (2 years)	Phase 3 (5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leverage the \$1 billion Commonwealth Building Early Education Fund to build more integrated hubs based on child need (on school sites where appropriate), ensuring genuine integration rather than colocation, and including a ‘carve off’ for ACCOs that reflects a meaningful proportion of new investment needed to redress early childhood disparities. Genuine integration includes shared entry points, joint governance, coordinated planning and connected service delivery (Social Ventures Australia, 2025d). Amend and expand the Commonwealth Government Community Child Care Fund to support viability ECEC funding and ‘glue’ funding for hubs. Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments establish a specific funding mechanism for integrated ACCO early years services in accordance with the SNAICC ACCO Funding Model report (SNAICC, 2024a), and support mechanisms to grow and sustain the ACCO early years sector. This includes, in particular, the Nest and Nurture Model for new ACCO early years services and continuation and expansion of SNAICC Early Years Support. Embed integration into national policy and pricing reform, including the Early Education Service Delivery Prices Project and Thriving Kids program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repurpose existing Commonwealth (and state and territory) funding to resource local leadership, integration and community outreach to scale and sustain Child and Family Hub approaches. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a Commonwealth-led national hubs growth strategy supported by dedicated, pooled and adaptable funding streams. Dedicated funding streams should cover both capital investment and operational resourcing to integrate services effectively. Pooled and adaptable funding, drawing across portfolios such as Education, Health, and Social Services, would reduce duplication, balance responsibility, align incentives and enable hubs to tailor solutions to local contexts. For the operational funding, the Commonwealth should establish recurrent, multi-year funding arrangements (5–10 years) that resource the integration ‘glue’. This includes salaries for hub coordinators, community connectors and administrative roles, protected time for collaboration and investment in shared systems and governance structures. Change recurrent funding models for schools to ensure support for school-based hubs where needed.

Regulation

To scale Child and Family Hubs effectively, a robust, multidisciplinary regulatory framework is essential; one that goes beyond compliance to actively guide quality, integration and sustainability. The framework should balance consistency in core evidence-based features – such as integrated service delivery, family-centred practice, seamless referral pathways and shared governance – with flexibility for local adaptation. This means clearly defining the *what* of hubs based on evidence, while allowing communities to determine the *how* in response to local needs.

A strong regulatory framework can establish minimum standards for integration and family engagement, link core components to measurable outcomes (e.g. improved service access, child development and family wellbeing) and create a legal foundation for shared accountability across agencies. Building on and extending existing quality systems, such as the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, will evolve them into a multi-sector quality standard for all child-facing services. This alignment would strengthen cross-disciplinary coherence, reduce quality variability and support continuous improvement.

Importantly, regulation must avoid being overly prescriptive. Community ownership and innovation are central to the success of hubs, and regulation should enable – not constrain – local responsiveness. The goal is not uniformity but assurance that all hubs deliver high-quality, integrated services and achieve proven outcomes tailored to local contexts.

To support this, regulation should be paired with incentives for quality. Evidence shows that service quality ratings in ECEC predict developmental vulnerability across AEDC domains (Rankin et al., 2024). Enhancing quality requires investment in workforce capability, practical resources for integrated practice, data-driven improvement strategies (e.g. Restacking the Odds; <https://www.rsto.org.au>) and robust evaluation to identify success factors and address barriers.

Grounding hubs in an evidence-based yet flexible regulatory framework will enable governments to scale with confidence – ensuring consistency in what matters most, accountability for outcomes and space for local innovation and ongoing improvement.

Key policy opportunities related to regulation are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Policy Opportunities – Regulation

Phase 1 (1 year)	Phase 2 (2 years)	Phase 3 (5 years)
Invest in research on existing and new Child and Family Hub models in various settings to build a nationally endorsed set of evidence-based core elements for hubs to provide clarity and consistency in design and delivery of effective hubs. Specific research required in relation to ACCOs given their unique purpose and characteristics.	Introduce performance frameworks with measurable outcomes and targets tied to these core elements, ensuring accountability for results across education, health and social services.	Use regulation to support consistent quality of hubs and align governance and reporting requirements across systems, reducing fragmentation and enabling collective responsibility for outcomes. This might involve establishing a multi-sector quality framework.

Workforce and capability building

A capable, supported workforce is essential to the success and scalability of Child and Family Hubs. As Deloitte Access Economics (2023) noted, a ‘sufficiently large and capable workforce’ is a critical enabler for future hub expansion (p. 77). Yet, workforce shortages across early childhood, health and social services are already limiting the reach and sustainability of existing hubs. These shortages are particularly acute in remote and high-need communities, where recruitment and retention are persistent challenges (Australian Childcare Alliance, 2022).

This is also a workforce operating in highly demanding environments, with staff often facing: challenging behaviours from children and families who may be experiencing: trauma; low pay; limited recognition; and few opportunities for professional development (Fenech et al., 2022; Social Ventures Australia, 2023). Many hubs operate year-round, leaving little time for reflection, planning or capability building.

Hubs further require staff who are not only qualified in their disciplines but also skilled in working collaboratively across sectors, engaging relationally with families and navigating complex systems. Staff must be equipped to work in multidisciplinary teams

and respond to trauma, complexity and community need, and must have a sound understanding of child development and holistic wellbeing. Leadership and relational capability are especially critical. Staff need interprofessional competencies, emotional intelligence, strategic thinking and the ability to build trust across diverse stakeholders (dandolo partners, 2024). Reception staff, who are often the first point of contact with families, must be trained and supported to provide a warm, helpful and non-stigmatising welcome. For example, Our Place sites in Victoria emphasise the importance of ‘impartial professionals’ skilled in relationship-building and community engagement (Our Place, 2025: p. 40). Strategies for building and sustaining capabilities include training programs, mentoring, embedded reflective learning and communities of practice.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, workforce development must be a strategic priority. SNAICC’s Early Years Support program highlights the need for targeted investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years workforce development, including: culturally safe training pathways tailored to ACCOs; targeted investment in recruitment and retention for remote and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers; leadership development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

staff in governance, integration and service design roles; and sustainable funding to grow and retain culturally strong teams within ACCOs (Deloitte Access Economics, 2025).

These supports are essential to build a workforce that reflects community strengths, embeds cultural knowledge, and delivers holistic integrated care. Addressing workforce shortages requires coordinated action (by governments, training providers and Table 4. Policy Opportunities – workforce and capability building

Phase 1 (1 year)	Phase 2 (2 years)	Phase 3 (5 years)
Codify the capabilities needed to work in integrated, multidisciplinary ways in hubs; for example, through a Child and Family Hubs capability framework.	Establish a national strategy and fund for workforce pipeline and capability building for integration, with dedicated funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development.	Review and update industrial agreements and training standards to better incorporate integration into qualifications and conditions across all child-facing workforces.

National Child and Family Hubs Network commitments

This endeavour of scaling and embedding hubs within our early childhood service system is a shared agenda that requires deep collaboration across the sector, philanthropy and government. The National Child and Family Hubs Network is a national, multidisciplinary group dedicated to strengthening Child and Family Hubs across Australia. The Network unites service providers, community-based organisations, advocates, researchers and policy makers to build the capacity of Hubs and enable more children and families to access the care they need to thrive. The Network is committed to supporting this agenda through strengthening the articulation and measurement of the ‘glue’, researching costings of hubs, fostering peer learning, collaborating to develop funding solutions, trialling innovation and sharing learnings. The Network supports SNAICC’s leadership as the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in continuing to shine a light on challenges faced by ACCOs, and the unique role they play to innovate solutions and to advocate for reforms to see a strong and thriving ACCO sector.

Conclusion

Child and Family Hubs represent a transformative opportunity to reimagine how we support children and families experiencing disadvantage. Families thrive when they have access to coordinated, relational and responsive support systems – systems that reflect the complexity of their lives and respond to their strengths and needs.

Embedding integration within early childhood systems is a bold and necessary step, though not without its challenges. While momentum is building, policy and funding settings often remain rigid, fragmented and misaligned across sectors. These structures can overlook the relational infrastructure essential for collaboration and fail to encourage shared accountability for child and family outcomes. Services continue to operate in silos, with limited flexibility to adapt to local contexts or collaborate across boundaries. Workforce shortages further constrain the capacity to scale and sustain integrated models.

communities) on funding reform, career pathways, and recognition of relational roles. Integration is ultimately driven by people with the skills to do the core relational work, and scaling hubs will depend on sustained investment in workforce capability, wellbeing and leadership across the system. Key policy opportunities related to workforce and capability building are summarised in Table 4.

Now is the time to move beyond pilots and isolated programs towards embedding hubs as core infrastructure within our early childhood service system. This involves intentionally designing integration into every layer – governance, funding, regulation, data and practice – and cultivating an authorising environment that supports system-wide change. It also calls for a genuine commitment to partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, guided by principles of self-determination and the recommendations of the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Lavarch et al., 2025).

Realising this vision will require collaborative leadership across diverse stakeholders – families, service leaders, practitioners, researchers, advocates, philanthropists and government representatives. Together, we can co-create an ambitious roadmap for integrated systems and practice.

While Commonwealth leadership is vital, local organisations have a unique role to play in identifying priority locations, coordinating services, tailoring strategies to community needs and supporting workforce development. States and territories, as primary service providers, are equally central to this effort. Ultimately, integration will flourish when service leaders foster cultures, expectations, and supports for relational, multidisciplinary practice.

This is a national opportunity that invites a national response. We encourage the Commonwealth Government to focus on areas of deep socioeconomic disadvantage, explore scalable models of local commissioning and identify barriers to integrated delivery. In the first year, establishing a national task force, leveraging the Building Early Education Fund and Thriving Kids reforms, and codifying the capabilities needed for multidisciplinary practice can lay strong foundations on which to further build.

As members of the National Child and Family Hubs Network, we are committed to advancing this agenda – working alongside government and community leaders to trial new approaches, overcome barriers and bring the collective wisdom of hubs practice into policy.

With strong foundations and growing momentum, the next 5 – 10 years offer a critical window to embed Child and Family Hubs as a cornerstone of our early childhood systems. Every child and family experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability deserves access

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