What we heard

Community engagement on Early Learning for Three Year Olds

Department *for* Education, Children and Young People

Tasmanian Government

INTRODUCTION

The Tasmanian Government has committed to provide universal access to pre-school for every child in the year before kindergarten to give them a great start in life and learning.

The 2023-24 State Budget provides $6.04 million over four years to commence a pathway to provide universal access to Early Learning for Three Year Olds, beginning with establishing trials across the state to test different models of service delivery that are responsive to local community needs.

The initiative is being co-designed with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) providers, other early learning and support services and, most importantly, with families and the community.

A Co-Design Planning Group was established with the Department *for* Education, Children and Young People (the Department) and ECEC representatives in January 2023 to provide strategic guidance on how to develop and implement a co-design process with key stakeholders.

The Group is jointly chaired by Ros Cornish, who retired in 2022 after over four decades of working with children in the ECEC sector, and Jenny Burgess, Associate Secretary in the Department.

Other members include representatives from Early Childhood Australia, the Australian Childcare Alliance, Independent Schools Tasmania, Catholic Education Tasmania and Family Day Care.

Guided by the Co-Design Planning Group, the Department held Early Learning Workshops in March and April 2023, and received responses to an Online Survey, to hear from families, services and community members across Tasmania about Early Learning for Three Year Olds.

Feedback from the workshops and survey, as outlined in this report, will help to build an understanding of challenges and opportunities in different communities and inform innovative approaches to the delivery of early learning services for three year olds.

Ros Cornish and Jenny Burgess would like to thank the Co-Design Planning Group for their ongoing support, expertise and involvement in this work.

BACKGROUND

Quality early learning experiences improve outcomes for children throughout their lives and help to lay the foundation for their physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development.

Access to quality early learning in ECEC settings has increased across Tasmania in recent years, however more than a third of all three year olds do not participate in early learning delivered through an ECEC before they commence kindergarten.[1]

There is an opportunity to further expand access to early learning for three years olds across Tasmania, building on the success of the ECEC sector, Working Together and Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs).

In August 2022 the Premier of Tasmania announced the Government's commitment to provide universal access to early learning for every three year old in the year before kindergarten.

The 2023-24 State Budget provides $6.04 million over four years to support the delivery of the first stage of this commitment and establish trials across Tasmania, each designed alongside communities to test models of service delivery that best respond to local community need.

Outcomes of the trials will aim to build a picture of how existing services can work together to ensure three year olds who are currently not engaged in early learning are provided with an equitable opportunity to do so.

In designing local solutions to improve access to early learning, ECEC services will be the preferred provider, in recognition of the importance of growing and sustaining the sector for the benefit of all young children and their families who need access to education and care services.

Other options may be explored where there is no ECEC service or the service has no capacity, including for example through CFLCs, schools or local libraries.

1 Report on Government Services 2023, Table 3A.14

CO-DESIGN APPROACH

In each trial site the Department will work in partnership with families, community members, ECEC providers and other key early years services to co-design a place-based approach to quality Early Learning for Three Year Olds.

Co-design is a collaborative approach to working with people to enable and deliver outcomes that matter to them, underpinned by principles of inclusion, respect, participation, iteration and an outcomes-focus.

The Co-Design Planning Group has provided strategic guidance on how to develop and implement a co-design process with key stakeholders.

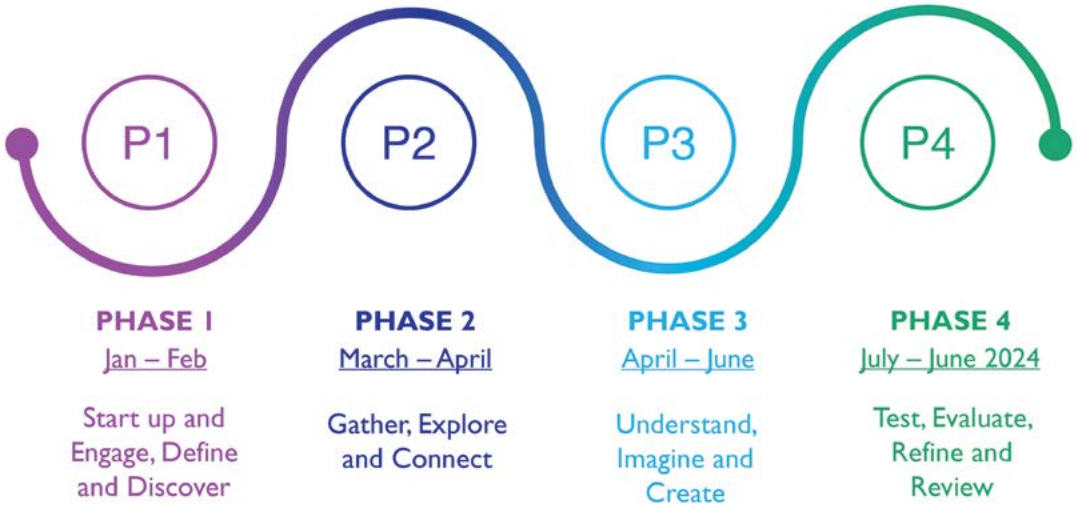
The Co-Design Planning Group agreed on the following principles for the design of early learning services in each trial site, to be tested and confirmed through consultation:

- Quality, age and developmentally appropriate and play-based
- Delivered by a qualified workforce
- Accessible to all three year olds for up to 15 hours distributed over a week
- Place-based, flexible, innovative and meet local needs
- Children and their wellbeing are central to decision making
- Cost will not be a barrier to participation
- Informed by evidence and research
- Implemented through a co-design approach with families, communities and early learning service providers.

Co-design increases impact by working with people, families and stakeholders, enabling outcomes that matter to them.

Dr Penny Hagan, Co-design Lead, Auckland Co-design Lab

During 2023 and early 2024 the co-design process will follow the below phases and timeline:



PHASE 1

During Phase 1, the Co-Design Planning Group was established to provide advice and guidance to the process and develop the guiding principles to test during Phase 2.

PHASE 2

Phase 2 involved connecting with local communities to explore and gather views on the guiding principles and what early learning for three year olds could look like in their community.

PHASE 3

Phase 3 will include making sense of what we heard to inform opportunities to trial different models of early learning service delivery.

PHASE 4

Phase 4 will include establishing Local Enabling Groups in selected communities to prepare and trial different models of early learning service delivery in 2024.

EARLY LEARNING WORKSHOPS AND ONLINE SURVEY

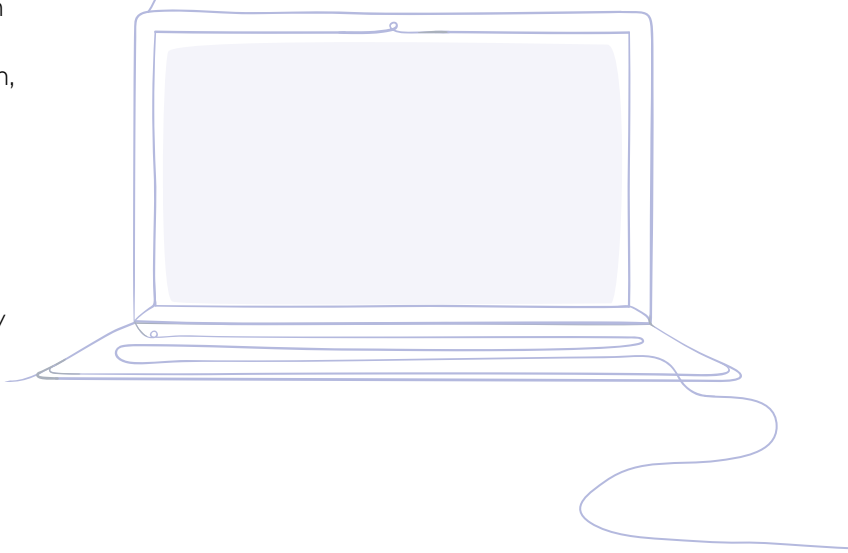
During Phase 2 of the co-design process the Department sought feedback from a range of different people across the state to have their say on the future of quality and affordable early learning in their community.

32 Early Learning Workshops were held in

26 towns and cities across the south, north, northwest, east and west of the state, attended by

233 people including parents, grandparents, family members, ECEC services and a mix of people who deliver early years services including schools and other key stakeholders.

110 responses to a public survey titled 'Online consultation for Early Learning for 3 Year Olds' were received in April and May 2023. Respondents included parents, families, and service providers from across the state.



NEXT STEPS

Feedback from the Early Learning Workshops and Online Survey will guide the design and implementation of Early Learning for Three Year Olds services within the trial sites.

This information, combined with data from a range of sources and an assessment approach endorsed by the Co-Design Planning Group, will inform decisions on which communities are selected to trial different models of early learning service delivery in 2024.

Once selected, the Department will commence Phase 4 of the co-design process in partnership with those communities. This will involve detailed consultation, planning and design of trials in each community.

Trial sites will commence service delivery from 2024 with an independent evaluation and findings from the trials informing the broader implementation of universal access to early learning for three year olds in future years.

CURRENT EARLY LEARNING SERVICES FOR THREE YEAR OLDS IN TASMANIA

In 2023 there are around 5,800 children in Tasmania aged 3 years of age.

Just over 60 per cent of these three year olds attend ECEC services including centre-based care and family day care. It is estimated that the vast majority (88 per cent[2]) of those attend centre-based care. Of those attending centre-based care, the average attendance is around 19 hours per week.

There are a range of other early learning opportunities and services that children and families can access including:

- Launching into Learning (LiL)
- Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs)
- Early Childhood Inclusion Service (ECIS)
- Pre kinder programs
- Playgroups, Neighbourhood Houses
- Libraries
- Working Together

Providing access to early learning for all three year olds will consider the needs of local communities as well as current services available, including those listed above, with ECEC being the preferred provider where possible.

2 Australian Government Department of Education (unpublished) Child Care Subsidy System; ABS 2022 (and previous issues), 'Quarterly Population Estimates (ERP)'.

WHAT WE HEARD

Early Learning Workshops and Online Survey

Workshop participants were invited to have their say on the future of quality and affordable early learning in their community. They shared responses to the questions:

- Why is early learning important?
- What opportunities are already in the community?
- What early learning and support services are missing?
- What are the challenges in accessing early learning and support for children and families?
- How might early learning look in the community?

Conversations in the workshops were guided by principles for the design and implementation of early learning services:

1. Quality, age-appropriate and play-based
2. Delivered by a qualified workforce
3. Accessible to all three year olds for up to 15 hours distributed over a week
4. Place-based, flexible, innovative and meet local needs
5. Children and their wellbeing are central to decision making
6. Cost will not be a barrier to participation
7. Informed by evidence and research
8. Implemented through a co-design approach with families, communities and early learning service providers.

The 'Online consultation for early learning for 3 year olds' Survey covered the same questions and principles as the Early Learning Workshops and provided another mode of engagement with members of the community who could not attend the in-person workshops.

Detail on who participated in the Early Learning Workshops and Online survey are at Appendix A.

Fun, creative, purpose driven, sensory experiences, bright, colourful

Workshop Participant

SUMMARY OF WHAT WE HEARD

Workshop participants and survey respondents were unanimous in recognising the positive benefits of early learning for both individuals and the community. They appreciated that all children are different, and that the rights of children must be upheld in the design and delivery of services.

Participants recognised that investing in the early years and providing support to families has broad benefits such as an improved sense of community, improved education outcomes and a reduced need for intervention and support later in an individual's life.

Participants talked about the challenges in accessing early learning and support for children and families, including barriers such as cost, transport and housing. Participants also raised a lack of other services for families such as health, allied health and support services, particularly in rural and remote communities.

Participants talked about the value of existing early learning programs and services, including ECEC services, kindergarten, playgroups, Launching into Learning, and Rock and Rhyme at local libraries, as well as the benefits of informal interactions between families with small children in the community and at home.

Participants wanted any new early learning service to be embedded in the community, to build on the strengths of existing local services and to provide even greater flexibility to meet the diverse needs of young children and families.

Workforce challenges were common and raised as a key issue across most communities, including concerns about a lack of qualified staff, ECEC staff pay and conditions, training and development opportunities and attracting and retaining staff with the right skills and attributes to deliver quality services.

A theme across the feedback was the desire for more quality early learning experiences where parents, carers and families could participate with their young children, to connect with other families or even to access supports themselves.

Another theme was the benefit of linking or co-locating services on one site to improve accessibility to wrap around supports for families, particularly for those experiencing vulnerability.

Focus on the child. Play, play, play with and alongside nurturing, responsive adults.

Workshop Participant

PRINCIPLE 1:
QUALITY, AGE-APPROPRIATE AND PLAY-BASED

All participants supported this principle and agreed that early learning for three year olds must be quality, age-appropriate and play-based.

Participants talked about how the early years is a crucial developmental period and a time of rapid brain development.

They raised the importance of early interventions and support for children with additional needs and talked about how services must be 'developmentally' appropriate rather than simply 'age' appropriate to best support children with additional and diverse needs.

Participants were asked what this principle might 'look like' in their communities and they described it as:

- child-led, inclusive of all children and culturally appropriate
- recognising all children are different and building the learning to suit each
- supporting a child's social, emotional and physical development
- providing time and opportunities for socialising and exploring nature
- welcoming, informal, flexible and incorporating lots of outdoor play
- providing a safe environment, sleep spaces and nourishing food
- communicating with children, staff, families and the community in an open, respectful and genuine way.

Regulation keeps children safe, and a quality service is one that is indeed safe for children.

Workshop Participant

Participants emphasised the importance of fostering a sense of community through early learning and the close relationship between the wellbeing of children and families and the wellbeing of a community as a whole.

Participants also highlighted the importance of inclusive early learning services and the need to incorporate Aboriginal cultural practices, learning and understanding, as an opportunity for the whole community to learn and engage.

Participants who were parents talked about quality in the context of safety and compliance with regulations whether it be delivered through an ECEC or other regulated service.

PRINCIPLE 2:
DELIVERED BY A QUALIFIED WORKFORCE

Workshop participants agreed that a qualified workforce was crucial to the delivery of quality early learning services. There was consensus that the ECEC sector is facing unprecedented challenges with attracting and retaining staff, affecting the accessibility and availability of early learning services across the state, with some services experiencing high turnover.

Participants emphasised the need for educators to be suitably qualified and well-supported in their roles to enable them to build lasting relationships with children and their families and deliver quality early learning services.

Some participants raised pay and other employment conditions as critical to help services attract and retain qualified staff. They also discussed specific challenges faced by regional and remote services and communities in attracting and retaining staff, and possible solutions such as relocation allowances and accommodation.

Participants from remote communities who had no access to early learning services due to staffing issues and viability of a service to operate remotely, talked about the negative impact this has on local families, economies and the community as a whole. They considered it to be a deterrent for young families seeking to stay in - or move to - remote communities, perpetuating the cycle of families moving away to more populated areas for better access to jobs and services.

While participants agreed that all staff should be qualified, there were differing opinions on the type and level of qualifications required to deliver a quality service and the best mix of qualifications across a service.

Professional training and development opportunities, including mentoring programs provided locally, were identified as ways to improve employment conditions for staff, attract new staff and improve the quality of services.

Some participants proposed innovative solutions such as providing training for parents and carers alongside access to quality early learning for their children, as a way of concurrently improving access to both training and early learning in a community.

For example, families could access Occasional Care while they undertake workforce readiness training, access employment services, attend parenting courses or work from a remote office space co-located with the service.

Some parents in rural and remote areas even offered to undertake the required training to help alleviate workforce issues, such as a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care.

A limiting factor to having more services is staffing. The sector is already experiencing a workforce crisis.

Workshop Participant

PRINCIPLE 3:
ACCESSIBLE TO ALL THREE YEAR OLDS FOR UP TO 15 HOURS DISTRIBUTED OVER A WEEK

All workshop participants supported the principle that early learning should be accessible to all three year olds. Participants agreed that where a child lives, or their family background, should not be a barrier to accessing a quality early learning service.

Some participants indicated that a full day of early learning may be too intensive for three year olds and that a different distribution of hours would be more appropriate, such as five hours a day over three days.

However, other participants indicated that for working parents, 15 hours over two days would be a preferred option, with workforce participation having positive flow on effects for families and communities.

Participants agreed that services should be available year-round and not on a per term basis.

Many participants highlighted the importance of routines and consistency for three year olds, especially to prepare them for successful transitions between home and an early learning service and through to kindergarten.

Some participants recommended that 15 hours would be the minimum service requirement to achieve this consistency and that delivery of a service for three year olds should 'line-up' with the existing universal provision of kindergarten for four year olds (including starting age and calendar year delivery) and others recommended the service should be available from the day a child turns three.

However, participants in almost all locations said that early learning services must be delivered in a flexible way to meet the needs of different children, families and communities.

Having some different options for different family circumstances would be ideal.

Workshop Participant

Some suggested this flexibility could look like a combination of early childhood education and care with a 'drop in' service co-located on site, where parents, carers and families could attend with their children and connect with other families.

Participants also talked about accessibility in terms of being inclusive of Aboriginal communities and as an opportunity to learn more about First Nations cultural practices.

PRINCIPLE 4:
PLACE-BASED, FLEXIBLE, INNOVATIVE AND MEET LOCAL NEEDS

All workshop participants supported the principle that early learning should be place-based, flexible, innovative and meet local needs.

Participants said that early learning services should be based in the local community and accessible by all. Participants in rural areas (particularly in the east and west of the state) suggested mobile or outreach models would improve accessibility, which could include, for example, a mobile service that used local halls or other community spaces as temporary locations.

Many participants believed that any new early learning services should partner with and build on the strengths of existing services, such as ECEC services, CFLCs or schools, with priority given to settings that are safe, regulated, accessible and already engaged with families.

Participants agreed that where the number of three year olds in a community were low, that utilising Family Day Care services or the local school would best meet local needs.

To best support communities facing vulnerability, again, participants suggested that a hub of services or the co-location of early learning services with other support services for children and their families, such as social work, physiotherapy or speech therapy, would improve access to services and deliver broad benefits.

Staff could receive specialist training in trauma-informed practice or family partnerships and make appropriate referrals to relevant support services, reducing the impact on families of trying to access and coordinate many different supports.

Participants highlighted transport as a key barrier to access, particularly in areas of disadvantage. Participants proposed solutions such as 'borrowing' existing school and community buses if funding for an early learning service bus was not available.

We know that access to high quality care makes a huge difference… and if we can help access to high quality support services it can change their lives 100%.

Workshop Participant

PRINCIPLE 5:
CHILDREN AND THEIR WELLBEING ARE CENTRAL TO DECISION MAKING

All workshop participants supported the principle that children and their wellbeing are central to decision making and it was clear from the feedback that communities highly valued existing services for children and their families.

Many service provider participants noted that this principle reflects best practice in the ECEC sector, and that every early learning program should be child-centred.

Participants also made the connection between this and other principles, arguing that operating from a child-centred perspective also means having qualified staff and a play-based, flexible program that is accessible to all children regardless of their location or family background.

Participants talked about the importance of clear and timely communication and coordination between services and with families to ensure successful transitions for children from the home environment to early learning settings to school settings as they grow.

Some participants indicated a need for greater awareness among families of the range of services available from pregnancy to when children reach school age. They suggested this could be achieved through a marketing campaign or through greater coordination between services where, for example, health and community services for families with babies could promote services and supports that will be available as children grow, such as early learning programs and services.

Families have experienced isolation during Covid and have not accessed early learning programs…it's especially important to support wellbeing of families and children through access to early learning programs.

Workshop Participant

PRINCIPLE 6:
COST WILL NOT BE A BARRIER TO PARTICIPATION

All workshop participants agreed that cost should not be a barrier to participation, and many made the connection to Principle 3 that early learning should be accessible to all three year olds.

A large number of participants believed that Early Learning for Three Year Olds should be free to families. Some participants suggested that a fee could be associated with the service that could be either means-tested, a levy system similar to schools, a voucher system or be very low or nominal (e.g. $2 or $5). One suggestion was to have parents, carers and families volunteer in some capacity in return for additional hours.

Participants agreed that any fee for service should be means-tested to ensure equitable access for families while ensuring adequate resources to support quality in early learning programs.

Some participants referred to an early learning model in Canada where services are proposed to require a flat rate payment of $10 per day from parents, with the goal or ensuring that families value the services without cost being a barrier to participation.

Some participants raised other related barriers to access such as administrative tasks and processes associated with enrolment. Some participants also raised frustrations with the existing Child Care Subsidy application process through Centrelink, saying it is too complex and potentially poses a further barrier to access for families.

Affordable for us would mean free. We are a low-income family and every cent counts.

Workshop Participant

WHAT WE HEARD BY REGIONS:

A snapshot of what we heard across different regions of the state is shown below:

North

- Many services within and around metropolitan centres are at capacity
- In remote communities more ECEC services are required to support families seeking to move to an area
- Suggestion of a 'hybrid' program, incorporating a mix of early learning 'drop-in' type rooms with childcare attached
- 20 hours of care would work better for families and offer more flexibility

North West

- There is significant demand for services for children with high support needs
- Early learning services with wrap around services on site would provide support to parents, carers and families, particularly those experiencing vulnerability
- More education and training options are required for the ECEC sector
- More local training options are needed, as are other incentives to attract people to the ECEC sector, such as reduced study costs
- 15 hours of early learning should be utilised over two full days, which would free up spaces in other ECEC services and create more capacity for the whole community
- Propose a new model of a "mini CFLC" in an ECEC service to provide a pathway for families to connect to the service

South

- Diverse needs were expressed across a mix or urban, regional and remote areas
- One remote community described a two hour round trip to access the closest ECEC service
- Remote communities identified that a mobile or outreach option would best meet local needs
- Recognition that there is currently not a locally delivered undergraduate early childhood qualification or pathway

East Coast

- Calls for an outreach or mobile early learning program option attached to a centre to offer flexibility and easier access for families
- A need for a hub service, linked to allied health on site as well as a training centre for parents
- Challenges related to a more 'transient' population and ECEC staffing issues, which could be addressed through incentives such as relocation allowances

West Coast

- Isolation is the main barrier with the nearest early learning offering being nearly an hour away via windy road (resulting in many children getting car sick)
- No current access to ECEC services
- A preference for ECEC staff to be embedded in the local community rather than 'drive-in, drive-out'
- Improving access to training and qualification for local residents would assist in retaining staff as well as making use of existing community relationships and local knowledge

APPENDIX A:

EARLY LEARNING WORKSHOPS AND ONLINE SURVEY DETAILS

32 Early Learning workshops were held in 26 towns and cities across the south, north, northwest, east and west of the state, in the following locations:

- Beaconsfield – 20th March 2023
- Bicheno – 6th March 2023
- Bridgewater (morning and afternoon session) – 27th March 2023
- Bruny Island – 9th March 2023
- Burnie – 22nd March 2023
- Cape Barren Island – 3rd April 2023
- Clarence Plains – 31st March 2023
- Dorset – 22nd March 2023
- East Devonport – 23rd March 2023
- East Tamar – 5th April 2023
- Flinders Island – 4th April 2023
- Geeveston – 27th March 2023
- Georgetown – 20th March 2023
- Hobart – 28th March 2023
- Huonville – 27th March 2023
- King Island – 4th April 2023
- Launceston – 19th March 2023
- New Norfolk (morning and afternoon session) – 31st March 2023
- Nubeena – 13th March 2023
- Online Sessions – 23rd March 2023, 3rd April 2023, 20th April 2023,
- Queenstown – 15th March 2023
- Ravenswood – 22nd March 2023
- Scottsdale – 22nd March 2023
- Sorell – 30th March 2023
- St Helens (morning and evening session) – 7th March 2023
- Strahan – 15th March 2023
- Swansea – 6th March 2023

Early Learning workshops were attended by 233 people including parents/carers, community members, ECEC services and from early years and relevant services.

The "Online consultation for Early Learning for 3 Year Olds" survey received 110 responses over a 6 week period. Respondents included parent/carers, community members, ECEC service providers and relevant early years services, with over half of respondents identifying as ECEC service providers.

The Co-Design Planning Group has met seven times since January 2023 and has been an important guide to engaging with stakeholders, including families and local communities.

Tasmanian Government

July 2023