

**INQUIRY INTO FOUNDATIONAL AND DISABILITY
SUPPORTS AVAILABLE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation
Date Received: 27 April 2025

Submission to the Select Committee on Foundational and Disability Supports Available for Children and Young People in New South Wales

The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. In particular, we are seeking to inform the design of the Foundational Supports system for children under 9 years of age with developmental concern, delay and/or disability, and their families, carers and kin.

Our submission draws on our extensive experience in supporting the development of children's language and literacy skills in the early years (to 9 years of age), in a range of locations and settings. We work with children and families with diverse abilities and resources, and we understand the huge gains to be made – for individuals and the nation – under the Foundational Supports system.

Our submission proposes principles for the NSW Government in designing and delivering Targeted Foundational Supports; and responds to the Terms of Reference for the inquiry.

In summary, we are proposing that the NSW Government utilises the early childhood education and care (ECEC) system to deliver early speech, language, pre-literacy and communication support to young children in 'natural settings'. This responds to the strong recommendations of the NDIS Review. However, the ECEC system is already under-equipped to support children with disability or developmental delay and concerns – particularly in regional and remote locations and in communities experiencing disadvantage. In addition, the acute shortage of speech pathologists precludes most ECEC services from simply engaging professionals to work directly with children on their premises.

This means that the NSW and Australian governments need to opt for innovation in designing Foundational Supports. The experience of the ALNF demonstrates that this can be done: combining universally accepted strategies and knowledge from speech pathology with carefully chosen technologies, and delivered via high-quality training to early childhood educators and other adults and community members. In this way, we can offer timely support to all children in NSW, addressing and identifying speech and language challenges before they create a barrier to children's learning and achievement throughout life.

1. Our scope and experience

For more than 20 years, ALNF has developed and delivered programs that support Australian children in the early years (ages 2-8) to build strong oral language and literacy skills, as the foundation for learning throughout life. In doing so, we have developed innovative and award-winning tools for:

- measuring children's abilities and progressions
- identifying the language challenges experienced by some children
- tailoring learning and teaching, and
- training non-experts in how to support children's oral language and early literacy in practical ways.

ALNF has a strong track record of partnering with collaborators and funding bodies to design, deliver and evaluate language and literacy supports that work for children. Developed in close consultation with marginalised communities across Australia, our flagship [Early Language & Literacy Program](#) (EL&L) already supports more than six thousand Australian children – of all abilities – each year. Rather than providing direct

services to children, ALNF supports children through the EL&L program by upskilling early years educators, school educators and parents in cohesive oral language and early literacy strategies, which are informed by speech pathology principles.

In addition, our [Early Language and Literacy Development Index](#) (ELLDI) is a world-first assessment tool for the prior-to-school years that ‘moves with the child’ across into early primary, enabling us to track children’s progress over time and deliver sustained additional support to children who need it.¹

The ELLDI has been recognised internationally for its innovation and social impact, winning a World Summit Award in 2023. The ELLDI was selected from 466 nominees across 100+ UN member states, one of just five winners in the Learning & Education category.

Our approach is place-based, which means we tailor our work to each community, understanding its unique context and assets. We take a whole-of-community approach - strengthening the ability of educators and community members to teach their own children fundamental language and literacy skills, while increasing the skillsets, capabilities and engagement of participating adults.

2. Why Foundational Supports are essential for language and literacy development

Oral language is the foundation for learning and human connection. The evidence is clear, spelled out by the Australian Council for Educational Research: ‘strong oral language skills and good quality early language teaching predict a child’s success in life’.² Conversely, poor oral language and literacy skills in the early years create poor outcomes, at individual, community and national levels. Children who fall behind in oral language and literacy development in the years before school are less likely to learn to read well at school, beginning a cascade of negative effects that last throughout life.³

Oral language difficulties among young children are relatively common⁴ – but accessible speech pathology services are not. Australia’s children are waiting far too long for speech pathology services, with some families waiting 20 months for assessment and a further 20 months to commence treatment.⁵

The need for speech pathology services is particularly pronounced for children and families living in lower socio-economic status communities. Australian researchers have identified ‘high rates of language and pre-

¹ ALNF commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research to develop the ELLDI as part of its 5-year independent evaluation of the EL&L Program. See: Cloney, D., Picker, K., Jeffries, D., & Anderson, P. (2022). [The Overcoming Disadvantage in Early Childhood study: Evaluation of the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation’s Early Language and Literacy program. Final Report](#). Australian Council for Educational Research.

² Anzai, D., Knowles, S., Cloney, D., Munro-Smith, P., & Mitchell, P. (2021). [Assessment of Oral Language and Early Literacy in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review](#). Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Melbourne. p.3.

³ Quach, J., Elek, C., Beatson, R., Bridie, J., & Goldfeld, S. (2017). [Reviewing the evidence for supporting children’s early language and literacy development](#). Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and Royal Children’s Hospital.

⁴ Smith J., Levickis P., Neilson R., Mensah F., Goldfeld S. and Bryson, H. (2021). Prevalence of language and pre-literacy difficulties in an Australian cohort of 5-year-old children experiencing adversity. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*. March/April 2021, 56(2), 389–401.

⁵ McGill, N., Crowe, K. & Mcleod, S. (2020): “Many wasted months”: Stakeholders’ perspectives about waiting for speech-language pathology services. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* 22(3).

literacy difficulties for 5-year-old children experiencing adversity', including families facing socioeconomic, health and other challenges.⁶

However, even if they were universally available, professional speech pathology services cannot, in isolation, deliver the comprehensive support that many children need. Families and communities are essential in the daily work of building children's language skills. Parents and carers can be equipped to support their children's language and literacy development, even when a child is experiencing language difficulties. Our own work delivering EL&L demonstrates that parents, carers, educators and others can be taught principles and practices from speech pathology and educational pedagogy, in ways that have direct impact for children.

3. Principles of Targeted Foundational Supports

Drawing on our experiences with communities in NSW and elsewhere, we offer the following principles for the design and delivery of Targeted Foundational Supports to children under 9 years of age with developmental concern, delay and/or disability, and their families, carers and kin:

(a) Empower communities to support their children

We empower communities to address their own children's speech, language and pre-literacy development needs. This means working in teams, bringing together clinical experts, parents/carers and the early years workforce to design and deliver daily supports for children who need more help with their oral language and early literacy skills.

We understand that not every family is independently resourced to support their children's needs. But we know that every family can be equipped to provide support to every child. Our program equips community members with training, mentoring and tailored resources to address their own children's speech and language development needs with practical, accessible strategies and resources. We do this in communities that experience significant challenges, including health and developmental issues, transgenerational illiteracy and disengagement from education.

(b) Cast the net wide to support children in 'natural settings'

Our Early Language and Literacy (EL&L) Program combines evidence-based practices from speech pathology and education to support children's development in a range of 'natural settings'. We work with:

- early childhood educators
- teachers and support staff in the early years of primary school (Reception to Grade 3)
- maternal and early childhood health professionals
- local allied health professionals, especially speech pathologists
- public library staff
- playgroup facilitators
- kinship carers

⁶ Smith, J., Levickis, P., Neilson, R., Mensah, F., Goldfeld, S. and Bryson, H. (2021). Prevalence of language and pre-literacy difficulties in an Australian cohort of 5-year-old children experiencing adversity. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* 56(2). p. 390.

- local community service groups.

This is an 'ecosystem' approach that can maximise each child's access to supports in daily life (see Figure 1).

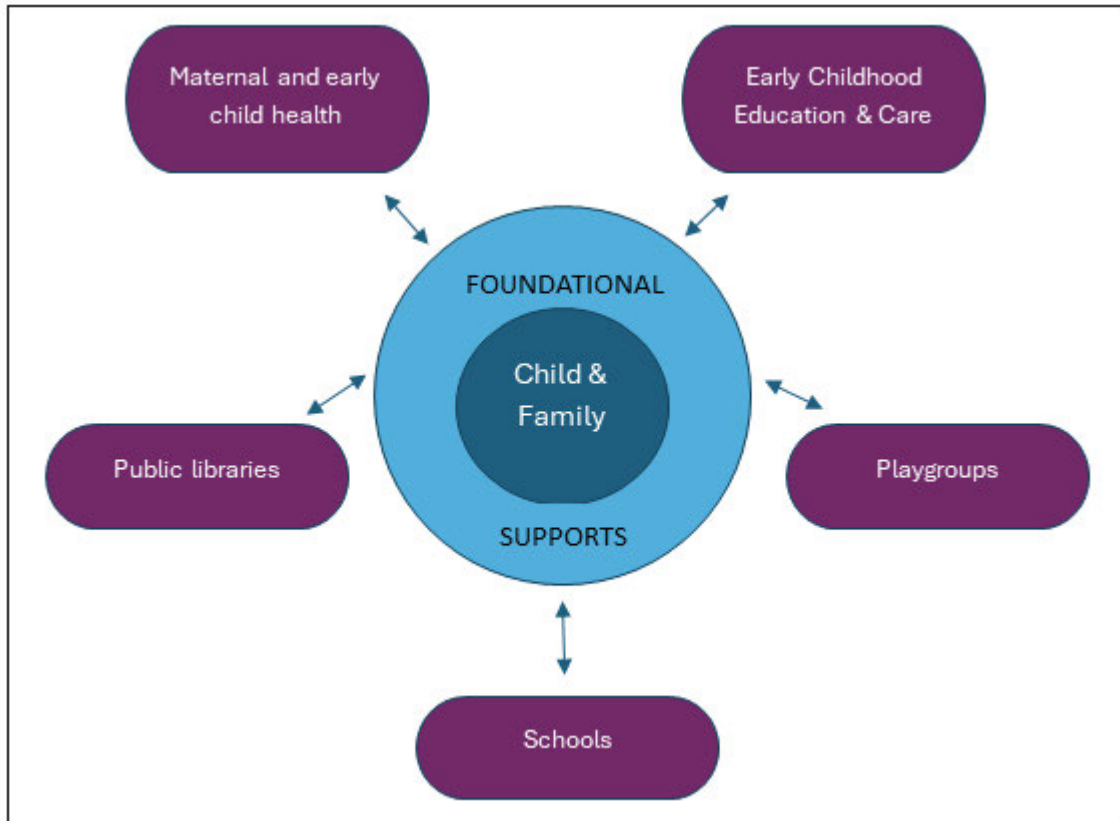


Figure 1: Foundational Supports and natural settings: language and literacy development

(c) Insist on high-quality training, but be flexible in delivery

The support that we provide a child with developmental concern, delay and/or disability must be evidence-based and well-suited to the child's circumstances. In natural settings, this means delivering high-quality training to a range of adults, ensuring that both the training content and the mode of delivery meet their needs. This requires flexibility on the part of service delivery providers.

In 2024, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) and ALNF published a study on peer mentoring as an alternative to more traditional professional development, where most or all staff/adults in a particular setting are trained at once, usually off-site. The study involved ALNF delivering its EL&L program to teachers and educators from 10 early childhood education and care services. The study found that peer mentoring is a feasible and promising alternative approach to training, offering flexibility while also maintaining fidelity to the training.⁷

⁷ Ridgway, K., Collier, A., Pian, R., People, J., Bradford, D., & Mancenido, Z. (2024). *Peer mentoring for sharing skills and knowledge from professional learning: The importance of planning and support*. Australian Education Research

The AERO research supports ALNF’s community engagement model, which anticipates and accommodates the time pressures on staff across a range of services. We deliver ‘rolling’ training and mentoring on-site, to integrate knowledge and skills into the daily work of program participants; we also facilitate ‘cascading’ knowledge and skills exchanges, to spread the benefit of our training to other staff. In this way, all staff at a service are supported to build their skills and confidence as a team: assessing and planning together, and confidently supporting families.

Quality content is also essential for effective training in community-based settings. ALNF uses its nationally-accredited 11027NAT Certificate IV in Early Language and Literacy as the bedrock of its community-based training. This can be delivered as a standalone qualification (to professionals and to those with no post-school qualifications), or can be adapted to deliver smaller modules of training.

(d) Maximise the value of allied health professionals

Access to allied health professionals will continue to hamper efforts to support children with developmental concern, delay and/or disability – unless we ‘work smarter’ by embedding carefully selected knowledge within the services that operate throughout our communities.

Our own programs were developed as an efficient, effective and sustainable way of overcoming barriers resulting from the insufficient provision of speech pathology for children. While programs delivered by ‘non-experts’ are not a substitute for clinical services, they can ensure that children’s needs are identified and met (up to a point), irrespective of geographic location and socioeconomic situation.

The Foundational Supports system should embed a multi-tiered model of service provision (see Figure 2).

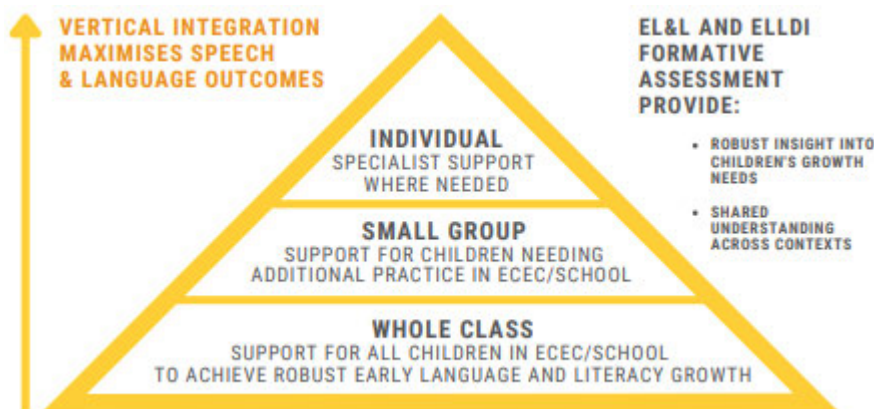


Figure 2: ALNF programs: working across tiers of support

4. Responses to NSW Select Committee's Terms of Reference

The Foundational Supports system has the potential to equip and activate communities with evidence-based training and resources, in support of their children. Families and communities can be powerhouses: agents of sustainable change in the lives of children who need additional support.

These observations are consistent with the priorities identified in the NSW Select Committee's Terms of Reference on the Inquiry into foundational and disability supports available for children and young people in NSW.

(a) & (b)	<p>The role of such services and supports on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing;</p> <p>The types of services and supports available and measures to improve effectiveness, availability and access of such services and supports in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote New South Wales, including medical, community-nursing, allied health services, NDIS services and other service delivery models</p>
	<p><u>ALNF response:</u> As stated above, ALNF agrees that support services – such as allied health services – are essential for supporting children who are vulnerable to experiencing delays in oral language and early literacy development. However, we also understand that (a) the demand for such services outstrips the supply in many communities across NSW; and (b) rich support for children can be provided through quality training, mentoring and support in ECEC services. ALNF advises the Select Committee to consider the role that ECEC services play in directly providing supports for children and their role in collaborating with allied health services in the provision of services for children.</p> <p>As suggested below (g), we recommend that the Select Committee consider the role of training and mentoring – such as the EL&L program model – in supporting workforce development in the ECEC sector, to equip educators with the skills and knowledge to provide quality, regular support for children who qualify for Foundational Supports.</p>
(c)	<p>The role of diagnostic services, existing gaps and barriers, and measures to improve effectiveness, availability and access of such services</p>
	<p><u>ALNF response:</u> ALNF invites the Select Committee to learn more about ways in which the ELLDI assessment tool can fill some gaps in the sector. ALNF developed the ELLDI as a fit-for-purpose, easy-to-use formative assessment tool for everyday use by ECEC educators, to gain insights into children's development across all recognised sub-domains of early literacy development (e.g. oral language, expressive vocabulary, concepts of print, phonological awareness, etc). Whilst the ELLDI is not a diagnostic tool – such as speech pathology tools like the CELF – it is a world-first assessment tool for assessing children aged 2 to 5 years. It (a) highlights where a child is located on an empirically derived development scale; (b)</p>

	<p>provides instructional advice for parents and educators; and (c) can be administered over time to monitor a child's growth and to adjust instructional practice accordingly.</p> <p>For the purposes of Foundational Supports, the ELLDI could play a key role in screening children who may require additional assistance, but who would not qualify for NDIS funding. However, screening is only one part of the diagnostic process, which must extend into support for children and monitoring of children's development over time. The ELLDI was designed for precisely this type of broad, long-term application. For example, the ELLDI could be used in child and family health care services as an effective means to monitor children's growth across time.</p>
(d)	<p>Gaps and barriers to accessing early childhood intervention and their impact on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing, as well as on their family or carers and other government services and systems</p>
	<p><u>ALNF response:</u> We have stated elsewhere that shortages in the clinical workforce (e.g. speech pathologists and therapists) highlight the importance of working with other professionals to support children's oral language and literacy development. The adults who already attend to young children – in ECEC settings, community settings and the family home – are ideally placed to deliver these supports, equipped with guidance and training from reputable experts. Whilst clinicians provide excellent services to children, and families, the demand for their services greatly outweigh the supply, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas. Children and youth who qualify for Foundational Supports may struggle to access appropriate services.</p> <p>In addition, research suggests that families prefer to travel short distances (on average 2.9 kilometres) to access ECEC services, and families often base their decisions on ECEC services on proximity and accessibility, rather than any quality or service criteria, which – aside NQS rating – are not widely published or available. This makes it even more important to embed the strategies, skills and knowledge into the workforce with which families and children interact on a regular basis.</p> <p>Recent research by the Mitchell Institute shows that the current model of ECEC funding tends to favour already advantaged families, in terms of their access to ECEC services and the quality of these services. Importantly, the Mitchell Institute found that the ECEC system 'is limited in delivering equity in the early years because it lacks the systemic mechanism required to allocate additional funds where and when they are needed most'.⁸ In response, the Mitchell Institute is calling for change, so that the ECEC system can 'fund interventions</p>

⁸ Tham, M., Leung, C., Hurley, P., Pilcher, S., & Prokofieva, M. (2025). *Unequal from the start: The achievement gap and the early years*. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, p. 22.

	and extra resources that are effective in improving children’s developmental outcomes’. ⁹ We recommend that the NSW Government advocates for this change in its work with the Australian Government on the Foundational Supports system.
(e)	Opportunities to increase engagement across sectors and improved collaboration across both government and non-government services, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, early learning services, educational settings and health services
	<p><u>ALNF response:</u> ALNF agrees that a Foundational Supports strategy needs to be place-based and successfully leverage trusted local services, regardless of whether we are considering urban, regional, rural or remote contexts. It is important to understand the safe, trusted spaces that families access within communities in order to reduce the barriers to accessing Foundational Supports. As stated in response to (d), families are more likely to access services in their local community than to travel for specialised support.</p> <p>ALNF works regularly with community-based services in rural and remote Australia, including in Indigenous communities. Respectful engagement is essential to this work, building true partnerships. We often establish a community reference group to guide our engagement and activities, enabling us to listen deeply and respond to advice about cultural adaptations to be incorporated into our training and mentoring. These partnerships also work to raise awareness of the types of supports available to families, so that available supports are accessible to the most vulnerable in our communities. In addition to creating awareness, local collaboration helps build the local workforce in appropriate and respectful ways and helps us to create lasting change for the community’s children.</p>
(f)	Other government or best practice child development and early childhood intervention service models and programs operating outside of New South Wales
	<p><u>ALNF response:</u> As the Select Committee would be aware, TAFE SA has commenced a Centre of Excellence in Early Childhood Education and Care to provide national leadership on skills in early childhood and care services. Whilst hosted in South Australia, the Centre is designed to provide national recommendations. The Centre is early in its remit, but its learnings will be of benefit to NSW Government planning.</p> <p>Other organisations, such as ARACY, provide strong frameworks to guide policy development. ARACY’s The Nest is an evidence-based tool for mapping, delivering and assessing change for children and youth, across health, wellbeing and learning domains.¹⁰</p>

⁹ Tham, M., Leung, C., Hurley, P., Pilcher, S., & Prokofieva, M. (2025). *Unequal from the start: The achievement gap and the early years*. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, p. 9.

¹⁰ ARACY. (2024). *The Nest Wellbeing Framework*, <https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-wellbeing-framework/>.

	The Victorian Government's School Readiness Funding (SRF) is a proven model for building capacity within the ECEC workforce and families to support children's learning and development. With its devolved decision-making structure, the SRF is ideal for a place-based approach, allowing individual ECEC services, educators and families to find the right programs and supports for their community. A review of the SRF found that it had led to 'improved capacity of services and staff to respond to the needs of children and families'. ¹¹
(g)	Workforce issues in the child development and early childhood intervention sectors, including workforce demand and the availability, quality and capacity of existing workers
	<p><u>ALNF response:</u> As stated in sections (a), (b) & (d), it is vital that families and early years educators have the skills and the confidence to incorporate regular, play-based, intentional instruction in the prior-to-school years in the essential areas of oral language, phonological awareness and pre-literacy engagement so that children enter into schooling with the skills and strategies necessary to engage in formal literacy instruction. Research suggests that gaps that appear at the onset of school only widen across time, making early intervention an important component of ECEC services. According to the TAFE SA's Centre of Excellence in ECEC, this includes developing educators' awareness of the role of assessment in the guiding of programming and on-the-floor practice.</p> <p>The ECEC sector would acknowledge that the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care is not sufficient to develop educators' on-the-floor practices, and that additional training of everyday practitioners would be beneficial. Through the EL&L and ELLDI initiatives, ALNF draws on expert knowledge to equip a wide range of adults to support children's oral language and early literacy skills. ALNF knows that high-quality training and mentoring, delivered in communities, enables educators, health practitioners, community support workers, and parents and carers to help children in very practical ways – including children with language difficulties.</p>

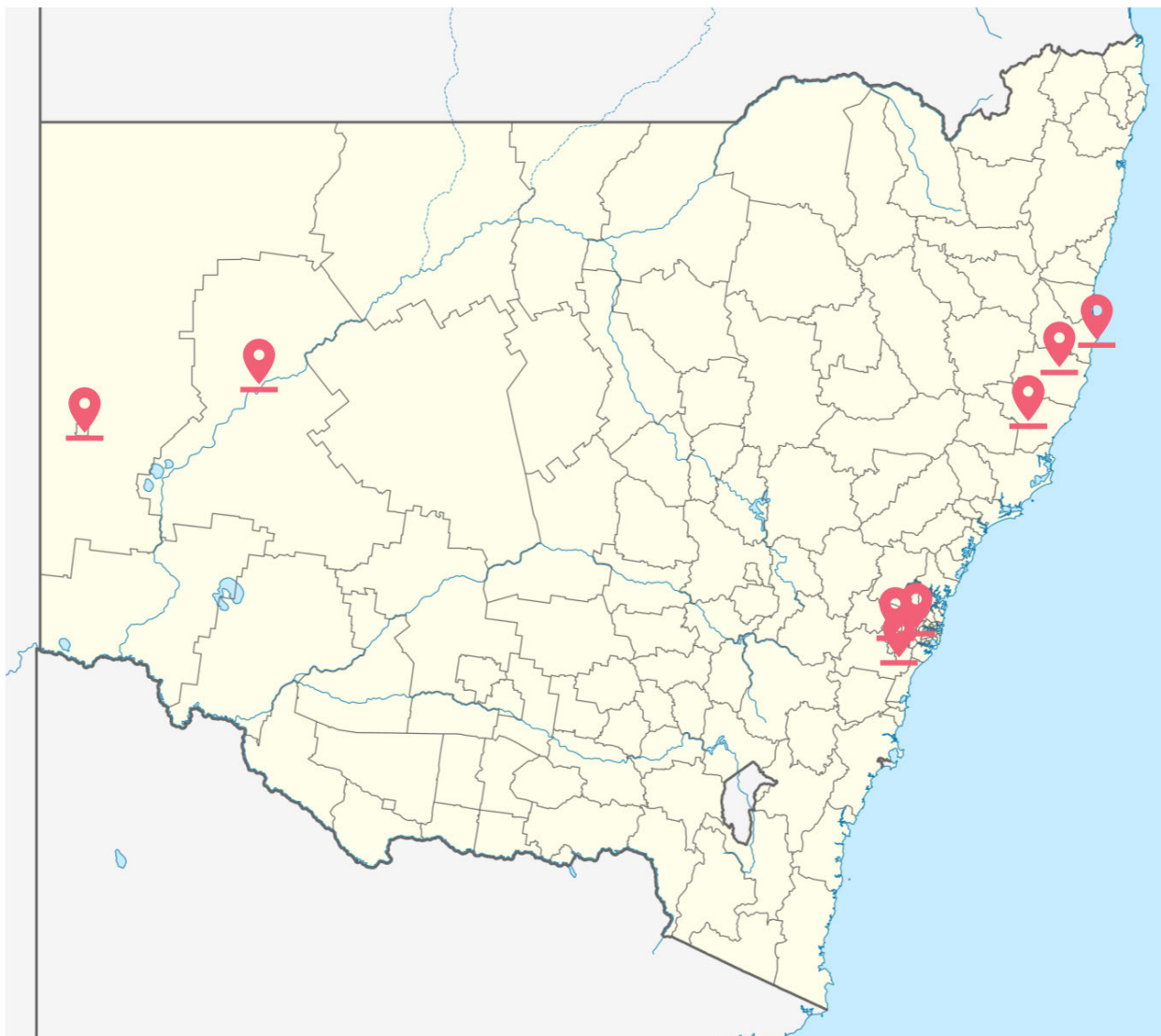
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¹¹ Victorian Government. (2022). *School Readiness Funding: Future Directions, September 2022*. Department of Education and Training.
https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/funding/SRF_ReformDirections_MinisterStitt_Statement_2022.pdf

APPENDIX: GENERAL NSW LOCATIONS : EL&L Training Delivery (past three years)



NSW Locations by LGA:

- Broken Hill LGA
- Central Darling LGA (specifically, Wilcannia)
- Kempsey LGA
- Mid-North Coast LGA (specifically, Taree locations)
- Nambucca Valley LGA
- City of Canterbury-Bankstown LGA
- Campbelltown City Council LGA (including locations in Minto)
- Cumberland LGA
- Fairfield LGA
- City of Parramatta LGA