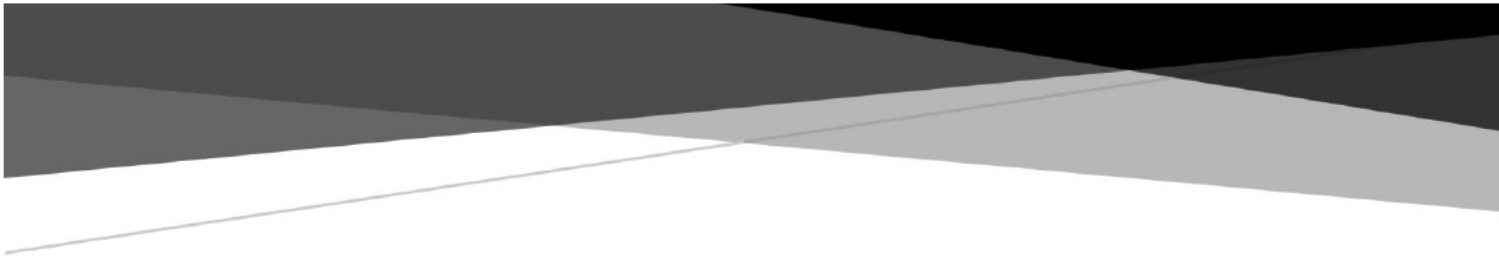


**INQUIRY INTO FOUNDATIONAL AND DISABILITY
SUPPORTS AVAILABLE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: The Hive Mt Druitt (United Way Australia)
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SUBMISSION TO THE NSW SELECT COMMITTEE ON FOUNDATIONAL AND DISABILITY SUPPORTS AVAILABLE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

The Hive, Mount Druitt (United Way Australia)

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Executive Summary

This submission draws on the experiences and insights of The Hive, Mount Druitt, a place-based collective impact initiative operating in Western Sydney. For ten years, we have been working with the Mount Druitt community to ensure that all children start school developmentally ready. We have direct knowledge of the disability supports available for children and young people in our area, and of the factors that enable – and prevent – access to supports.

A key driver of our work – and the key point of this submission – is that vulnerability is multi-layered for children with disability and developmental delay who also live in communities experiencing disadvantage. Both mainstream services and specialised support systems must recognise, and respond to, this layering of disadvantage. This is possible when governments prioritise funding and other resources for communities and cohorts with the greatest needs, and when governments and service providers work in tandem with communities to design supports.

This submission highlights some of the barriers faced by children and families in Mount Druitt in accessing essential, high-quality services. These include:

- unaffordability
- difficulty in navigating complex systems: accessing early childhood education and care and connecting with primary schools, health and allied health systems.
- lack of workforce capacity
- siloed organisational structures, creating gaps in service provision.

We want to see better services and outcomes for children in our community. Disability supports are critically important to early childhood development and learning, and the new system of Foundational Supports presents an opportunity to ‘do differently’ and ‘do better’. We urge the Committee to provide the NSW Parliament with strong recommendations on fixing the disability support system and ensuring that Foundational Supports deliver on their promise.

Our recommendations

<i>For all governments and service providers</i>	
1.	Ensure that Foundational Supports are concentrated on communities with the greatest need and are co-designed with those communities.
<i>For the NSW Government (in consultation with the Australian Government, as required)</i>	
2.	Make ECEC free in the two years before school (for children aged 3-4 years).
3.	Provide more resources for ECEC services to support children with disability and developmental delay and simplify the application process.
4.	Build better practice in transition to school, including structured collaboration between early childhood educators and primary school teachers.

5.	Invest in the wellbeing of early childhood educators, through coaching that builds their knowledge and confidence in inclusive practices.
6.	Advocate for a higher rate of Child Care Subsidy (CCS) funding for ECEC services in socially disadvantaged areas, in recognition of their higher cost base.
<i>For ECEC providers</i>	
7.	Abolish childcare bonds or use a sliding bond fee scale for vulnerable families.
8.	Allow the enrolment of vulnerable children without birth certificates.
9.	Invest in additional educators (above ratio) to achieve higher standards of practice.
10.	Increase the number of First Nations educators, to create culturally safe environments for First Nations families.

About The Hive in Mount Druitt

The Hive is a place-based, collective impact initiative operating in Mount Druitt, Western Sydney. Our vision at The Hive is for all children in Mount Druitt to start school well, with equal opportunity to learn, be healthy and participate in quality community life.

Mount Druitt has a history of entrenched intergenerational poverty and social stigma. Among the postcode's twelve suburbs, some have exceptionally high rates of unemployment, crime, financial insecurity, domestic violence and poor mental health. Over the last several years, the percentage of children assessed as developmentally vulnerable has increased, along with the gap between Mount Druitt children and their peers in the rest of NSW. Disability and developmental delay present profound challenges to young children and their families in Mount Druitt – because the intervention supports available elsewhere are not available here.

The Hive works in two main ways to support children who need early intervention support:

1. We work directly with families to address barriers to enrolling their children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services; and
2. We provide professional development opportunities and mentoring to early childhood educators, to equip them to support children with disability, developmental delay and complex needs.

Our work supporting children, families and ECEC services is effective, but our resources are limited. Mount Druitt urgently needs systemic change, to ensure that children can start school well and thrive. Without significant investment from government in disability supports across Mount Druitt, children here will struggle to break the cycle of poverty.

Our response to the terms of reference

(a) The role of early childhood intervention services and disability supports on children's development, health and wellbeing

Delays in accessing early intervention and diagnostic services can have profound impacts on children's development; unfortunately, such delays are common in disadvantaged communities like Mount Druitt. We desperately need a better approach.

The early childhood education and care (ECEC) system is the ideal delivery site for early intervention and disability supports, for several reasons:

- Early learning is pivotal to healthy development and achievement throughout life.
- Inclusion in the education system must start from Day 1 - and this means participating in high-quality ECEC programs.
- As the NDIS Review recommended, '[s]upport should be delivered in natural settings wherever possible — homes, early childhood settings and schools' (Commonwealth of Australia 2023, p. 41).

Research demonstrates that access to 600 hours of quality preschool before starting school is instrumental in ensuring children are developmentally on track and ready to commence primary school (Early Childhood Australia 2019). The provision of high-quality care in early childhood has positive impacts on children's developmental outcomes, with those experiencing high-quality care programs more likely to exhibit school readiness abilities and become successful adults (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2023).

The impact of quality ECEC is particularly significant in disadvantaged communities. Developmental vulnerability is much higher in some Mount Druitt suburbs (2 in 3 children vulnerable) than the national rate (1 in 5 children vulnerable). This vulnerability gap is widening, with children from socioeconomically disadvantaged regions starting school already behind, compared to children from other communities (AEDC 2023).

For all children, ECEC services play a critical role in supporting development, health and wellbeing, offering a learning environment that promotes physical, emotional, social and cognitive growth. Early childhood services help to foster independence, help children to learn new skills and can help build the foundations of social connectedness.

For children with disability and developmental delay, well-resourced ECEC is particularly important. Speech and occupational therapy supports are required so children can thrive in their learning environments. For instance, expressive and receptive language skills affect children's social engagement and learning. Emotional dysregulation - often observed in communities experiencing disadvantage, due to family stresses - affects children's ability learn and navigate their social and learning environments.

In Mount Druitt, the barriers to accessing these services are especially high. This problem requires a systems-level solution, with leadership and resourcing from the NSW Government.

(b) Types of services and supports available and measures to improve effectiveness, availability and access

The Hive was established in response to very poor access in the Mount Druitt community to the services that should help children and families to thrive. Poor access to services is particularly common – and particularly harmful – for children with disability and developmental delay.

We have seen many organisations in Mount Druitt wanting to deliver the best supports for families. However, the system surrounding children and families is confusing and complex. If ECEC services, primary schools, health services, NDIS providers and allied health professionals could develop communication channels and a streamlined approach for families, much of the stress on families would be eliminated.

The Hive currently delivers the following services, which address access barriers and lack of coordination:

- **Specialised Supports:** Enabling speech therapists, occupational therapists and other early intervention specialists to attend ECEC services, to provide capacity-building strategies for educators supporting children with developmental challenges.
- **Early Learning Linker roles:** Supporting families to overcome barriers to accessing ECEC by providing information on options, navigating the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) system, accessing birth certificates, and providing brokerage support.
- **Early Childhood Educators' Network:** Place-based professional development for educators in Mount Druitt.

The Hive's initiatives in Mount Druitt have generated very positive impacts for children. Key outcomes include:

a. Increasing the number of vulnerable children able to access ECEC services:

- o We assisted families to enrol 250 children in ECEC and/or to sustain their enrolment when at risk of termination.

b. Increase in quality of ECEC services

- o Through provision of professional development and coaching by The Hive, the quality ratings of ECEC services across Mount Druitt have risen significantly: from 19 services failing to meet the National Quality Standard, to only two services in this category.
- o 89% of educators indicated that The Hive's Early Childhood Educators' Network made them better equipped to deliver high-quality ECEC.

c. Early intervention specialists are now embedded in ECEC services long-term

- o The Hive delivered its Specialised Support Program in 19 ECEC services in Mount Druitt. As a result, nine services have now secured ongoing funding to continue early intervention.
- o Reflections from educators who have participated in this initiative are very positive (Box 1).

Box 1: Reflections from educators and families engaged in the Specialised Support Program

Early Educator Story of Impact

"The diversity of challenges the children have, is so hard to meet their diverse developmental and learning needs. Some days it feels like I can't get to everyone. It's great that you [occupational therapist] work with us as a team, so that we can share the load."

Child Story of Impact

"Across the playground, children are approaching educators, identifying their feelings, and actively participating in identifying appropriate responses. Children are anticipating adults will help them and accepting the support to be able to get back to play."

Parent Story of Impact

"Life does not feel like a fight anymore. She is responding to me when I put in place expectations, and she is enjoying me more. She feels more relaxed and her play and knowledge skills seems to be happening very quickly – she knows all her colours now."

Child Story of Impact

"3yo child thinking that he needs to be strong and not need his mother, tending to be specifically shy and avoidant. After engagement in circle of security principles, mother increased her responsiveness, and child demonstrated more receptiveness of mother's support, to more openly engage in play with a variety of people."

These highly effective supports for families and educators are funded by The Hive – not by the ECEC or CCS systems. Under the new Foundational Supports system, governments must fund these kinds of services, at no cost to families in vulnerable circumstances.

(c) The role of diagnostic services, existing gaps and barriers, and measures to improve effectiveness

Early childhood diagnostic services play a critical role in identifying developmental concerns, health issues, and learning difficulties in young children and young people across Mount Druitt. These services help to ensure timely interventions that can significantly improve outcomes for children and their families. They are also usually required to gain access to NDIS funding and classroom support in schools.

Existing gaps and barriers across Mount Druitt include:

- **Growing population with insufficient resources** for early identification of disability and developmental delays. This leads to **long waiting periods** for specialised assessments, especially for autism (ASD). The waitlist for private and public paediatricians is currently 12-18 months.
- **The financial cost** of services and assessments. Many parents are unable to afford appointments and assessments. For example, an ASD diagnosis currently costs \$2,500;

access to speech and occupational therapies/assessments costs \$500; and many diagnostic processes are up to \$1,000.

- **Insufficient communication and collaboration** between support services, including schools, NDIS and health services, which are often working in silos. Systems need to be speaking to each other to improve effectiveness.
- **Complex administrative processes** for securing additional support, including difficulty accessing essential NDIS information and input from doctors, who are often unaware of processes and information required for children to meet access requirements.
- **Lack of staff knowledge** in ECEC services to adequately support children with disability and developmental delay.
- **Inadequate staffing ratios** in ECEC services, making it difficult to identify and address developmental concerns.
- **Transport** and geographical barriers impacting access to services, professionals and supports.

Box 2: Check Ups Before School (CUBS): An effective approach to early diagnosis in vulnerable communities

The CUBS Program was started by The Hive in response to the increasing number of developmental delays in children starting school in the Mount Druitt area, and a low number of families accessing early childhood health & development checks.

Families were not accessing the checks due to: fear of government services and being judged for their parenting; lack of transport; low health literacy and understanding of the checks; and navigating complex family stressors such as domestic violence, financial stress, housing instability and poor mental health.

The CUBS Program leveraged existing trust held with local community health and ECEC services, by embedding a child & family health nurse to conduct Ages & Stages Development Checks on the children. A speech pathologist was added to the team to complete screeners and provide initial therapy with the children, and a Health Linker (social worker) supported families post-assessment, where they required further assessment of their child's needs.

This program was highly successful, as evaluated by Western Sydney University, and was subsequently embedded into the mainstream community nursing program (NSW Health) in the Mount Druitt area. The CUBS Program also informed the design of the Brighter Beginnings model of preschool health checks across NSW.

(d) Gaps and barriers to accessing early childhood intervention and their impacts

Across the suburbs of Mount Druitt, we have identified numerous barriers that families face in accessing disability supports in ECEC services:

- **Financial barriers:** High costs of enrolment fees and bonds, sometimes \$2,000 per family (for two children).
- **Knowledge gaps:** A lack of information about how to access local ECEC services and supports.
- **Administrative complexity:** Families overwhelmed by CCS processes.
- **Transportation:** Unreliable public transport, stress of travelling with children and financial costs.
- **Documentation:** Access to birth certificates and complex registration processes, including difficulties and expenses involved in accessing birth registration and certification.
- **Family complexities and challenges:** Difficulty maintaining enrolment when family circumstances lead to arrears, with often strict exclusion policies that do not provide time and support to families.
- **Lack of training for educators** to support the complex needs of children with a disability.

These barriers impact children's development by preventing or delaying access to crucial early intervention within ECEC services. This contributes to the widening developmental gap observed between disadvantaged communities like Mount Druitt and the rest of NSW.

(e) Opportunities to increase engagement across sectors and improve collaboration

The Hive pursues cross-sector collaboration through its place-based collective impact approach. Place-based models and approaches demonstrate how government, non-government services, educational institutions and health services can work together effectively, for the benefit of children with disability and developmental delay.

Our experience suggests the following as opportunities for the Foundational Supports system in NSW:

- Expanding collaborative networks, like our Early Childhood Educators' Network, to facilitate knowledge sharing across ECEC services.
- Promoting stronger partnerships between early childhood educators and school teachers to ensure smoother transitions to school.
- Increasing investment in First Nations early childhood educators, to encourage First Nations families to enrol in culturally safe care.
- Developing more integrated models, where allied health professionals regularly visit ECEC settings and work alongside educators.
- Establishing centralised coordination points, like The Hive's Early Learning Linker role, to bridge the gap between service providers and families.

(f) Other government or best practice models and programs outside of NSW

The NSW Government should also review other evidence-based approaches, such as universal free early learning, as delivered for children aged 3-4 years in Victoria (Free Kinder). Currently being rolled out across Victoria, this program is ground-breaking in removing many of the barriers to ECEC in vulnerable communities:

‘Free Kinder is for everyone. Families do not need to have a Health Care Card or Pension Card, Australian citizenship, or proof of address to be eligible to access. You also do not need to be eligible for Australian Government Child Care Subsidy (CCS) to receive Free Kinder’ (Victorian Government 2024).

(g) Workforce issues in the child development and early childhood intervention sectors

There are critical workforce issues across the early intervention, early childhood development and ECEC sectors in Mount Druitt. These include:

- **Shortage of educators:** Impacting the availability of ECEC places, with some centres having to close on days without sufficient staff.
- **Inadequate staff-to-child ratios:** Current ratios are insufficient to provide high-quality care, especially for children with complex needs.
- **Administrative burden:** Excessive paperwork reduces time for direct work with children
- **Limited resources:** Educators in disadvantaged areas lack sufficient support to meet the National Quality Standard.
- **Wellbeing concerns:** Burnout among early childhood educators leading to attrition from the sector.

(h) Measures to implement recommendations from key reports

The Hive strongly supports the recommendations for reform produced by the NDIS Review. In particular, we agree with the Commissioners that a new Foundational Supports system is necessary, to ‘bring fairness, balance and sustainability to the ecosystem supporting people with disability’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2023, p. 4).

We urge the NSW Government to bring its best efforts to co-designing, funding and delivering a robust, innovative Foundational Supports system for our children.

Conclusion

The barriers to accessing diagnostic services and early intervention services have profound impacts on children's development, particularly in disadvantaged communities like Mount Druitt. A comprehensive approach is desperately needed that addresses financial barriers,

simplifies navigation of complex systems, builds workforce capacity, and ensures equitable access to high-quality services.

Place-based approaches like The Hive demonstrate the value of localised, collaborative interventions that address the specific needs of communities. By bringing together stakeholders from across sectors, implementing school-based hubs, and investing in specialised support programs, we can create an early childhood system that truly supports all children to reach their potential.

This submission advocates for the role of high-quality ECEC services in supporting children with disability and developmental delay. This central role for ECEC – inclusive and non-stigmatising – is particularly important in vulnerable communities. Our experiences in Mount Druitt demonstrate that, without significant investment in ECEC services and foundational disability supports, children from communities experiencing disadvantage will continue to fall behind.

Addressing the identified barriers and implementing our recommendations would create a more equitable ECEC sector that better serves all children in NSW, particularly those who need it most.

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