

Dear Infrastructure Victoria,

Early Learning Association of Australia (ELAA) is the national peak body championing excellence in early learning. We represent over 1300 service sites that provide early childhood education and care, predominately kindergarten and long day care.

ELAA is writing to provide insight into the unique infrastructure needs of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and is informed by over 35 years of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) and Road Safety Education experience in ECEC.

This submission will outline key issues to inform Victoria's 30-year infrastructure strategy with regard to ECEC.

Managing the market for quality

Infrastructure in ECEC is largely driven by the market. Low barriers to entry for ECEC impact quality. New providers regularly enter crowded markets and can result in closure of quality established services as parents may perceive newer facilities as more desirable and/or they may initially compete on price. Competition to operate services in areas that can command higher fees also inflates rents, making entry prohibitive to high-quality not-for-profit providers.

Other areas lack ECEC services where the market does not provide incentives for providers to invest. Managing the market alone is not sufficient as not-for-profit community services often lack access to capital necessary to expand. New approaches are needed to support the community sector to grow its footprint.

Recommendation

- managing the market and supporting the community sector to develop and grow through infrastructure investment, including funding innovative solutions to drive growth.

Addressing thin markets to improve access and participation

Participation in early childhood education in two years before school is a Victorian Government priority. A key to improving access and participation in ECEC is ensuring that services are available in all locations, operate the span of hours families need and can be accessed by families.

Many communities lack access to early childhood education and care that meets their needs, including vulnerable families and children with disabilities who face added complexity in matrixing together a range of service supports.

Across Australia there are a range of integrated ECEC models, that combine ECEC with access to other services such as playgroups, maternal and child health, allied health, adult education and parenting programs. Co-located services can support the engagement and retention of children and families.

Recommendations

- investing in sector development by funding co-located ECEC services, especially in low socio-economic, rural and regional communities
- funding transportation for families in rural and remote areas



Building housing capacity in regional Victoria

Workforce attraction and retention is a key issue facing ECEC. This is especially true in regional and rural locations, where population is scarce and access to early childhood services is more limited. A key barrier to attracting workers is a lack of affordable housing.

In order to address the workforce shortage issue in regional Victoria, there needs to be investment into increasing affordable housing opportunities in consultation with local city councils to understand community needs. This issue is especially pertinent as the Commonwealth Games approaches in 2026, which will apply pressure to regional Victoria.

Recommendation

- for there to be investment in building affordable housing options to enable educators to fill job vacancies in regional Victoria
- to address the pressures that Airbnb and the Commonwealth Games place on Victorian residents and housing/rental prices.

Reviewing design guide for children's services

The large and welcome investment in early childhood education infrastructure provides an opportunity to ensure best practice in building design through updated good design guidelines. The existing guidelines, from 2005, are now outdated. Key aspects that require addressing include:

Car Park Design

Good car park design is crucial. Poor design leads to children being in hazardous situations because there are no designated safe walking areas to separate children and families from cars. Multi-use buildings compound the need for proper design that factors in traffic flow. Older services often lack carparks and street parking is required. In these areas, school timetable speed limits do not currently apply.

For ECEC services transporting children to or from their service by bus, a designated safe parking area for the buses should be provided to enable the safe embarking and disembarking of children.

Noise and Pollution

Around one-quarter of ECEC services are sited in areas of high traffic, exposing children to vehicle emissions especially when cars are idling at traffic lights.

Traffic can also contribute to a noisy environment. Noisy environments lead to difficulty in communicating with children and in turn can lead to disengagement from children. Loud environments can also be triggering for some children. Reliance on hard surfaces can contribute to echoing and noise.

Play spaces

Time in natural outdoor spaces is known to benefit children, including supporting children to develop social skills and engage in healthy risk-taking. More services are seeking waivers for outdoor play areas with a reduction of the size of the play areas and no access to natural environments. The overuse of rubber surfaces and artificial grass should be discouraged.



Lock Downs

Early childhood services, as part of their emergency plans, are required to periodically practice lockdown procedures. Ideally, children and adults should be moved to a room or position that does not allow them to be viewed. This should be built into building designs.

Exits

To prevent unintended exits from ECEC, services should be required to have at least two gates/lockable doors to be opened before exiting the service. This includes gates that are used for entrances that may be used by maintenance staff if these areas can also be accessed by children.

Airflow

The Department of Education Victoria has a policy relating to ventilation and air flow relating specifically to COVID-19. These guidelines should be embedded in a design guide as airflow is a key to minimising disease spread including but not limited to COVID-19.

Staff facilities

ECEC building design rightfully prioritises spaces for children's learning. Consideration also needs to be given within design guidelines to ensure sufficient space for staff to engage in planning, to take lunchbreaks and to hold confidential conversations.

Recommendation

- That a revised design guide for Children's Services be developed and include reference to the items listed above including siting, and internal and external design issues.

ELAA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021-2051 and would be pleased to further engage with Infrastructure Victoria.

Kind regards

Megan O'Connell

Acting CEO