



South Australian Aboriginal Early Childhood Co-Design Project

3-YEAR-OLD PRESCHOOL REPORT - AUGUST 2025

Strong voices, bright futures.

A community-driven approach
to enhance the 3-year-old
preschool experience for
Aboriginal children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

MTL Consulting Services and Kimberley Wanganeeen Consultancy acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands to which we travelled.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, along with future leaders, and extend our respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

We recognise the role of family as first teachers and respect the unique value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-raising practices.

We acknowledge and thank all those who participated in this project. Your knowledge, experiences and expertise were heard, felt and valued.

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Daniel Giles, Blak Scarlett

Ngintait, Nganguruku and Yankunytjatjara man Daniel Giles lives on Erawirung Country (Riverland) and supplied some of the imagery for this report. Daniel is an accomplished artist and leader in his community where he provides educational opportunities and positive role modelling for future generations through his art and his shared knowledge and culture.



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TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this report, the term Aboriginal respectfully applies to people who identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. First Nations, Aboriginal and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may be used interchangeably throughout this report to reflect the terms used by participants or where referenced from other sources.

GLOSSARY

Cultural safety: *In the context of this report, cultural safety is understood to encompass Aboriginal cultural safety, recognising the importance of creating environments that are spiritually, socially, emotionally, and physically safe for Aboriginal peoples.*

OECD: *Office for Early Childhood Development*

ECEC: *Early Childhood Education and Care*

ACGG: *Aboriginal Co-Design Governance Group*

ACCO: *Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation*

SAACCON: *South Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Network*

Engagement Consultants: *MTL Consulting Services and Kimberley Wanganeen Consultancy*

Cultural/colonial load: *Colonial load and cultural load are used interchangeably to reflect the preferences of the participants to discuss the underlying burden carried by Aboriginal people.*

Executive Summary

The South Australian Aboriginal Co-Design Project in Early Childhood Education has gathered valuable stakeholder insights to enhance access to and initiatives for 3-year-old Aboriginal children to attend preschool, and to support efforts to attract, develop and retain Aboriginal staff in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector.

Through a carefully structured program of in-person and virtual engagement across all six South Australian First Nations Voice to Parliament regions, we gathered valuable insights from early years educators, administrators, parents, students, ACCO representatives, and government staff. Our phased approach placed genuine co-design at its centre: initial workshops created space for open discussion, while follow-up workshops allowed ideas to be refined and strengthened. The key themes emerging from these engagements are presented in this report and directly inform the Office for Early Childhood Development's work to enhance Aboriginal children's experiences of 3-year-old preschool within the universal preschool rollout in South Australia.

Across the state, we heard many stories of success. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff are already working in strong partnership with communities, families, ACCOs, and local services to provide culturally safe, holistic care for children. In some preschools, Aboriginal-led education has long been embedded, offering valuable examples of how existing strengths can be recognised and built upon.

At the same time, stakeholders expressed concerns about the universal rollout and its potential impact on the tailored supports that Aboriginal children currently rely on. Consistent themes included the need for stronger cultural safety in services, the

persistence of enrolment barriers, transport challenges, cost pressures, and the risk of losing Aboriginal-led approaches through standardisation. Importantly, all participants recognised that access to an additional year of education brings lifelong benefits, not just for children's learning and development, but for families and communities more broadly.

This report explores both the opportunities and the challenges; the benefits of holistic early years services, the barriers that limit access, and what success looks like for Aboriginal children. It highlights that cultural safety and responsive, community-driven service delivery are essential for building trust, increasing attendance, and ensuring Aboriginal children have the strongest possible start to their education journey.

In response to the themes raised, the ACGG has identified a set of practical and impactful initiatives, further refined and prioritised following further consideration and outlined in this report. These indicative initiatives provide a clear foundation for action, with an actionable implementation framework to follow in the next phase.

Above all, our engagement reinforced a strong call for genuine and ongoing co-design. Communities spoke openly about past experiences where Aboriginal voices were excluded from policy and program reform. In contrast, the workshops created safe spaces for honest dialogue and active collaboration, and participants responded positively to being heard, with a second opportunity for engagement to hear back the findings and contribute further well-received. This spirit of partnership between all stakeholders working towards a shared goal signals a hopeful path forward. A path where reforms are shaped with communities, not imposed upon them, and where Aboriginal children across South Australia are supported to thrive.

Background

Aboriginal Australians represent the oldest living continuous cultures in the world, comprising approximately 3.8% of the total Australian population and 2.4% in South Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Following 37 years of government preschool access for Aboriginal children, a universal 3-year-old preschool rollout will commence in 2026. However, widespread concerns among project stakeholders highlights the need to ensure that Closing the Gap must remain a central focus throughout this process. Early preschool education has demonstrated long-term positive effects with children benefiting from early learning experiences, better health outcomes and increased chances of success throughout their educational journey.

By 2032, every child in South Australia will have access to 15 hours of 3-year-old preschool per week with a program that includes teacher-led quality preschool, allied health assistance or similar, along with structured family and community supports. There is no change in accessing the program for Aboriginal children and families, however the universal rollout of this program will offer enhanced benefits to all, with long-term impacts expected across communities in South Australia.

Aboriginal children are currently eligible for 15 hours of preschool from three years of age, continuing until they start school. This initiative, introduced in 1988, was part of a broader approach to improve early childhood education outcomes and support Aboriginal children's development. While this initiative has provided important access to early learning, Aboriginal children remain disproportionately represented among those who are developmentally vulnerable. Additionally, Aboriginal people remain underrepresented within the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce. This highlights the need for considered investment to address the complex challenges faced by Aboriginal communities, particularly those in regional and remote areas. It is recognised that there are few simple solutions, but a multifaceted approach that addresses cultural, logistical and systemic concerns will provide long term benefit and a foundation for ongoing reform.

In 2023, the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care released its final report detailing recommendations to the South Australian Government on planning and delivering quality universal preschool programs for 3 and 4-year-old children from 2026. South Australia is now implementing significant reforms to its early childhood education system, focusing on enhancing developmental outcomes for all South Australian children, including a focus on and dedicated funding for Aboriginal children.

Key initiatives include:

- **Universal 3-year-old preschool**
Ensuring all 3-year-old children in South Australia have access to preschool education through a staged rollout (2026 - 2032), commencing in regional and rural areas.
- **Support for Aboriginal children**
To co-design and invest in initiatives for Aboriginal children that ensure support is culturally respectful, integrates Aboriginal knowledge and pedagogies, and strengthens the long-term benefits of three-year-old preschool.
- **Workforce development**
The government is investing to develop and support the ECEC workforce. This includes financial and wrap-around supports to attract, retain and develop Aboriginal workers.
- **Infrastructure investment**
The government is also investing in preschool infrastructure.

What does current engagement of preschool look like for Aboriginal children in South Australia?

According to the 2024 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census, nationally 65,879 Aboriginal children attended Child Care Subsidy (CCS) approved services, making up 4.4% of the total children enrolled, up from 3.8% in 2021. In South Australia specifically, Aboriginal children accounted for 6.3% of those attending these services, representing a higher proportion than most other states.

Aboriginal educators and teachers remain underrepresented in the ECEC workforce, as highlighted through the census data and our engagements, whilst 3.8% of the total national ECEC workforce identifies as Aboriginal. In South Australia, 37.2% of Aboriginal children had access to at least one Aboriginal paid contact staff member, indicating a need for more consistent cultural representation in early learning environments. Similar to many themes we captured from our engagements, the need for higher Aboriginal ECEC workforce representation was consistently heard in multiple regions and has a flow on effect into the opportunities for engagement with Aboriginal children and families. Through this approach, the goal of establishing and maintaining cultural safety, building trusted relationships with families and communities has a much higher chance of success.

The 2024 Census identified that 338 CCS services nationally are Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS), with 244 of these offering Centre Based Day Care. These services are key to engaging Aboriginal families, although their reach may still be limited in comparison to mainstream services. In South Australia, there are seven ACCOs delivering early childhood services. Additionally, the South Australian Department for Education has engaged or supported 17 ACCOs since January 2023 to co-design, inform, and/or deliver initiatives under the Aboriginal Education Strategy.

While not all of these organisations provide childcare services, the Department's support demonstrates a broader commitment to culturally responsive early childhood development.

These efforts align with South Australia's ongoing initiatives to strengthen the ACCO sector and enhance culturally safe early learning environments.

The Census data finds that the number of Aboriginal children attending childcare services increased relative to the level of remoteness. This aligns with our findings that regional and remote communities often have stronger community connection with local services and a greater understanding of service availability. However, substantial work is needed to ensure that all Aboriginal children have access to safe and engaging 3-year-old preschool, and the benefits are well promoted to families. These findings also reflect our observation that, while a standardised approach to initiative development is important, the systems and programs must be flexible enough to accommodate regional and cultural differences, as uniform strategies do not always lead to consistent and equitable outcomes across all regions.

South Australia demonstrates encouraging participation rates for Aboriginal children in early learning services, especially compared to national averages. The state's longstanding policy to enrol Aboriginal children from age three offers a strong foundation for early engagement. However, gaps remain, particularly in the employment of Aboriginal staff and the provision of culturally safe environments. As the state continues to roll out universal 3-year-old preschool, targeted investment in Aboriginal educators and staff, community partnerships and culturally-led service models will be essential to ensure meaningful and equitable outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and their communities.

Engagement methodology



DESIGN

Our consultation was methodically designed to align with project objectives and to ensure the comprehensive documentation of relevant findings. A phased approach was taken to ensure co-design was emphasised with an opportunity for further participation for those who wished to engage.

Workshops were designed to prioritise Aboriginal culturally-safe environments for attendees to share stories and experiences. A tailored consultation approach, adapted to suit metro, regional and remote community needs, was regularly reviewed based on feedback throughout the engagements.

ENGAGE

Our flexible approach utilised various workshop styles, such as mixed group conversations and one-on-one sessions, delivered both in person and online.

Co-design is an iterative process built on continuous feedback. Workshop questions were refined as insights emerged, and data collection methods were adapted to meet the needs of each group. Throughout, a strong focus was placed on maintaining consistency across engagements to enable meaningful thematic analysis.

ENHANCE

Extensive data and trend analysis occurred throughout the consultation process, particularly at the end of Phase One where themes were consolidated and presented during Phase Two engagements.

Where gaps or assumptions were identified, these were addressed in real time as consultations progressed.

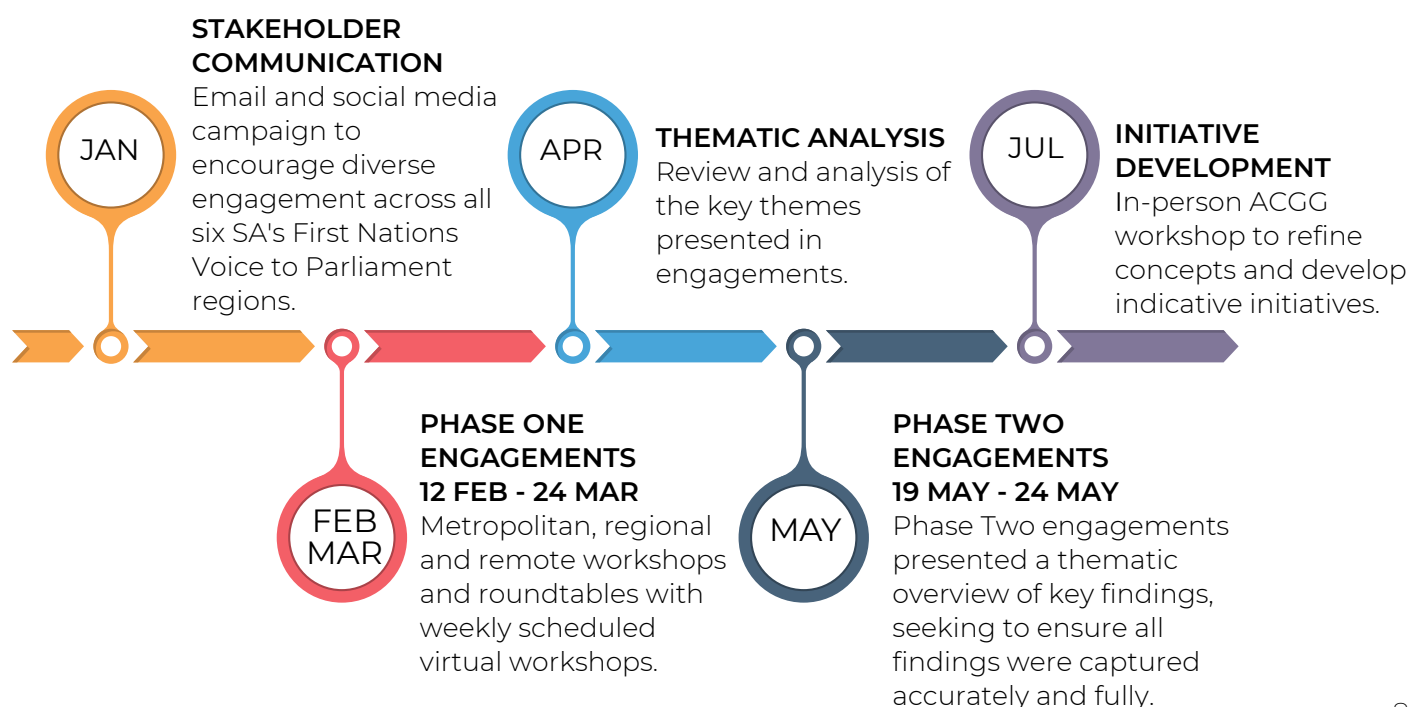
This awareness ensured that we remained mindful of the unique needs and nuances of each community, tailoring our approach and delivery as needed.

A phased approach

The secondary engagement phase offered workshop participants an opportunity to review and discuss our initial findings and invited feedback on our earlier engagements, reinforcing the project's commitment to collaboration and inclusive co-design. We had received a significant amount of valuable insights and through Phase Two were able to refine and test some of our themes. This approach was well-received, with many participants taking the opportunity to share further insights and refine key messages. All Phase Two attendees had previously engaged with our team in some capacity. It was encouraging to see the continued willingness of participants to contribute to the project and they expressed strong interest in staying informed about progress and future initiatives.

To ensure participants had flexibility during the secondary engagement phase, we focused on virtual engagement and developed supporting videos that could be viewed at their convenience, a direct response to consistent feedback received during the Phase One engagements. We recognised that it was a significant commitment for stakeholders to attend a workshop, particularly for those who weren't able to do so freely as part of their paid employment. Phase two saw 20 workshop registrations, with 15 attendees. The project website received over 200 visits during this period (19 - 24 May), highlighting the desire to review and connect with the information presented in an online and accessible format. The videos were viewed 33 times, further indicating the need for flexible engagement opportunities. Those who viewed the videos were invited to provide feedback or comment via an online survey. Another important consideration was the over-consultation of Aboriginal people and communities, an issue we remained acutely aware of throughout the project. Phase Two was designed to offer those who wished to re-engage the opportunity to do so in a way that was entirely voluntary and without any pressure to provide input.

What we heard during Phase Two strongly reinforced our Phase One findings, placing an even stronger emphasis on the need for culturally-safe learning environments and workplaces for Aboriginal staff and children. This key issue must be central to all initiatives developed in partnership with Aboriginal communities, ACCOs, and educators.



Cultural engagement principles

Guided by strong co-design principles* and our collective lived experience, our engagement approach reflected authentic co-design. Cultural considerations were central throughout, with engagement methods tailored to suit each group and community recognising that building long-term, respectful relationships is essential. Co-design requires respectful, sustained relationships grounded in trust, transparency, and shared accountability. Throughout the workshops conducted across diverse regions of South Australia, participants consistently emphasised the need for the South Australian Government and the OECD to maintain a commitment to genuine co-design processes and to communicate outcomes and insights transparently, as essential foundations for achieving meaningful and sustained change.

Our engagement core principles featured:



Self-determination

Self-determination features at the core of our co-design philosophy, ensuring that Aboriginal people influence and shape the design process. Co-design should afford community control over decisions that affect the lives of Aboriginal children and families, empowering their right to define priorities and outcomes.



Cultural integrity

Respect for cultural protocols, knowledge systems and ways of being is essential. Our process upheld and reflected Aboriginal values and connection to Country, kinship and community.



Culturally-appropriate communication

While initial communications were designed for a broad stakeholder audience, we adopted a more targeted approach for specific regions and groups, focusing on minimising jargon and using culturally and contextually appropriate language.



Integrating a trauma-informed approach

Effective facilitation must recognise and build upon the strengths, resilience, and diverse experiences of Aboriginal communities. Our approach deliberately steered clear of deficit-based language and negative framing, instead centring on community strengths, aspirations, and potential. This strengths-based focus facilitated respectful dialogue and resulted in highly valuable engagement outcomes.



Cultural empowerment

Throughout our engagements, we aimed to empower participants and create deeper cultural understanding among non-Aboriginal attendees. Given that workshops were held on the traditional lands of various Aboriginal peoples, we encouraged Aboriginal participants to yarn, sharing insights about their communities and lived experiences. This approach enabled the collection of highly contextualised data, offering region-specific insights across South Australia.



Remaining agile and culturally responsive

As the engagement period progressed, our consultants adapted to the cultural needs of each community including changing dates and workshop format to ensure barriers to involvement were removed.

* Articulation of co-design for engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, SAACCON and the South Australian Public Sector

Engagement analysis

PHASE ONE



Maintaining co-design fundamentals in our approach, we facilitated direct communication and engagement with diverse stakeholders with a presence, expertise or interest within the ECEC sector and/or the experiences of their children. Balancing the project timeframes and scope of the stakeholder landscape, initial communications were fast-tracked and our team used multiple connection channels to engage with our target cohort. Given the positive engagement and willingness to remain connected and informed, we encourage the OECD and ACGG to continue building on these connections more broadly through ongoing engagements across the sector.

Phase One Engagement Summary:



19

In-person workshops and roundtables facilitated



301

Individual stakeholders identified and sent project communications



400+

Project website visits



118

Attendees at engagement session (all formats)



6

Virtual workshops facilitated



11

Online surveys completed

Engagement analysis

PHASE TWO



Phase Two engagements focused on re-engagement and building on earlier conversations. All of those who attended a Phase Two engagement had provided insights during Phase One.

Phase Two Engagement Summary:

→ **10**

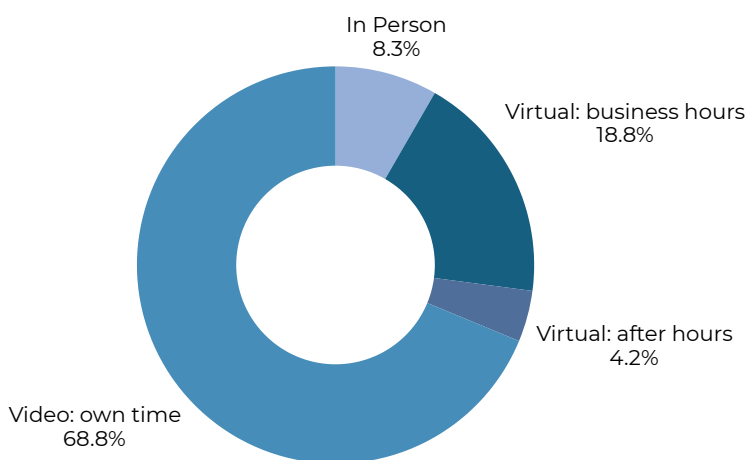
In-person and virtual workshops planned during the period 19 - 24 May, seven proceeded with registrations

→ **281**

Individual stakeholders sent phase two project communications

→ **200+**

Project website visits - phase two content



→ **79%**

Attendance rate of registered phase two participants, representing 15 individual participants

→ **33**

Video views as an alternative to workshop attendance



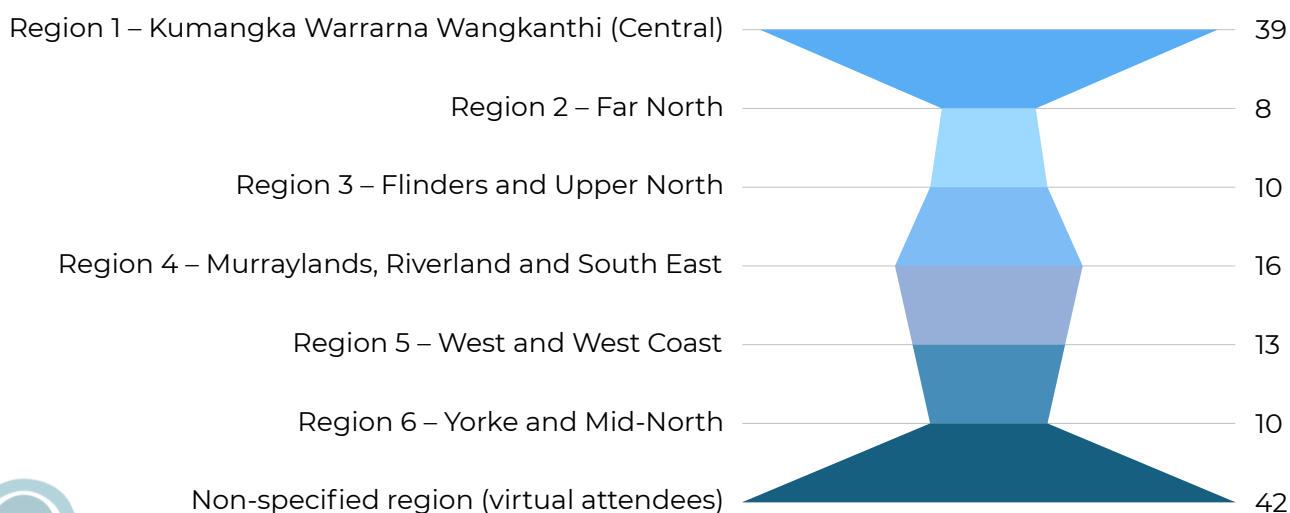
I think you have done such a good job at bringing all this information together really clearly. I really hope that it goes where it needs to go, and speaks to the people it needs to, so that it can change things and have an impact.

Phase Two virtual workshop participant

Stakeholder analysis

Our stakeholder analysis provided a critical foundation for effective community engagement. Through this process, we identified individuals, groups, and organisations both impacted by and influential within the sector and their communities, ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives. By developing a clear understanding of stakeholders' interests and relationships, we were able to adapt and focus our engagement efforts accordingly. This approach has contributed to stronger decision-making and increased engagement uptake throughout the early phase of the project.

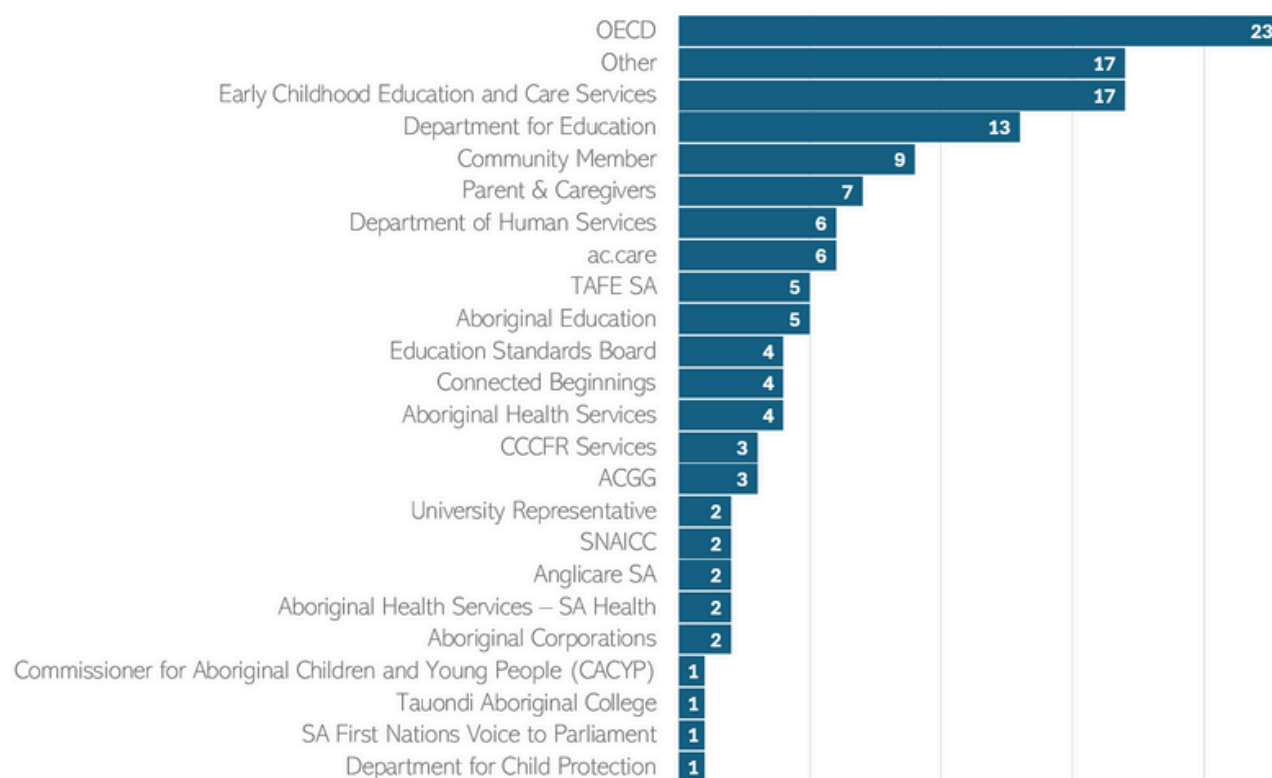
Engagement Attendance by SA First Nations Voice to Parliament Region - *Phase One + Two*



“This is such important work, and I have really enjoyed watching this all progress. You have both done an incredible job capturing stakeholder engagement and keeping us all involved in the journey.”



The following graph provides a representative summary of stakeholder groups that showed interest in engaging with the project. We note that many representatives offered multi-faceted views, drawing on their experiences as parents, community members and service workers. Whilst OECD representation at our workshops may be perceived as high, we note that many of these participants were Local Team representatives who based their feedback on past work and personal experiences, adding a unique level of insight to these engagements.



The following representative groups were identified as having an interest in this project and were also invited to participate in our workshops:

- Aboriginal Community Child Parent Centres (ACFC)
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs)
- Australian Government Funded Community Child Care Fund- Restricted (CCCFR)
- Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia Ltd (ACHSA)
- Aboriginal Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)
- KWW Aboriginal Corporation
- Local Health Networks (LHN)
- Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (OGCYP)
- Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC)
- SAACCON Members
- The Minister's Early Childhood Advisory Forum (MECAF)

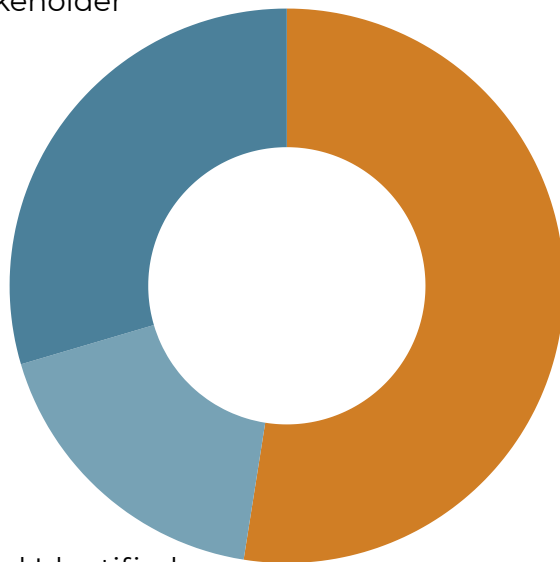
We expanded the initial contact list by drawing on our professional networks, enabling broader promotion of our engagements. This approach helped maximise reach, particularly through social media and established information-sharing networks.

Stakeholder List Acquisition

Self-Identified Stakeholder
29.6%

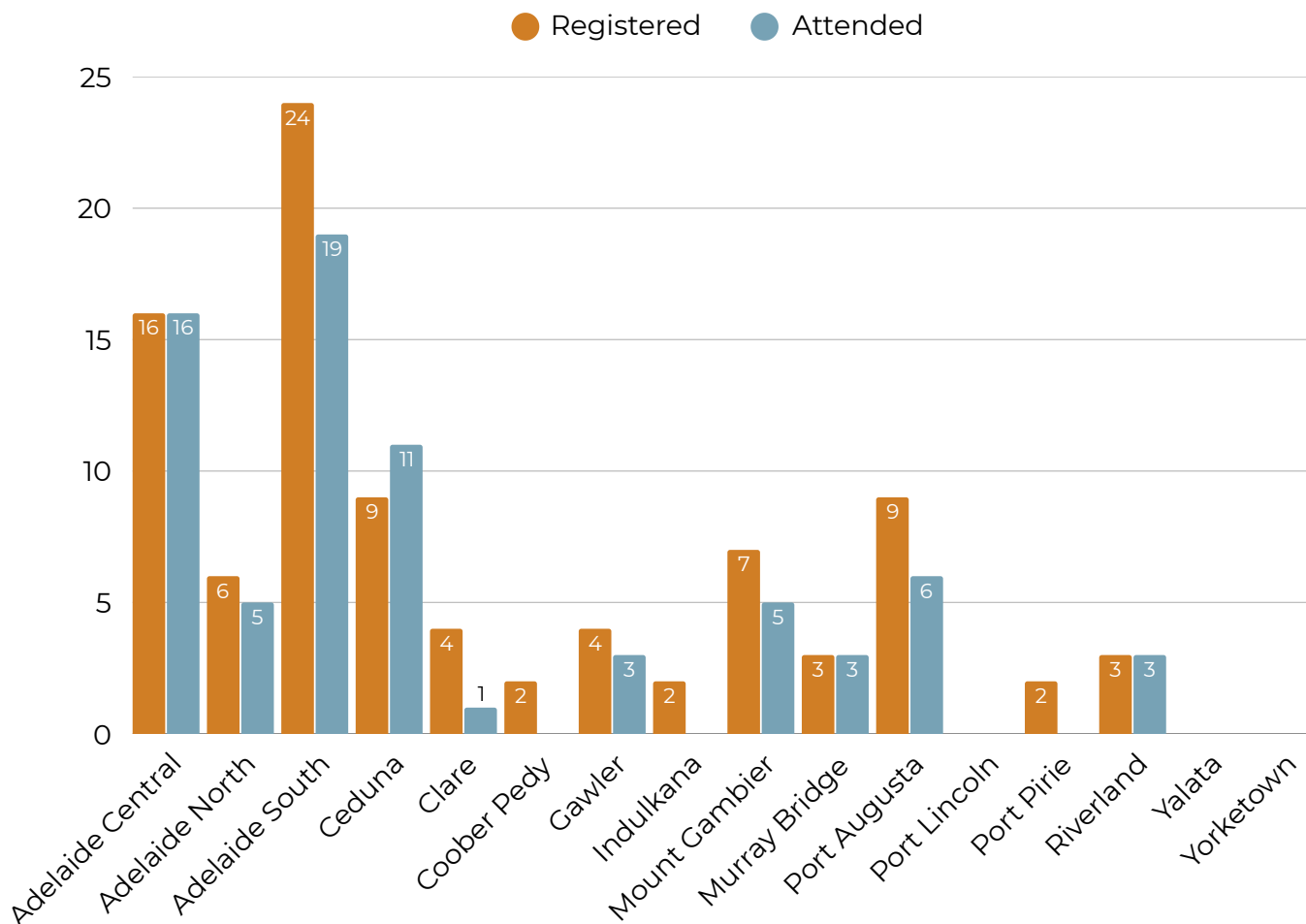
Additional Identified
17.9%

OECD Provided
52.5%

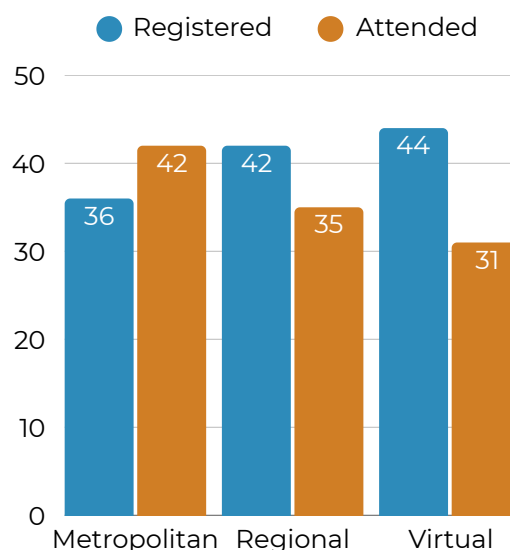
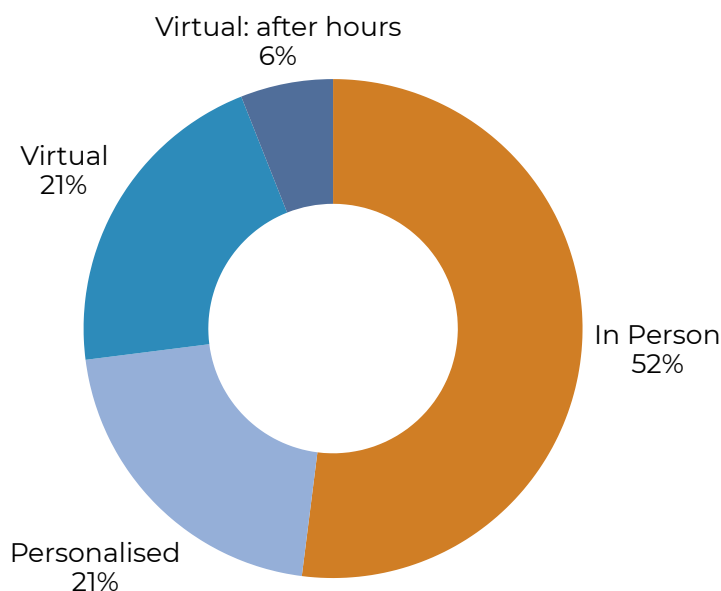


Throughout the Phase One engagements, ongoing analysis of stakeholder data highlighted the importance of adopting a flexible and responsive approach that acknowledged competing demands including professional responsibilities and cultural obligations. Weekly virtual sessions were widely promoted to ensure regional stakeholders were informed of multiple participation opportunities. In addition, as Phase One progressed, the engagement strategy was expanded to include personalised sessions, further enhancing accessibility and maximising stakeholder participation.

Phase One attendance at each location against registrations received



Phase One method of engagement



Engagement insights - by region

Through place-based engagement, our learnings from each region yielded distinct geographical, cultural and service delivery insights. By prioritising face-to-face engagement during Phase One, we ensured that diverse voices and cultural contexts were heard and respected, and these are reflected in our captured insights. We recognised the distinctiveness of Aboriginal communities, each shaped by their own experiences, priorities and ways of working. Genuine co-design promotes equity by creating opportunities for all communities, particularly those in remote and regional areas, to actively shape the decisions that impact their lives. In doing so, it delivers outcomes that are not only stronger and more effective, but also grounded in authentic partnership with community.

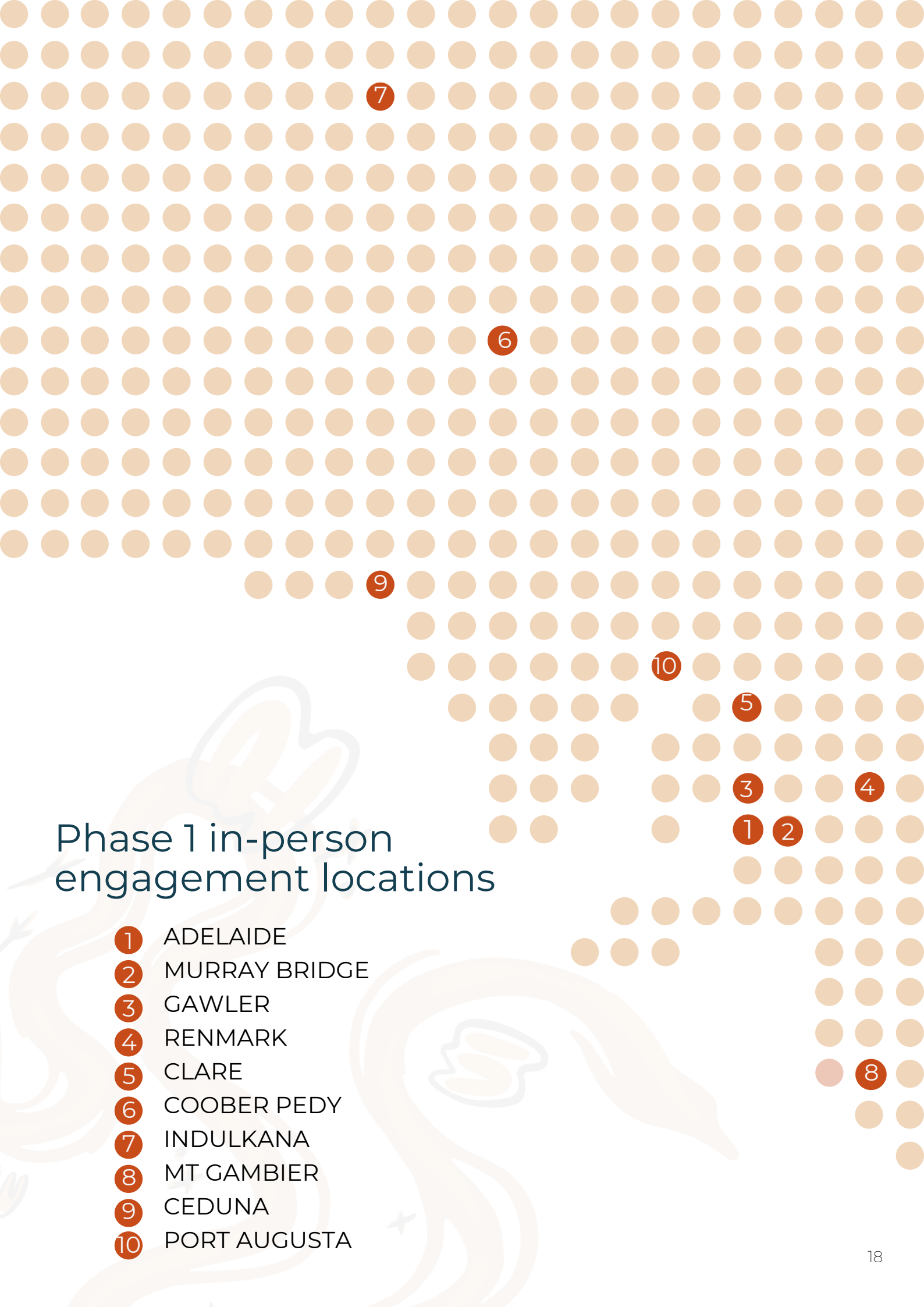
Wide-reaching insights were gathered through engagements across the state, with key themes emerging consistently, many of which were closely linked to the need for a skilled and well-supported Aboriginal workforce.

Targeted engagement locations were selected based on stakeholder analysis and aligned with the six South Australian First Nations Voice to Parliament regions. Future OECD engagement and communication would be strengthened by extending to additional communities and locations, enabling a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences and perspectives across South Australia.

Aboriginal-led and community-controlled models create local opportunities for genuine engagement and ensure services reflect local priorities. Increased visibility and positive promotion through trusted community channels further encourage preschool participation, helping families see early years education as a safe and valuable place for their children to learn and grow. The OECD's commitment to reflecting this diversity of Aboriginal communities, through co-design processes and the introduction of Integrated Hubs and Local Teams, will be instrumental in strengthening the impact and relevance of this work.

“Aboriginal people must be at the table as part of this reform. If we are not, our communities and our people will miss out.”





Phase 1 in-person engagement locations

- 1 ADELAIDE
- 2 MURRAY BRIDGE
- 3 GAWLER
- 4 RENMARK
- 5 CLARE
- 6 COOBER PEDY
- 7 INDULKANA
- 8 MT GAMBIER
- 9 CEDUNA
- 10 PORT AUGUSTA

Through our thematic analysis, it was important to highlight the localisation of feedback, recognising that the needs of communities and families varied between locations. At each workshop we offered participants an opportunity to consider one immediate change in regards to the 3-year-old preschool reform for Aboriginal children.

These responses were captured and are summarised for each region:

ENGAGEMENT LOCATION	PRIORITIES: If you could make one immediate change to the 3-year-old preschool experience, what would it be?
ADELAIDE - central, north and south	• ECEC pedagogy should be reimagined through consultation with Aboriginal communities to reflect diverse measures of success • Emotional literacy should be a foundational focus, teaching children to regulate and understand emotions from a young age, while also supporting families to do the same • Services should work together rather than compete; all centres share the common goal of improving outcomes for Aboriginal children • Past competition among centres has undermined collaboration but must be replaced with unified efforts • More Aboriginal representation and positive role models are needed in the workforce • Encourage young people to see potential in ECEC as a creative and meaningful career path • Services should connect across health, education and housing domains to provide wraparound support for children and families • There is a need for integrated hubs staffed with skilled workers to address broader challenges like poverty and housing • Engage Elders meaningfully in early learning settings, offering spaces for connection and valuing their wisdom • Family involvement should be welcomed and normalised, particularly for families and children that are new to the service • Programs should be co-designed with Aboriginal families and communities, ensuring inclusivity from the ground up • All 3-year-old Aboriginal children should be accepted into early childhood education settings, regardless of enrolment numbers • Aboriginal knowledge, voices, and perspectives must be acknowledged, valued, and embedded in all aspects of the curriculum • Truth-telling and cultural representation should be integral to early learning content
MURRAY BRIDGE	• Consistent and familiar faces in services improve engagement • Opportunity for flexibility with hours and days • Improve affordability and cost

GAWLER	• Consider opportunities for non-teacher led programs • The mindset of what preschool is and the community perception of services needs to shift • Free for everyone - flexible cost model • Improved access to allied health services
REMARK	• Improve relationships with Aboriginal families, which builds trust and improved awareness of services • Improve flexibility of preschool offering • Inclusion and awareness of attachment theory • Trauma-informed practice based on attachment theory • Cultural resourcing and representation
CLARE	• Access to cultural knowledge to ensure education for staff and children to learn Aboriginal culture • Authentic experiences available for children to learn Aboriginal culture
MOUNT GAMBIER	• Transport improvements required to encourage attendance and link with allied health services • General awareness of 3-year-old preschool offering is lacking • Consideration given to the role of Aboriginal Community Engagement Officers and other non-degree qualified staff
PORT AUGUSTA	• Early intervention support – somewhere you can go to get additional support for educators and families • Ensuring burnout and educators leaving the sector is addressed, including the government making sustainable changes to support educators to stay in the sector • Improve the stigma and judgement of parenting • Affordability – prioritise early education, especially in regional areas
COOBER PEDY	• Greater 1:1 support with individual play to grow social skills, through improved resourcing • Improved grant opportunities and government support to access and secure grant funding • Better funding opportunities

INDULKANA

- Educators who are qualified through tertiary roles devalue early years educators
- Additional teaching resources, including support for freight of new materials so staff don't need to do this themselves
- Consider SSOs and allied health workers for housing opportunities and support all staff to secure accommodation in remote areas, without the need for staff to live communally

CEDUNA

- Increased numbers of Aboriginal educators and teachers
- More Aboriginal traineeship pathways, including school-based traineeships
- Consider career information sessions to promote the different roles and long-term opportunities in the sector
- Mutual obligation for families on income support – former programs such as CDEP (Community Development Employment Projects) worked well
- There is no central information source to connect with locals, cannot rely on social media
- Building relationships with the community provides reassurance and two-way learning opportunities
- Ensure Aboriginal children are not lost in the universal rollout, maintain the focus and support



Cultural safety facilitates engagement – this brings a world of opportunity for children and families.

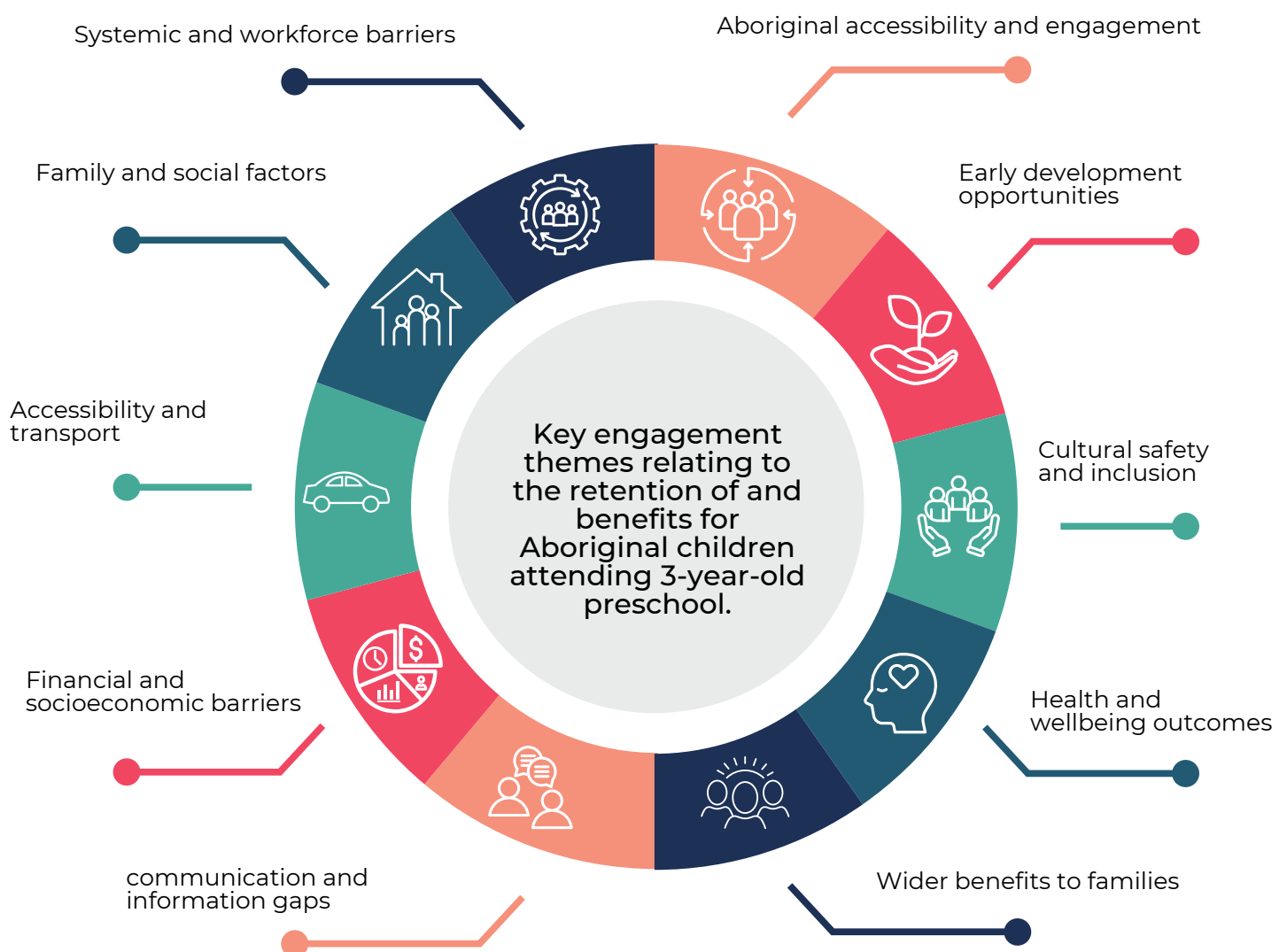


This [preschool access] has been an affirmative action for Aboriginal children at three for a number of years, and it is now opening up to all, which creates a concern that Aboriginal children will be left behind once again.

Engagement insights - by theme

While there was broad awareness of the universal rollout of 3-year-old preschool in South Australia, understanding of its implications for Aboriginal communities varied. Concerns were raised that the focus on Closing the Gap outcomes could be diluted within a universal approach. It remains essential to retain a distinct emphasis on improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and families through early childhood education, while recognising and building upon the success of programs that have delivered real, measurable impact.

Feedback from workshop participants reinforced the value of beginning preschool at age three, particularly for Aboriginal children. Early access to preschool provides a wide range of developmental, educational and social benefits, and strengthens connections between families and communities. When children and their caregivers feel safe, respected and included, there is significant potential to initiate early intervention and long-term positive outcomes.



¹ We acknowledge that the term 'colonial load' was used by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants as a variation of 'cultural load', to emphasise its origins as a colonial construct. While the terminology may differ, the underlying burden carried by Aboriginal people remains evident in both expressions. For the purposes of this report, the terms have been used interchangeably, in accordance with the preferences expressed by participants.



Aboriginal accessibility and engagement

- It is evident that awareness among families regarding access to 3-Year-Old Preschool varies across regions and is often influenced by the strength and cultural connectedness of existing early childhood centres and their staff.
- Word of mouth, particularly in relation to a centre's cultural safety and connection to community, plays a critical role in both initial and sustained family engagement.
- Several participants noted challenges in accessing the program for their 3-year-olds, including the need to advocate strongly for early enrolment and concerns around a lack of transparency or limited information about available options.
- In contrast, regions where 3-year-old preschool programs were already established and actively engaged with Aboriginal communities tended to report more positive outcomes and stronger participation.

Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- Tailored localised communication campaigns highlighting the benefits of early years education, highlighting the long-term benefits for communities to support parents to access local programs.
- Understand knowledge gaps about requirements for centres to accept 3-year-old Aboriginal children and work to address these directly with centres and Directors.
- Preschool programs should be flexible enough to accommodate the varying needs of 3 and 4-year-olds, ensuring older children receive a more advanced curriculum as they prepare for school.

Early development opportunities

- Starting preschool at three helps children develop critical social, emotional and cognitive skills, improving school readiness and positive engagement with peers and staff.
- Children build independence, confidence, social skills and develop a sense of belonging when they feel safe.
- Early exposure to routines and structures helps them adjust better to the school environment, setting them up for longer term education success.
- Starting at three increases opportunities for academic success, including language development. Children also develop practical skills like toileting and personal hygiene, setting them up for a more successful transition to primary school.



Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- The adaptation of the successful Words Grow Minds campaign into a tailored and culturally-led resource seeks to support parents and caregivers understand these benefits so they can be reinforced at home.

CASE STUDY: Nunga Playgroup, supported by Pangula Mannamurna in Mt Gambier, provides a space three times weekly for parents and their children to socialise and meet other families in the Community. Nunga Playgroup offers a safe and friendly atmosphere to bond and take part in a huge variety activities aimed at improving social and emotional development of all Aboriginal children. Culturally safe playgroups provide an opportunity for more relaxed engagement, supporting parents to remain with their children and connect themselves. Parents can learn skills in early learning education, and learn more about the support structures available in their local community.



Cultural safety and inclusion

- The presence of Aboriginal staff in early childhood settings supports a culturally safe and supportive environment, helping children connect to their culture and identity. This also creates opportunities for learning about Aboriginal culture and practices, for all students and staff, furthering a sense of connection and belonging.
- Preschool helps build stronger community ties, encouraging social interactions between children and families. It helps reduce barriers to accessing other services and promotes greater inclusivity and engagement in education.
- Throughout our engagements, participants highlighted the longstanding leadership of Aboriginal communities in early childhood education. In communities such as Port Lincoln and Maree, 3-year-old preschool has been supported for decades, with strong Aboriginal staff representation and deep community involvement. These sites provide strong examples of how culturally embedded early education can be delivered successfully and sustainably, and their impact should inform the broader rollout.

Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- Aboriginal governance structures at centres or in clusters of centres will support cultural safety development, alongside working with Elders and respected community members.
- The development of a cultural safety framework tailored to the ECEC sector is needed.
- Investment in resources which reflect the nuanced and diverse Aboriginal communities across the state is required. Resources for play and learning will support educators and teachers to embed cultural knowledge in their daily curriculum.
- Resources and materials used in preschool settings should reflect Aboriginal cultural diversity to enhance the learning experience.

Health and wellbeing outcomes



- Early intervention in health and development concerns, such as speech or motor skills delays, allows for a better chance of addressing issues before they impact schooling.
- Some programs also provide access to allied health services, promoting overall child wellbeing. Whilst a benefit, it is also a key area of concern for many of the participants we spoke with, with many citing a lack of resources and accessibility to consistent health services in regional areas. Connected to the Royal Commission recommendations, it is critical that these services are integrated in children's early years.

Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- Culturally-nuanced communication strategies which educate parents and broader communities on the benefits of early years education will support connection to services.
- Embed within the early years qualifications discussions to support all new staff with an understanding of the health and wellbeing benefits and support structures in place.

CASE STUDY: A childcare centre in Coober Pedy has developed its own culturally appropriate resources to share with families to send home with laminated visual aids to guide positive conversations around healthy eating. This initiative has strengthened ties with families and educators and supports parents to continue education at home with relevant resources.



Wider benefits to families

- Preschool access provides parents with valuable positive opportunities, helping them to attend work or study, develop structured routines that promote healthy lifestyle choices and time to attend appointments.
- Preschool can strengthen relationships between families, educators and communities by developing trust and ongoing opportunities for collaboration.
- For families with fewer resources at home, early childhood centres provide learning materials, health screenings, and structured programs, ensuring children have the support they need to thrive. Access to healthy food, including healthy eating educational materials, was a widely cited benefit that we noted in multiple regions.

Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- Localised communication campaigns to story-share about success stories and highlight wider benefits for communities.
- Dedicated community development coordinators and staff help educate families on the benefits of early childhood education, promoting connection and belonging. Their strengths-based approach should be expanded through additional supported roles.

Communication and information gaps

- Some families were unaware of various preschool offerings, particularly the availability and benefits of 3- year-old preschool in their region.
- There appears to be an over-reliance on digital communication, such as email/mobile apps/digital enrolment forms. This is a barrier to those with limited digital access and digital literacy.
- Bureaucratic paperwork and inconsistent enrolment systems across sites create confusion and overwhelm, cited as a barrier across multiple regions. Where centres had dedicated resources to support families with paperwork, they found success with directly supporting the families to complete the enrolment forms and accessing ID documents.
- Families with low literacy or where English is not the first language may struggle to understand and complete forms without tailored support.
- Community-led promotion was raised as an effective mechanism to spread accurate and timely information. Currently preschool options are not always promoted through trusted community networks or platforms, reducing reach and relevance.



Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- Offering resources in multiple formats, including videos or simplified guides, can enhance understanding and accessibility.
- The importance of mutual support among different preschool centres was highlighted, through formal and informal networking opportunities. This collaboration can lead to improved awareness of services and improved outcomes.



Financial and socioeconomic barriers

- The cost of preschool, particularly in private settings, is perceived as a barrier unless information about free services is known. Additional associated costs such as food, transport and clothing further deter enrolment.
- Seeking support for financial or other needs is often associated with shame or fear of child protection concerns being raised, preventing families from asking for help.
- Navigating financial assistance systems can be time-consuming and complex, reducing access and motivation to enrol.

Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- Review opportunities for additional support or programs that provide food, clothing and educational items.
- Resource Integrated Hubs with culturally-appropriate financial support services, and upskill existing staff to be aware of services available for referrals.
- Ensure ACCOs are appropriately resourced and have the capacity to provide intensive support as needed.

Accessibility and transport

- Limited or non-existent transport options, especially in regional, rural and remote areas, create significant access issues. Centres that were represented at our engagements and had a dedicated bus service in place spoke very positively of this offering. This initiative also supports additional auxiliary workforce roles.
- Rigid zoning rules and operating hours at centres not offering long daycare may not align with family needs or circumstances where transient families move for cultural or health needs and would benefit from additional flexibility in temporary locations.
- Despite the priority given to Aboriginal children, we heard that some centres have long waitlists, particularly for commencing 3-year-olds, leading to families being turned away or disengaging. This issue is likely to be heightened with the universal rollout and increased demand for 3-year-old places.



Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- Work closely with ACCOs and centres with Aboriginal children to determine the need for a bus service and provide ongoing resourcing to support this.
- Provide flexible enrolment options that support family lifestyle, with consideration given to centralised enrolments to support transient families.

CASE STUDY: The Ngura Yadurim Children and Family Centre in Ceduna provides a range of valuable services for children aged birth to five and their families. The Learning Together program encourages shared participation through playgroups, cooking sessions, reading groups, and cultural activities. An on-site Family Services Coordinator helps families connect with additional services and learn about parenting and child development. In addition, an Occupational Therapist offers both one-on-one and group sessions for children, while a Community Development Coordinator delivers events and parenting programs to strengthen community capability and connection.



Family and social factors

- Families experiencing mental health challenges, substance use or housing insecurity face additional obstacles in engaging with early education.
- Parents may fear judgment or feel unprepared to leave a child in care, with additional stigma associated with toilet training and developmental delays.
- Strong attachment between parent and child is positive and should be supported, involving the parent in the child's care.
- Lack of service flexibility that offers limited support for movement between communities, particularly from remote to urban areas, leads to disrupted access and reduced service familiarity.
- Mainstream services may not understand, recognise or respect Aboriginal family structures, affecting the way families are supported.
- Families must often repeat their story across multiple services due to a lack of integrated enrolment and referral systems. This may lead to trauma-responsive feelings with families and these conversations must be navigated sensitively.

Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- Enhancements to existing programs that upskill parents in providing education and care at home for their children to complement the preschool education.

Systemic and workforce barriers

- The absence of dedicated roles to support Aboriginal families through enrolment and engagement limits relationship development, trust-building and ongoing engagement.
- Staff shortages, including in essential services such as cleaning, particularly in remote areas, impact centre quality and accessibility.
- Disconnects between health, education, and social services mean families must navigate fragmented systems, sometimes with little support.
- Standardised (western) and inflexible approaches often fail to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal families, with limited scope for flexible engagement.
- The work being done towards the South Australia's Early Childhood Workforce Strategy seeks to address these barriers and to enhance the sector overall.
- Many suggestions are explored in detail in the South Australian Aboriginal Early Childhood Co-Design Project - Workforce Report 2025.



Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- Initiatives to attract and retain an Aboriginal workforce, including free and accessible training and development opportunities and improved pay and conditions.
- The cultural safety of Aboriginal staff is paramount and significant effort must be made to improve this across the sector at a systems, policy and centre level.
- Aboriginal staff must be valued and remunerated for their cultural expertise and knowledge.



Strengthening partnerships with ACCOs

- Successful early childhood education for Aboriginal children relies on establishing trust between service providers and Aboriginal families. This trust is built through consistent, respectful communication and genuine engagement with the community, so investing in ACCOs is crucial, as they already understand the unique cultural context and needs of the families they serve.
- Establishing Aboriginal childcare centers will provide culturally relevant education.
- Initiatives like Connected Beginnings and the Early Years Support Program (not currently available in SA) seek to create partnerships that enhance support for Aboriginal children and families.

Participant suggestions to address these challenges:

- A number of established ACCOs are well-placed to partner with OECD in the establishment of community-led Aboriginal childcare centres in areas where they already operate services. This could present a cultural model of care including learning and teaching.
- ACCO partnerships would maintain a focus on keeping and connecting families and communities together.

Early childhood education should be about supporting our kids and their families to thrive, strong in culture and connection to family and kin.

Benefits of 3-year-old preschool for Aboriginal children

The majority of workshop participants reported a general awareness of the universal 3-year-old preschool rollout in South Australia. While this awareness was common among those working within the ECEC sector, Aboriginal services and government-affiliated roles, broader community awareness appeared to be more limited.

Participants noted that although information is publicly available, it is not always presented in a clear or accessible way for families and communities. The use of complex language, along with a lack of targeted, community-facing communication, has contributed to confusion around the rollout, particularly regarding its potential impact on local centres and communities, eligibility criteria, and available support mechanisms.

In regions where 3-year-old preschool programs have been operating for several years, stakeholders also expressed uncertainty about how the new universal model will affect existing arrangements.

Stakeholders broadly supported the expansion of preschool access to all 3-year-old children, recognising it as a positive and much-needed development. However, many also expressed concerns that, without careful and culturally-informed implementation, the universal rollout could contribute to, albeit unintentionally, existing inequities for Aboriginal families. One example shared was the current experience of Aboriginal children who, by attending preschool for two years from the age of three, may be separated from their 4-year-old peer group when they transition to school. This separation of peer groups has the potential to impact a child's sense of belonging and highlights the need for an inclusive, whole-of-community approach to the rollout.

Throughout the workshops, participants were encouraged to reflect on the deeper cultural and philosophical foundations necessary to genuinely support young Aboriginal children. The importance of grounding early education in story-sharing, community connection, and a strong sense of place was consistently raised. These responses reinforce that the success of universal preschool depends not only on access but also on the quality, cultural relevance, and safety of what is offered.



Social and emotional development

There was a clear emphasis on the benefits of early socialisation for children such as making friends, developing communication skills, learning to share and building emotional resilience. These foundational skills play a critical role in helping children transition into structured learning environments and support their overall school readiness. Furthermore, early development of social and emotional competencies contributes to long-term wellbeing and adaptability across future educational and life settings.



Cultural safety and identity

Insights gathered throughout the engagements, both in relation to the 3-year-old preschool experience and the Aboriginal workforce, consistently emphasised the importance of culturally safe environments. The presence of Aboriginal educators and teachers, inclusive of both men and women, along with meaningful connections to Elders and the use of culturally relevant resources, were identified as key factors in supporting Aboriginal children's sense of identity and belonging. Culturally strong settings enable children to grow with confidence, encourage respectful engagement with families, and promote long-term participation, community connection, and positive relationships. Participants also highlighted the importance of cultural preservation, particularly through the teaching of local practices and traditions using storytelling, art, and music. This intergenerational transfer of knowledge supports children to develop pride in their cultural identity, become leaders within their communities, and continue the cycle of cultural knowledge-sharing into the future.



Strengthening community

Education plays a key role in strengthening community networks by bringing together families, Elders and educators in a shared commitment to supporting Aboriginal children. These connections reinforce collective responsibility and help embed cultural values within early learning environments. Community events and cultural celebrations offer meaningful opportunities to share knowledge, promote visibility of local culture and enable staff to engage more deeply with the communities they serve. These interactions contribute to stronger relationships and a greater sense of belonging for children and families alike.

→ Early intervention and health outcomes

Early access to health services was recognised as critical for the timely identification of developmental delays, including speech, language, and other early childhood needs. Engagement with allied health professionals at an earlier stage allows for the provision of tailored care and targeted support, helping to address and mitigate developmental barriers before children begin primary school. This early intervention is particularly important in regional and remote communities, where access to services may be limited, and plays a vital role in closing developmental gaps and improving long-term outcomes for children.

→ School readiness and academic foundations

Participation in preschool from the age of three supports children in becoming familiar with structured routines, learning environments and behavioural expectations earlier than they otherwise would. This early exposure builds confidence and emotional security, while also strengthening foundational literacy and numeracy skills. The additional year of early learning facilitates a smoother transition into Reception and is associated with improved academic and behavioural outcomes, providing children with a stronger platform for long-term educational success.

→ Support for families

Engaging children earlier in education provides parents with time to work, study, attend appointments or focus on their own wellbeing. With a positive experience, early education can also create a softer entry point into the education system which can be the difference between ongoing engagement and disengagement. Relationships with educators and teachers can model positive engagement for children and enhance family confidence in navigating educational institutions and support services.

→ Intergenerational impact

The value of early learning was recognised not only in terms of direct support for children, but also as a powerful mechanism to strengthen families and communities. Participants highlighted its role in building community connections, creating opportunities for holistic support, and opening space for truth-telling and cultural exchange. The benefits of early learning were described as both immediate and long-term, laying the foundation for lifelong wellbeing and contributing to stronger, more connected communities across generations.



As a result of the Royal Commission, we have a different landscape. Centres must be ready to work with Aboriginal children by being culturally appropriate and safe.
It's not about the kids being ready **but centres being ready.**

Success for Aboriginal children, families and communities

Access to 3-year-old preschool provides a powerful foundation for Aboriginal children to thrive. These early, formative years are where children learn how to express themselves, communicate with others, form relationships, and discover their unique identity. In culturally-safe environments where Aboriginal staff are present and where culture is embedded in daily practice, Aboriginal children begin to see themselves in their learning. This validation builds strong self-esteem and confidence. The presence of familiar and consistent staff, particularly those who engage meaningfully with families, creates trusted relationships that are essential for participation. Strong connections between services and families enable the early identification of health or developmental concerns, the provision of timely referrals and access to holistic support.

In these settings, centres evolve into trusted community hubs: welcoming spaces where families can access resources, receive support, and develop lasting connections. Aboriginal children who learn in culturally grounded environments are more likely to thrive and gain the social and emotional tools needed to navigate both cultural and mainstream worlds with confidence and pride in their identity.

With supportive role models and culturally responsive programs, Aboriginal children grow up knowing they belong. They build friendships, demonstrate kindness, ask questions, and become confident, capable participants in their own learning journey.

→ Cultural identity

Culturally rich environments where Aboriginal culture is visible, respected, and embedded are essential. The presence of Aboriginal staff helps children feel seen and understood, building a strong sense of identity, belonging, and pride in who they are and where they come from.

→ Breaking cycles of disadvantage

Empowered parents and communities, when supported by inclusive and culturally informed services, play a crucial role in breaking intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

→ Belonging and joy

Early positive experiences create lasting impacts on children's self-worth and future pathways. Success is evident in children who are happy, confident and excited to attend. They laugh, play, make friends and feel safe in their learning spaces.

What does success look like for Aboriginal children?



Addressing barriers to access

Aboriginal families across South Australia continue to face a range of systemic, social, and cultural barriers to accessing 3-year-old preschool programs. These challenges include practical obstacles such as transport, costs, and inflexible enrolment processes, alongside deeper issues related to cultural safety, limited trust in the education system, and low levels of Aboriginal representation within services.

Across regions, participants shared examples of families who were unaware of available services or who found the enrolment process overwhelming due to complex paperwork and inaccessible digital systems.

Establishing trust through a strong community presence, culturally responsive staff, flexible service delivery, and the use of clear, localised information is essential. A strengths-based, relationship-driven approach that centres Aboriginal voices and reduces administrative barriers can significantly improve the participation and engagement of Aboriginal children and families.



Cultural safety

A key barrier is the limited availability of local training opportunities, particularly in regional and remote areas. Aboriginal people are often less likely to relocate for study, preferring to remain within and connected to their communities. For those who do commence study, access to consistent academic and cultural support can be limited, affecting retention and completion rates.

While these challenges persist, there are positive examples of supportive pathways, such as the University of South Australia's Aboriginal Pathways Program, that provide culturally responsive training and mentoring.



Access and logistics

Cost, transport limitations and restrictive zoning policies continue to present significant barriers to preschool access, particularly in regional and remote communities. Participants also highlighted complex enrolment processes and inflexible service hours that often do not reflect the needs and circumstances of Aboriginal families. In many areas, limited transport connectivity between centres, schools and health services further reduces attendance and engagement.

→ Administrative support

Families require tailored and compassionate support through the enrolment process, including assistance with paperwork, birth and immunisation certificates. Varying levels of digital access and literacy, particularly in remote areas, further compound these challenges. Providing in-person, culturally informed support can significantly reduce barriers to participation.

→ Access and affordability

Reducing the cost burden and increasing access through initiatives like subsidised transport and additional bus routes makes early learning more inclusive. Additional costs associated with early years education was a consistent discussion across engagement locations, however the topic of transport was more concentrated in remote and regional areas. A positive example cited was at Tinyeri Children's Centre where a bus service is provided, improving attendance and connection of children. The younger children in particular are excited to join the older children and start to build these social skills and independence critical for later years.



Enhancing the offering for the benefit of Aboriginal children

Based on the rich community and sector insights, we heard clear and actionable ways to enhance the offering of 3-year-old preschool to Aboriginal children in South Australia. These opportunities span seven key areas of reform and practice:



Cultural safety and representation

To build trust and genuine engagement, cultural safety must move beyond occasional and symbolic gestures and become embedded in all aspects of service delivery. This includes significantly increasing the number of Aboriginal staff in centres, establishing identified liaison roles not tied to enrolment numbers and involving Aboriginal Elders and cultural leaders in program design and delivery. Training for non-Aboriginal staff should be ongoing, trauma-informed and locally informed, much more than a one-off cultural awareness session. Centres need to be visibly and meaningfully welcoming with language, resources, and pedagogy that reflects and respects Aboriginal identity and culture.



Family engagement

Aboriginal families must be empowered with the agency to make decisions that best support their child's needs. This includes offering flexible options such as full or part-time preschool, enrolment pathways based on developmental readiness rather than strict age criteria, and culturally informed transition processes.

Holistic and community-informed approaches to transitions can better support both children and families. The presence of trusted liaison staff, with dedicated time to build relationships, is critical, particularly for families navigating historical trauma or longstanding mistrust of systems. Strengthening these relationships enhances confidence, communication and sustained engagement.

→ Inclusive systems

Enrolment processes must be simplified and made more accessible for families facing barriers such as limited literacy, digital access, or complex service navigation. This includes providing hands-on support with paperwork, guidance around health and immunisation requirements, and offering communication in multiple formats, such as verbal, visual, or translated resources, to meet diverse needs.

Services should take a proactive approach in reaching out to families, particularly in regional and remote areas. This involves offering practical supports such as transport options, clear information on subsidies and access to wraparound services addressing essential needs including food, housing and health.

Strengthening connections between education and health, through co-located services or strong referral-based models, is essential to ensure that Aboriginal children receive timely, coordinated support and do not fall through the gaps.

→ Aboriginal workforce

Growing and retaining a skilled Aboriginal ECEC workforce is essential to achieving long-term change and improving outcomes for all children. This requires accessible and supported training pathways, including school-based Certificate III programs, paid placements and targeted funding to reduce financial barriers.

Schools and early learning services should actively promote ECEC careers to Aboriginal young people and provide support throughout their training and transition into employment.

Sustained, secure funding is critical, moving beyond short-term or project-based grants, to enable Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and community services to focus on meaningful delivery and long-term impact, with minimal administrative burden.



Infrastructure and resourcing

Targeted investment is required in both infrastructure and operational funding to support equitable access and culturally responsive delivery. This includes funding for transport, food programs and the engagement of dedicated Aboriginal cultural educators as part of core staffing, not as ad hoc additions.

Cultural content must be embedded throughout the curriculum and learning environments, forming an integral part of daily practice rather than being treated as supplementary or occasional.



Integrated service models

Families benefit most from wraparound support that connects early education with health, housing, parenting programs, and other community services. ACCOs are well-positioned to lead or coordinate these integrated models, but require flexible, long-term funding and strong, equitable partnerships with government and mainstream service providers. Integrated approaches strengthen outcomes by enabling early identification of issues, ensuring timely intervention, and promoting continuity of care for Aboriginal children and their families.



Policy and systems reform

Structural change is needed to remove systemic barriers. This includes addressing rigid zoning rules, reforming catchment-based enrolment criteria to support cultural preferences and shifting from bureaucratic decision-making to local, culturally-informed governance.

Policy frameworks should reflect the burden and invisible labour of cultural/colonial load and value and celebrate community knowledge with Aboriginal governance embedded in early childhood reform. True equity means not just equal access, but responsive and resourced pathways that reflect the diverse realities of Aboriginal families.



"We need culturally safe, holistic teaching and learning shared and passed down through generations of our own First Nations people"

Showcasing success

CASE STUDY

Supporting a child's journey at Ngura Yadurirn and Children's Centre

Ngura Yadurirn and Children's Centre in Ceduna provides wraparound support for families from pre-birth to age five, offering programs such as parent groups, playgroups, occasional care, the Inclusive Preschool Program (IPP), and Aboriginal preschool programs.

Through the Connected Beginnings initiative, staff worked alongside a first-time Aboriginal mother who had little local support and was initially hesitant to engage. With gentle encouragement, she and her daughter began attending the Creepers'n'Crawlers playgroup facilitated by an onsite Occupational Therapist. This provided both social connection and access to developmental advice.

Building on this first step, the team supported the child into occasional care, where relationships with staff grew and valuable observations were made to prepare for preschool. When she turned three, the child seamlessly transitioned into the Inclusive Preschool Program, thanks to the strong foundation of early engagement.

Initially presenting with significant developmental delays and limited communication, the child gained confidence and routine, and a sense of belonging through consistent participation. After completing two years in the IPP, she is now thriving in her first year of special options placement at Ceduna Area School.

This journey shows the power of early engagement, coupled with appropriate and considered family support, and culturally safe, connected services in creating positive lifelong outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.

CASE STUDY

Kindy on Country at Ngura Yadurirn and Children's Centre

Kindy on Country aligns with the Early Years Learning Framework, ensuring that *"all children experience learning that is engaging and builds success for life"*. Natural outdoor spaces offer a vast array of possibilities that are not available inside. These spaces invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature and the outside world. Kindy on Country gives children the freedom and power to be able to lead the direction of their play and discover what they are interested in and what they want to explore and investigate. Kindy on Country is supported and guided by two Aboriginal leaders and knowledge holders within our community.

NYCFC educators have observed over many visits that children, often the Aboriginal boys, can change their behaviour once out on Country. Typically shy and reserved in preschool, their confidence flourishes once out in nature. They become the leaders and story tellers, sharing their knowledge of finding animal tracks and their time spent out bush with their families out on Country. Their learning from family is then shared through their personal experience with others. This builds confidence and grows their leadership capabilities which translates back into their preschool setting.

Our thanks to the NYCC for providing us with these case study examples during the engagement phase. For more information: preschools.sa.gov.au/ngura-yadurirn-child-family-centre



Programs and pedagogies that are used in Australia are not typically built from the ground up in conjunction with Aboriginal people, educators and communities. They tend to have a particular view of what ECEC should look like and don't incorporate what success looks like for Aboriginal families and their priorities for their children and families.

Initiative development

Key themes and objectives were developed by refining the insights and discussions gathered throughout project engagements. While this necessarily simplifies the systemic challenges facing Aboriginal people and communities, it establishes a clear foundation for coordinated action. By prioritising bold, trust-based initiatives and progressing toward systemic, sector-wide reform, the OECD is positioned to leverage its mandate to drive policy change and advance initiatives that deliver culturally safe and inclusive preschool experiences for Aboriginal children aged three and four across South Australia.

In July, The Aboriginal Co-Design Governance Group (ACGG) gathered for a half-day workshop facilitated by MTL Consulting Services and Kimberley Wanganeen Consultancy to review and discuss engagement findings and insights. The purpose was to support the development of initiatives to address or positively contribute towards closing the challenges heard across the state. During this workshop, the ACGG prioritised the key themes (see page 23) as presented below. This prioritisation process encouraged a deeper understanding of what was heard during engagements, and provided an opportunity to test adoptability assumptions, drawing on the extensive and diverse experience of the ACGG members.

Whilst the ECEC workforce was acknowledged as both critical to and interconnected with many aspects of the early childhood preschool experience, initiatives relating to the Aboriginal ECEC workforce fall outside the scope of this report and Implementation Plan and are therefore not included. All other priority actionable initiatives are further explored here and will be considered by the OECD and ACGG before a more comprehensive Implementation Plan is prepared.



1. Cultural safety and inclusion

Cultural safety was highlighted at all engagements as the critical foundation for success and enhancement of all other initiatives. Throughout the engagements, this was reported differently, reflecting varied meanings across people, environments and communities. Initiative development will require focus of building a shared understanding, providing supportive guidance and accountability measures.



2. Systemic and workforce barriers

Initiatives to address workforce challenges are being implemented through the Aboriginal Workforce Strategy. It is recognised that ongoing attention to these challenges is essential.



3. Health and wellbeing outcomes

The benefits extend beyond Aboriginal children attending preschool, strengthening outcomes for their families and broader community outcomes. An appreciation for the importance of wellbeing in engagement with families and ensuring a holistic approach is reflected in the initiative development.



4. Financial and socioeconomic barriers

System reform must consider cost barriers for Aboriginal families, ensuring that where needed, essentials such as food and clothing are made available without stigma. A understand of preschool costs will identify equity gaps that may be limiting engagement. Flexible funding models should also be introduced so centres can better respond to the specific socioeconomic needs of their communities.



5. Early development opportunities

Aligned with the important desire to reduce the development vulnerabilities for Aboriginal children, the promotion of the benefits of early years education remains critical. Additionally, initiatives which support and broaden the integration of services to support early intervention will be beneficial.



6. Accessibility and engagement

Awareness of Aboriginal 3-year-old preschool access and benefits varies across regions, largely influenced by the strength of local centres and their staff. Indicative initiatives seek to promote the benefits, whilst clarifying the offering.



7. Accessibility and transport

The most consistent challenge identified throughout engagements was limited transport options to support access to preschool, an issue more pronounced in regional, rural, and remote areas. Practical and sustainable solutions to this challenge will be further explored.



8. Family and social factors

Engagements identified many social factors which impact the experience of early years education. Initiatives to address stigma and judgement can encourage participation through flexible care and education models that meet the needs of families.



9. Communication and information gaps

Whilst not prioritised as a stand-alone theme during the workshop, it was acknowledged that this engagement theme is foundational to all others. Without clear, culturally-sensitive and consistent information to families, educators, children, community groups and support services, all other themes will remain a challenge.



10. Wider benefits to families

The wider benefits to families will flow from successful implementation of all initiatives as their impact will be felt through a ripple effect. Further opportunities for 3-year-old Aboriginal children to be supported through their early years will have a long-term positive influence on families.



“We can have these beautiful strategies and consider how it will manifest, but it is so critical that our families actually know what is happening.”

- ACGG participant

Indicative initiative prioritisation

The outcomes of the ACGG workshop were presented in full to the OECD for consideration, including potential actions beyond the scope of this project. These insights should be explored in collaboration with other agencies and decision-makers to enable sector-wide reform in Aboriginal early years education. A coordinated approach will work towards addressing systemic barriers and identifying opportunities across multiple agencies, while minimising the burden of repeated consultations with Aboriginal stakeholder groups.

Building on regional engagement insights and indicative initiatives, we recommend a phased implementation approach. Further exploration and feasibility assessments will be undertaken as the next step to support the successful co-designed rollout over the 2026–2029 period. Notional funding has been allocated to each initiative to support decision-making, but we recognise that this can vary significantly depending on determined scope and rollout strategy.

Acknowledging the complexity and variables involved in this next phase, the roadmap provides a pathway to build momentum through to successful implementation of multiple and meaningful initiatives.

Where to from here?

PHASE 1:

Build momentum, establish trust and support Aboriginal families by building awareness of existing preschool offering.

PHASE 2:

Build relationships, strengthen culturally safe practices and community and ACCO connections.

PHASE 4:

Amplify success and Aboriginal voice and governance.

PHASE 3:

Embed practice and establish sustainable programs and formal partnerships for long-term success.



The indicative initiatives are presented in priority order with high priority initiative details in the following pages, including with P50 ^{*} cost estimates used to consider feasibility and implementation timing. The list reflects outcomes from the July ACGG workshop but does not incorporate co-design feedback from Phase One and Phase Two engagement participants. We encourage the OECD to continue to co-design these initiatives with communities and Aboriginal sector experts. Further assessments throughout the next phase of the project will continue to refine these initiatives before a progressive Implementation Plan is presented to the OECD in October to guide next steps for rollout in January 2026.

Indicative initiations by priority and suggested rollout timeline

PRIORITY	HIGH	Implement a dedicated state-wide co-designed Aboriginal preschool communications strategy.	2026 IMPLEMENTATION
	HIGH	Co-design a Cultural Safety Framework for Children and Families and explore a deeper understanding of what this means specifically for the ECEC sector.	
	HIGH	Establish and implement a Nunga Playgroup strategy + resource community-led playgroups linked to local preschools.	
	HIGH	Create a community resource directory that preschools can use to connect families to local supports and ACCOs supporting early years needs.	
	HIGH	Undertake a comprehensive review of enrolment and administrative systems to ensure flexibility, simplicity and trauma-awareness, then co-design solutions.	
	HIGH	Establish a place-based transport strategy, with additional workforce opportunities whilst exploring flexible options for community contexts and partnerships.	2027
	HIGH	Develop and apply a cultural audit framework.	
	MEDIUM	Implement a statewide grants program that champions place-based community development projects that promote early learning and child development.	
	MEDIUM	Remunerated roles for Elders as Cultural Ambassadors to promote early learning and preschool benefits within communities.	2028
	MEDIUM	Establish a local ACCO partnerships framework and support to remove logistical and material barriers to attendance and participation.	
	MEDIUM	Establish a statewide Elders in Residence Program to embed and support Elders to work within a network of centres.	
	MEDIUM	Co-design and train all ECEC services in culturally informed referral protocols and pathways.	
	MEDIUM	Support centres and regions to develop local engagement protocols that respect and reflect the cultural context of each community.	2029
	MEDIUM	Develop a sector strategy to embed Aboriginal governance in evaluation and design of program development and delivery.	

* A P50 cost estimate refers to a confidence level regarding the probability of the cost not being exceeded, and does not indicate a quantum of cost or proximity to the actual cost realised.

Looking forward

There was a strong and consistent call for continued engagement with Aboriginal communities across South Australia to ensure that the foundations of early education are robust, culturally informed, and grounded in a holistic understanding of the diverse identities and experiences of Aboriginal peoples.

The emphasis on early years education as a pathway to healthy futures reflects a broader commitment to community wellbeing, connection, and long-term development. Sustained collaboration will be critical to realising meaningful outcomes for Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

Sustained and engaging co-design

The intention of co-design is to create safe, inclusive spaces where diverse perspectives are heard and solutions are shaped collaboratively. Continued partnerships with ACCOs and community stakeholders are essential to ensuring that early years reform is grounded in lived experience and cultural authority. Through sustained engagement, the OECD can support Aboriginal leaders and communities in the design and delivery of meaningful, place-based programs. Ongoing evaluation and adaptation will be critical to ensuring these programs remain responsive to the evolving needs and aspirations of Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

Continued engagement

There was a clear and consistent desire from stakeholders to remain engaged at all levels of the sector. Participants expressed interest in ongoing updates and accessible information, presenting a valuable opportunity for the OECD to maintain meaningful engagement through key milestones and reform stages. Connection with communities, particularly through Local Teams and Integrated Hubs, will be essential for staying attuned to local priorities, identifying emerging issues, and capturing case studies that demonstrate success in practice.

Culturally-responsive communication

In conjunction with this project, the OECD has introduced valuable initiatives such as scholarships and training opportunities. Ongoing promotion of these opportunities should prioritise the use of culturally appropriate language and communication methods. Targeted outreach to regional and remote communities, through local events, trusted networks, and community social groups, will be essential to ensuring Aboriginal families and organisations are aware of and can access these supports.

Truth-telling

Truth-telling recognises that Aboriginal people have endured, and continue to endure, the impacts of racism, including historical and ongoing injustices. It is a necessary step in identifying the structural causes of current inequalities and establishing the foundations for meaningful reform. Without an honest reckoning with the past and a commitment to genuine listening and engagement, reconciliation cannot advance.

Cultural excellence

Throughout our engagements, we heard numerous examples of positive, culturally responsive work taking place in early learning settings and communities. However, these efforts should not rest solely on the commitment of a few individuals. Systemic and policy-level enablers must be continually reviewed and strengthened to ensure Aboriginal people have equitable access to opportunities that promote self-determination.

With the implementation of early childhood reforms, the South Australian Government has a significant opportunity to lead by example through authentic co-design and sustained support for Aboriginal children, families, and communities.



Young children need to grow up strong in their families and culture. Most early childhood services lack cultural insight and separate children from their families rather than strengthening the family unit. Holistic family supports are needed and education for family on how to best support the learning and development of their young ones.

About us



Marius Liddle

Founder and Managing Director

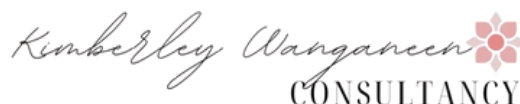


Marius is a proud Arrernte person living on Kurna Country. Having grown up in the Riverland, Marius values the inclusion and diversity of regional representation and maintains connections with the various regional communities throughout South Australia and beyond.



Kimberley Wanganeen

Owner and Principal Consultant



Kimberley Wanganeen is a proud South Australian Kurna, Narungga and Kokatha woman, born and raised on Boandik Country, and living and working on Kurna Country since 2005, striving to improve the cultural safety of Aboriginal people.

MTL Consulting Services (MTL) and Kimberley Wanganeen Consultancy (KWC) formed a consortium to deliver this project, combining their unique strengths and extensive experience in working with Aboriginal communities and organisations. This partnership leveraged their complementary expertise to deliver comprehensive and culturally sensitive solutions.

MTL has six years of dedicated experience in effectively engaging with a diverse range of Aboriginal stakeholders across South Australia. The consultancy has built a strong reputation for culturally appropriate, efficient, and goal-oriented project co-design, community engagement, and strategic planning.

KWC, established in 2022, brings specialised knowledge in Aboriginal engagement, workplace Aboriginal cultural safety initiatives and sector knowledge of domestic and family violence, child protection and housing.

Together, MTL and KWC bring expertise across various social issues, seeking to create impactful, culturally appropriate and sustainable outcomes for Aboriginal communities in South Australia. Their collaboration for this project underscores a commitment to empowering communities and fostering long-term partnerships that address critical needs and enhance the well-being of Aboriginal people.

