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Quality and safety of Australia's early childhood education and care

Queensland Family and Child Commission Submission

Parliament of Australia – Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment

The Queensland Family and Child Commission

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (the Commission) welcomes the Inquiry into the quality and safety of Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. Early childhood forms the foundation for lifelong learning, emotional resilience, and healthy development, making it essential to ensure children are supported and protected in these formative years. Strengthening child safety in early learning settings benefits children and builds stronger families and communities, contributing to a Queensland where every child can thrive.

Central to the Commission's mandate is our statutory responsibility to monitor the child protection system and the broader network of services contributing to children's safety and wellbeing, including early childhood education and care. As part of this, the Commission supports the work of the Queensland Child Death Review Board (the Board). The Board conducts independent, system-level reviews of service delivery for children known to the child protection system who have died. It provides insights and recommendations that inform policy, practice and legislative reforms aimed at preventing future deaths.

Our work is also informed by the *Safer Pathways through Childhood* framework¹ (Safer Pathways), a strategic initiative that centres children's rights in all prevention and safety activities. This framework draws on the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child² and represents a collaborative approach across systems, services, communities, and families to create safer environments for children and young people.

Submission overview

While this submission focuses primarily on terms of reference 1 and 3, the Commission's contribution also relates to term 2 (regulatory effectiveness), term 7 (transparency), and term 10 (related systemic issues).

Drawing on Queensland's regulatory data, recent research, legislative reforms, and our own systemic analyses, we provide a high-level overview of progress and persistent gaps in the quality and safety of early learning services. We welcome the Committee's focus on enhancing national protections for children in care and support reforms that prioritise child safety, equity and systemic accountability.

While this submission draws primarily on Queensland data, the insights presented are of direct national relevance. The National Quality Framework applies uniformly across jurisdictions, and the breach types, compliance challenges, and developmental outcomes observed in Queensland are consistent with national reporting by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) and the Australian Early Development Census. Queensland's experience provides a case study of both the strengths and recurring risks in early learning environments under the current system.

In particular, Queensland demonstrates that most services can and do meet or exceed standards, and that improvements in developmental outcomes are observable where quality and safety are assured. However, the persistence of certain risks – inadequate supervision, unsafe premises, emergency preparedness lapses – reflects systemic challenges across all states and territories. These are not isolated to one jurisdiction, but national issues requiring consistent responses.

Queensland's initiatives, including the *Safer Pathways* framework and data-driven child death prevention, provide useful models for national reform. Integrating similar approaches across jurisdictions would strengthen prevention, transparency, and systemic accountability nationwide. To ensure equitable outcomes for all Australian children, particularly those in rural, remote and disadvantaged communities, national policy must invest in regulatory resourcing, harmonise overlapping frameworks, and target support where provider capacity is most constrained.

¹ Queensland Family and Child Commission (2025). *Safer pathways through childhood 2022-2027: A framework to guide the Queensland Family and Child Commission's child death prevention activities*. [Queensland Family and Child Commission // Safer pathways through childhood](#)

² United Nations (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

System Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

In December 2024, the Queensland Government formally referred a review to the Board, using the offending of a convicted perpetrator as a case study.³ The review is being conducted under section 29I of the *Family and Child Commission Act 2014*, and is directed to examine laws, policies, procedures, and practices across three domains: early childhood education and care, policing, and the Blue Card (working with children) system.⁴

The review provides a stark reminder that safety in early childhood education must encompass protection from interpersonal harm, not just physical hazards. The emerging findings—especially regarding barriers to reporting, fragmentation of compliance regimes, delays in oversight responses, and organisational governance failures—highlight precisely the systemic vulnerabilities the Senate Inquiry is charged with addressing.⁵

Importantly, the Queensland case study is instructive for national systems: it demonstrates how even under existing frameworks, gaps in information sharing, oversight, regulatory responsiveness, and clarity of obligations can allow serious harm to continue undetected. As jurisdictions roll out child safe legislation or strengthen reportable conduct schemes, the lessons from this review should inform harmonisation and integration across ECEC regulation, child safe organisations law, police, and screening systems.

Opportunities

- **Learn from systemic reviews:** Apply lessons from Queensland's review to strengthen prevention, reporting, and inter-agency coordination.
- **Embed lived experience:** Ensure survivor, family, and frontline voices inform national reform.

The Queensland context

Across Queensland, regulatory oversight under the *National Quality Framework*⁶ (NQF) and state regulatory authority demonstrates many strengths but also reveals recurring risks. Recent data from Queensland's Early Childhood Regulatory Authority shows there are 3,344 approved ECEC services providing 263,736 places for children as of 30 June 2025.⁷ During that reporting quarter, 968 monitoring visits – both announced, and unannounced – were undertaken, reflecting a 22.5 per cent decrease from the same quarter in the previous year.

Nearly 95 per cent of services are assessed as meeting or exceeding the standard in Children's Health and Safety.⁸ About 72 per cent of services in Queensland are meeting the National Quality Standards (NQS), 17 per cent are exceeding it, while around 11 per cent are still working towards the national standards. Only a very small fraction of services is rated as requiring significant improvement in health, safety or other quality areas.

The most common breaches in recent quarters are offences of inadequately supervising children, failures to protect children from harm and hazards, inappropriate discipline, failure to notify required information to the regulatory authority, and staffing arrangement offences under the National Law. Under the National Regulations, breaches include:

- unsafe or poorly maintained premises, furniture or equipment
- emergency and evacuation procedure lapses

³ Queensland Child Death Review Board (2024). *System responses to child sexual abuse*. [System responses to child sexual abuse | Queensland Family and Child Commission](#)

⁴ Queensland Family and Child Commission (2025). *Terms of Reference – System responses to child sexual abuse*. [System Responses to Child Sexual Abuse Terms of Reference.pdf](#)

⁵ Queensland Family and Child Commission (2025). *Review of system responses to child sexual abuse: Progress report 3 – September 2025*. [Review of System Responses to Child Sexual Abuse - August progress report](#)

⁶ Australian Government – Department of Education (2025). *National Quality Framework*. [National Quality Framework - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

⁷ Queensland Government (2025). *Early Childhood Education and Care – Regulatory Data*. <https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/ececRegulation/regulatoryApproach/regulatoryData>

⁸ Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (2025). *National Quality Framework Snapshot Q1 2025*. <https://acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-05/NQF%20Snapshot%20Q1%202025%20FINAL.PDF>

- failure to follow required policies and procedures
- lapses in hygiene, health and safe food practices, and
- failures relating to children leaving premises safely.

These violations pose direct risks to children's safety and wellbeing. The service types most implicated in these types of breaches include long day care and outside school hours care, which also tend to serve large numbers of children.

There is evidence in Queensland linking positive early childhood attendance and high quality of early learning environments with lower rates of developmental vulnerability at school entry.⁹ Published studies examining spatial patterns across Queensland found that in areas with high rates of preschool attendance, there tend to be lower proportions of children showing developmental vulnerabilities in at least one domain. The study identified three regional clusters with differing socio-demographic and remoteness characteristics, which influence the strength of that protective association.¹⁰ The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data for 2021 confirmed that Queensland had the largest percentage reduction of developmental vulnerability on one or more domains among all Australian jurisdictions, and also observed an increase in the proportion of children starting school on track on all developmental domains.¹¹ Attendance to a safe, well managed, and high quality early education service has been positively related to greater engagement with secondary support services and improved school readiness.¹²

These results underline the importance not only of having services but of services that are safe, healthy, supervised, well-staffed and meeting regulatory standards.

Despite these positive trends, there remain systemic concerns. The recurrence of key breach types over successive quarters indicates that many services struggle to consistently embed compliance in areas central to health and safety. Some providers, particularly those in remote or disadvantage areas, are less well supported in maintaining safe infrastructure, adequate supervision, hygiene or emergency readiness. There are also issues in timely reporting of incidents, near misses and hazards, suggesting gaps in detection, response and oversight. Children's safety is often contingent on provider capacity, particularly as it relates to staffing, training, resources and organisational culture.

It is important to acknowledge that workforce sustainability directly affects safety and quality. Nationally, low pay, high turnover, and reliance on casual staff contribute to supervision and compliance risks. These workforce challenges magnify the systemic issues highlighted in our Queensland evidence.

Opportunities

- **Boost regulatory resourcing:** Increase unannounced inspections, rapid breach follow-up, and proactive oversight.
- **Target support to vulnerable services:** Assist rural, remote, and disadvantaged providers to strengthen infrastructure, supervision, and compliance.

⁹ Queensland Family and Child Commission (2023), Growing Up in Queensland. https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-02/9022_QFCC_Growing%20Up%20in%20Queensland.WCAG%20reading%20order_01%20COMPRESSED.pdf

¹⁰ Cornell University (2023). *Assessing the Spatial Structure of the Association between Attendance at Preschool and Children's Developmental Vulnerabilities in Queensland, Australia*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2305.15746?utm>

¹¹ Australian Early Development Census (2021). 2021 AEDC National Report. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

¹² Queensland Family and Child Commission (2023). *Lessons from the life-story timelines of 30 Queensland children who have died: A small sample review of commonalities in child and family trajectories considered at the Child Death Review Board*. [Lessons from the life-story timelines of 30 Queensland children who have died](https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-02/9022_QFCC_Lessons%20from%20the%20life-story%20timelines%20of%2030%20Queensland%20children%20who%20have%20died.pdf)

The National context

National ACECQA data confirms that the Queensland experience reflects broader systemic patterns across all jurisdictions. Of the 16,565 services assessed nationally as of June 2025, around 70 per cent are meeting the NQS, 21 per cent are exceeding, nine per cent are working towards, and only a very small number (13 services) are rated as requiring significant improvement. This mirrors Queensland's profile, where 72 per cent of services are meeting NQS, 17 per cent are exceeding, and 11 per cent are working towards.

Importantly, the data shows that while most services nationally meet or exceed standards, a consistent minority remain below compliance, with significant variation between jurisdictions. South Australia for example, has a higher proportion of services working towards NQS (17%) compared to Victoria (4%), while Western Australia reports the strongest compliance with 80 per cent of services meeting the standards. These differences demonstrate that the recurring risks and compliance challenges identified in Queensland—such as supervision, safe environments, and emergency preparedness—are not isolated issues, but national concerns requiring coordinated responses.

Queensland's experience, supported by national ratings data, highlights that while the system is strong overall, persistent gaps exist across all states and territories. This reinforces the need for consistent investment in regulatory resourcing, unannounced inspections, and targeted support for providers who struggle with compliance, particularly in rural, remote and disadvantaged contexts. The graduated approach to compliance infringements allows lower-risk or technical non-compliance to be remedied with a view to continuous improvement and capacity building, and responses to repeated, or direct risk breaches to bear more serious consequences.

While the compliance framework is strong in principle, adherence to the framework in practice is uneven. Over 200 compliance notices were issued in recent quarters in Queensland, alongside prohibition and show cause notices, and some cancellations of provider approvals.¹³ There is lag in enforcement action in some areas, and variability in providers' understanding of the overlapping obligations under the multiple frameworks with intersecting requirements under the National Law and Regulations, state child safety laws, screening or background-checking (Blue Card) regimes, and forthcoming child safe standards and reportable conduct obligations. The burden of compliance can be heavier for small services, remote services, or providers with less administrative capacity, meaning that risk of non-compliance correlates with resource-constraint more than with intent.

Opportunities

- **Improve transparency:** Release timely breach and enforcement data by service type and location.
- **Strengthen workforce capability:** Address risks from turnover, low pay, and casualisation through national workforce strategies.

¹³ Queensland Government (2025). *Early Childhood Education and Care – Compliance and enforcement data Q4 2025-2025*. <https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/eccecRegulation/regulatoryApproach/regulatoryData/Pages/compliance-and-enforcement.aspx>

National alignment

On October 1, 2025, the *Child Safe Organisations Act 2024* (Qld) commences. From this date, child-centred services and entities will be required to comply with the national Child Safe Standards and Universal Principle; the Reportable Conduct Scheme is scheduled to commence on 1 July 2026. The Child Safe Organisations Scheme in Queensland sits alongside existing regulatory frameworks, including the NQF, the Education and Care Services National Law and Regulations, state child protection laws, and Blue Card screening regimes. While this reform strengthens safeguards for children, it also illustrates the complex compliance environment faced by early childhood services. Providers must navigate overlapping obligations under multiple legislative and regulatory regimes. For larger providers, the challenge is aligning internal governance systems across jurisdictions; for smaller and remote providers, it is meeting requirements without detracting from service delivery. The Committee may consider options for nationally harmonising compliance obligations to reduce duplication, provide clearer guidance to providers, and ensure that regulatory effort is targeted towards improving safety outcomes rather than navigating administrative complexity. This Inquiry provides opportunity for national coordination to ensure consistent implementation and support for providers across all states and territories.

Opportunities

- **Harmonise frameworks:** Align child safe standards, reportable conduct laws, working with children checks, and the NQF to reduce duplication.
- **Streamline reporting:** Provide clear, nationally consistent guidance and pathways for incident reporting.

Policy considerations

The Commission's *Safer Pathways* provides a perspective for understanding and addressing risks to child safety and wellbeing from a systems lens. Grounded in comprehensive data from the Queensland Child Death Register, the framework underscores the importance of adopting data-driven, preventive approaches that move beyond reactive enforcement to effectively reduce preventable child deaths and improve wellbeing outcomes.¹⁴

Its strategic focus encompasses enhancing data quality, fostering expertise across sectors, translating research into meaningful policy and practice reforms, and continuously evaluating prevention efforts. This approach complements and strengthens ongoing efforts to ensure safety and quality in early learning environments. Reflecting *Safer Pathways'* commitment to equity and systemic accountability, the Commission advocates for national policy directions that uphold children's rights to safety, wellbeing and healthy development across all early learning services. These include sustained investment in regulatory resourcing to enable frequent, unannounced inspections, prompt follow-up on non-compliance, and support for providers in remediation. Equally important is the need for clear, unified guidance that aligns child safe and reportable conduct laws with the NQF, Blue Card screening regimes, and policies relating to emergency preparedness and environmental risks to reduce confusion and improve compliance.

Enhanced public transparency is also critical, with more timely and accessible release of enforcement and breach data by service type and geography, empowering families and communities to make informed choices and allowing broader visibility of sector-wide risk trends. Additionally, targeted support for providers in remote, rural, and disadvantaged areas is essential to build capacity in safety infrastructure, staff training, risk management and administrative compliance. By adopting measures aligned with the principles and strategic priorities of the Safer Pathways framework, the health, safety, and developmental wellbeing of children in early childhood education and care services across Australia can be significantly improved. Ensuring environments that are safe, nurturing, and developmentally supportive requires more than regulatory compliance; it demands ongoing collaboration, evaluation, and systemic improvement.

The role of for-profit incentives in the ECEC sector is a matter of national debate. Evidence suggests that where profit pressures lead to reduced staffing ratios, lower investment in infrastructure, or cost-cutting on training, risks to safety and quality increase.¹⁵ While this submission has not assessed provider business models, the Commission notes the relevance of this issue to the Inquiry's broader considerations.

Opportunities

- **Address for-profit incentives:** Ensure accountability settings drive reinvestment in staff, training, and infrastructure.
- **Promote systemic prevention:** Adopt data-driven, preventive approaches (like Safer Pathways) to reduce reliance on reactive enforcement.

Beyond compliance

Queensland demonstrates that many services meet safety and quality standards, and that improvements in developmental outcomes are possible where services are well supported. However, recurring challenges remain in supervision, safe environments, hygiene, emergency preparedness, staffing, and reporting. To fully realise children's rights to safety, wellbeing, and healthy development, national policy must enhance regulatory resourcing, clarify legal obligations, improve transparency, and target assistance to disadvantaged and remote services.

Children deserve not only compliance with regulations but environments where safety, supervision, emotional wellbeing, and developmental support are consistently assured. The Commission welcomes ongoing engagement, collaboration, and evaluation to ensure reforms continue to evolve with the needs of children and families.

¹⁵ Queensland Family and Child Commission (2025). *Buyer beware: How economic forces are shaping Queensland's residential care market*. [Buyer Beware | Queensland Family and Child Commission](#)