



2026 ECEC Portfolio

September Report

Ellen Fitzgerald

Early Childhood Education and Care Update

There has been a lot of movement in early childhood education and care this year, and much of it matters to isolated families. Here is what has changed, and where ICPA is pushing for more.

ICPA (Aust) has lodged a submission to the Senate inquiry into early childhood education and care in rural, regional and remote communities. The submission is built on member evidence - ECEC motions carried at our Federal Conferences in 2024, 2025 and 2026, and case studies provided by member families.

In Home Care: some progress, but still a long way to go.

The Worker Retention Payment has been extended to 30 June 2028, and In Home Care services are now included, but only where they employ all of their educators. Services using contractor arrangements, which are common in remote areas, remain ineligible. ICPA's position is that funding should follow the family and the educator, not the structure of the provider.

The hourly rate cap for In Home Care in 2026–27 is \$41.31 per family, while providers estimate the true cost of employing a qualified educator at more than \$60 an hour. That gap ends up in your gap fee, and our submission asks the Government to re-benchmark the cap against what care actually costs to deliver.

The Community Child Care Fund also moved in the right direction in August, with \$106.9 million going to 386 services over three years - around two-thirds of them in regional, rural and remote Australia. Welcome, though the fund remains competitive and capped in ways remote services often cannot meet.

Other changes worth knowing

- The Child Care Subsidy activity test was replaced on 5 January by the Three Day Guarantee, giving eligible families at least three days of subsidised care a week. For families with no service within reach, this changes nothing on its own. But it is progress in principle.
- CCS rate caps and income thresholds rose on 6 July, indexed to the CPI.
- Child safety requirements were tightened from 1 July, including mandatory training for In Home Care and Community Child Care Fund Restricted services.
- ACECQA has updated the workforce transitional provisions for early childhood teachers.

We need your stories!

ICPA's advocacy is only as strong as the evidence our members give us. Case studies turn a policy position into something a Minister or a Senate committee cannot argue with.

If your family has struggled to find care, waited for a place, paid gap fees you could not sustain, housed an educator at your own expense, or gone without early learning altogether because of where you live, we would like to hear from you. Share your experience with the Federal ECEC portfolio. Stories can be de-identified before use, and nothing goes forward without your consent.

Our Senate submission included families who generously shared their stories about the difficulty of accessing ECEC in rural towns and remote Australia. Those stories carried more weight than any statistic. Yours will too."