

Systems Mapping Report

Mapping the
systems that
influence early
childhood
development
outcomes

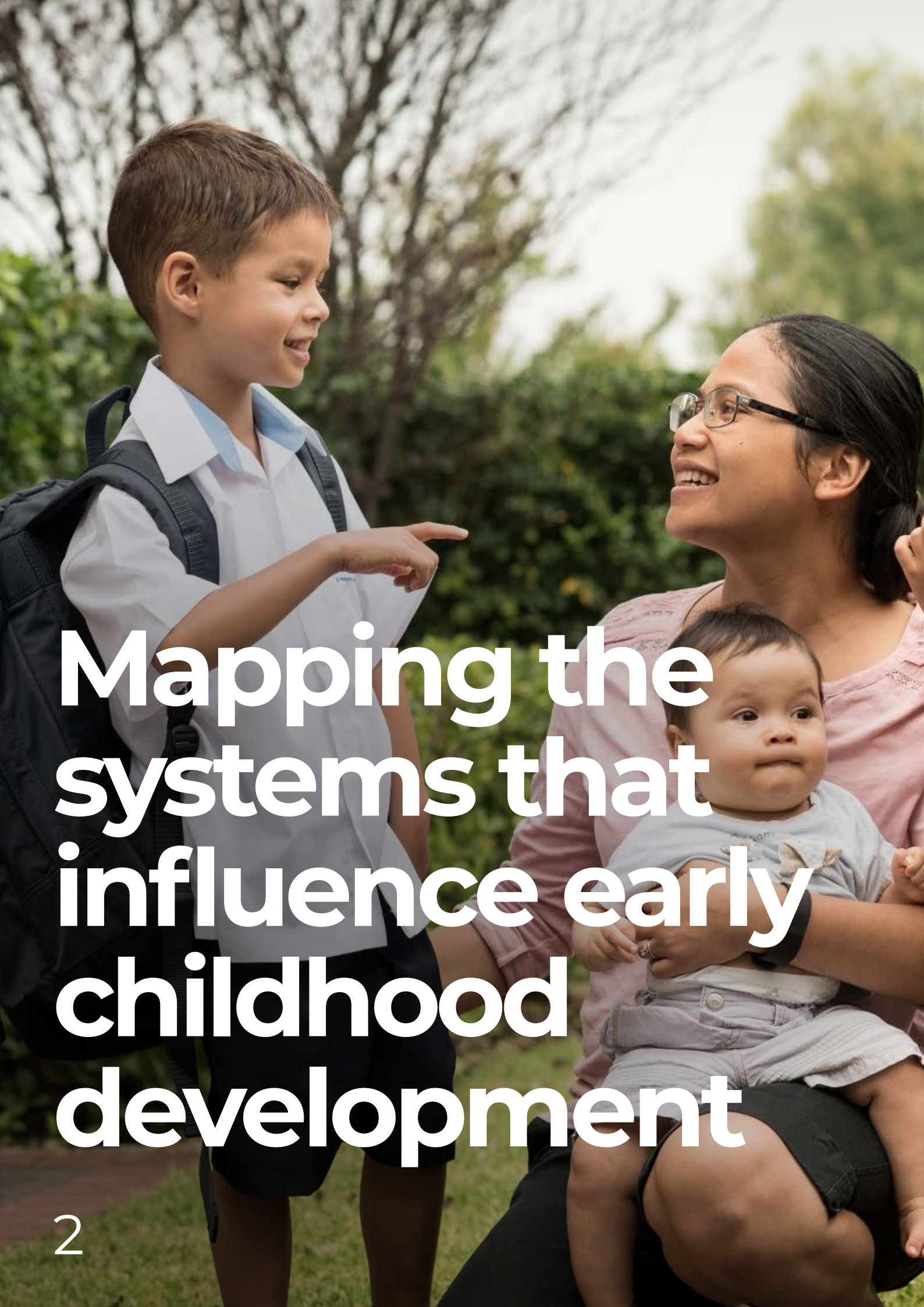
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August
2022



Early Years
Catalyst



Mapping the systems that influence early childhood development

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Suggested citation:
Fiona McKenzie and Eve Millar, 2022. Mapping the systems that influence early childhood development outcomes. Prepared by Orange Compass for the Early Years Catalyst, August 2022.

Contents

Acknowledgements	5
Foreword	6
Executive summary	8
Introduction	12
The system maps	16
Current state map	17
Extracted loops – current state	22
Current state icebergs	28
Desired future state map	40
Extracted loops – future state	46
Future state icebergs	49
Getting from here to there	60
Sensemaking and exploration	66
Map exploration	68
Identifying leverage points	69
The key leverage points	70
Rapid testing and iteration	72
Gaining a sense of possibilities	73
Where to from here?	74
Annexures	76
Annex 1 – Our approach to systems mapping	77
Annex 2 – Stages 1 & 2: Desktop synthesis and participatory engagement	80
Annex 3 – Stage 3: Sensemaking and exploration	84
Annex 4 – Stage 4: Rapid testing and iteration	88
Annex 5 – Additional inputs and references	91

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the people who contributed to this research by generously sharing their time and insights through participating in workshops, interviews and including the 300+ people who completed our online surveys.

We want to acknowledge the valuable contribution of these rich and varied insights in shaping this work.

We heard directly from many people and, to ensure frank and fearless conversations, we committed that all participants would remain anonymous.

Annex 2 reflects the diversity of sectors represented in the engagement process.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank the BHP Foundation for their visionary support of the Early Years Catalyst in our setup and initial phase of work. It is their support that has allowed us to embark on this work and to be able to gather such a wide range of voices and inputs. To learn more about the BHP Foundation and their work, please visit

www.bhp.com/foundation

Foreword

Early childhood is a critical period in a child's development that has consequences for the rest of their life. We believe that securing population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes requires us to understand how our existing systems work to constrain or create opportunities for young children and their families.

Rather than seek 'silver bullets', we look for multiple opportunities to influence change in many different areas over the short, medium and longer-term. These include changes in policy, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics and mental models. As sector leaders, we also commit to continually reflect on the role we play in influencing early childhood development outcomes and to identify new ways of working in response.

The Early Years Catalyst is an ambitious, long-term systemic change initiative that emerged from the 2020 National Early Years Summit. We are a national collaboration working to improve early childhood development outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. We seek to connect, support and amplify the work of organisations across the country so that together we can transform the early years system to better meet the needs of children and their families. Our vision is that by 2030, significantly more children in Australia will be thriving in their first 2,000 days and beyond (pregnancy to five).

It is through the development of a shared understanding of the many systems that children and families experience, and the interconnections between them, that we can begin to build a strong foundation for collective action to disrupt and transform Australia's early years system.

In late 2021, we commissioned Orange Compass to undertake a major systems mapping process to identify the forces influencing early childhood development outcomes in Australia today and possible leverage points for change. This work was informed by a participatory engagement process involving more than 300 people from across the country with knowledge

and insights of the early years system together with a rapid review of published position papers and deep dives into prevailing societal and economic ideologies.

We intentionally sought to focus the engagement process on frontline workers and others with lived experience of how the early years system currently operates on the ground, drawing participants from a wide range of backgrounds and areas of interest and expertise.

The systems mapping process has provided the Early Years Catalyst with invaluable feedback about how we can work relationally - convening the field while also connecting, supporting and amplifying the work of organisations to create the conditions for systemic change in the early years.

We are pleased to share this report 'Mapping the systems that influence early childhood development outcomes'. We encourage you to explore and interrogate this work - including the causal loop maps that capture how participants view the current and desired future state of Australia's early years system - and to consider the implications for the work of your own organisations, networks and collaborations.

We welcome your feedback and reflections over the coming months as we engage widely to further explore possible leverage points for transformational change.

JANE HUNT
EARLY YEARS CATALYST CO-CHAIR
CEO OF THE FRONT PROJECT

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Executive summary

The systems mapping process undertaken from August 2021 to May 2022, generated rich insights and systems learnings, surfacing participant experiences of the complex interplay of underlying patterns, structures and mental models that are maintaining unacceptably high levels of disadvantage in the early years. The process also revealed the key elements of a desired, future early years system that supports significantly more children and their families in Australia to thrive.

CURRENT STATE

In exploring the 'current state', particularly 'what is holding the current state in place', seven categories of embedded narratives and deep systemic forces were revealed. These included:

- Deeply held societal beliefs
- Care logic
- Child and family experience
- Market logic
- Government logic
- Service sector logic
- Reform logic

For each category, a number of feedback loops were subsequently developed. Over 30 feedback loops were mapped in total. Each loop reflects a narrative or systemic force that is holding the current system(s) and outcomes in place.

For example, the headlines for each feedback loop under deeply held societal beliefs include:

- We are a society that is prepared to live with poverty
- Families are a no-go zone
- Parenting comes naturally
- What's not normal is 'other' (the exception)
- There are good mothers and bad mothers

“So that every
child has the
village it takes to
raise a child”

In summary, some of the most deeply held forces that we must challenge, if we are to identify solutions that will truly disrupt and transform Australia's early years system include:

The family is private and should be protected from interference by government; 'normal' families have the resources, choice, agency and capacity to participate in society, know what's best for their own children and solve their own issues - only 'abnormal' families need outside help

Market based solutions are better as they offer a more efficient and professional means of delivering services; it is the role of governments to protect and promote this logic

Caring work is not real work it is the role of families (particularly women) to provide care; care is not the responsibility of governments nor is it something that should have to be paid for

Governments are not accountable for system failures it is simply the market working things out; governments should get out of the way and let markets do what they were designed to do.

DESIRED, FUTURE STATE

In imagining a 'desired future state', frontline workers were very clear about the importance of acknowledging the relational aspects of the early years systems and the role that power dynamics, relationships and connections play in shaping early childhood development outcomes.

We heard the field's aspirations for a distinctly different and better future early years system. One that prioritises strengthening families, parents, carers and local communities 'so that every child has the village it takes to raise a child'. The field has also called for a future focus on creating big societal shifts. That as a country we prioritise the (lifelong) wellbeing of all children in Australia and recognise that raising thriving children (and families) is the work of the whole nation.

This vision translated into a future state map underpinned by 5 categories of deep systemic forces that participants believe would help to shift the current systems and generate improved outcomes for all Australian children. These were:

- The lifelong wellbeing of all children in Australia
- Strengthening families, parents and carers
- Strengthening local communities
- Accountable, high quality, proactive ECD systems
- Government holds responsibility for the whole

For each category, feedback loops were developed. A total of 17 feedback loops were created for the desired future state.

We invite you to explore these maps and consider what holds true from your own experience, and also where you might be able to provide an alternative perspective or insights. It is through the development of a shared understanding of the system, and sets of interconnected systems, that we can better navigate complexity and generate momentum for systems change.

A NOTE ABOUT OUR WORKING DEFINITION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

To enable the systems mapping project we needed a working definition of “the influences on early childhood development outcomes”.

Given the systemic nature of our approach, we created an intentionally broad definition by combining ARACY's Nest Framework and the Centre for Community Child Health's “Core Conditions”, to acknowledge that children's development takes place in connection with parents / carers and families.

This definition resonated with those who engaged with us, enabling broad and deep reflections about the systemic influences on early childhood development outcomes.

A NOTE ABOUT CAUSAL LOOP MAPPING

Causal loop mapping is created by drawing on the knowledge of participants in a way that enables deep insights into the behaviour of the current system and the underlying conditions that shape this behaviour.

It is important to note that a causal loop map is a simplified representation of the system, it is never the ‘correct or only’ map. It is a visual and sensemaking process that enables the inclusion of ‘system stories’ that are meaningful to participants and reflects a moment in time.

In this project, the maps became an input into collective dialogue about the underlying patterns, the different points of leverage for transformation, and mechanisms for adapting and responding to change within a system.

A close-up photograph of a child's hands holding several brown eggs. The child is wearing a blue t-shirt with the words "CHOOSE BIKE" in white capital letters. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green foliage and brown ground. A large, light blue curved shape is overlaid on the bottom left of the image, containing white text.

We were
privileged to
hear from over
300 people from
across Australia

Introduction

Mapping the systems that influence early childhood development outcomes

Orange Compass is proud to have partnered with the Early Years Catalyst (EYC) to facilitate a participatory engagement process with front line staff working with children and families and people with lived experience, about the systems that influence early childhood development (ECD) outcomes.

The origins of this work was the National Early Years Summit held in March 2020. The Summit resulted in a draft Blueprint which outlined a plan to enable more babies, toddlers and their families to thrive in Australia. The Summit committed to establish a collective of national organisations to lead the finalisation of the Blueprint and catalyse action – the Early Years Catalyst.

From August 2021 to May 2022, we were privileged to hear from over 300 people, from across Australia (rural, remote and urban areas) about their experience with our current early childhood development systems, and their wishes for what desired systems of the future might look like if they supported significantly more children in Australia to thrive.

WHY SYSTEMS MAPPING?

With so many systems intersecting and influencing ECD outcomes, systems

mapping is a helpful way to be able to show complexity and connections and develop a shared understanding of deep systemic forces.

Our goal for the systems mapping was to help the EYC build a strong foundation for collective strategy development and collaboration by:

- Supporting increased mutual understanding of 'the system' and sets of interconnected systems
- Surfacing underlying patterns and deep systemic structures and forces
- Identifying different possible points of leverage for transformation

With the insights generated from field engagement, we chose to map both the 'current state' and the 'future (desired) state' of the ECD systems using causal loop maps.



For Optimal Early Childhood Development Taken from: The Nest Framework & CCCH's Core Conditions

Causal loop mapping is created by drawing on the knowledge and perspectives of stakeholders in a way that enables deep insight into the behaviour of the current system and the underlying conditions that shape this behaviour. It is a visual and sensemaking process that enables the inclusion of 'system stories' that are meaningful to participants, helping us to step back and see the 'big picture'.

HOW DID WE DEFINE ECD?

Reflecting the breadth of intersecting influences on early childhood development outcomes, we used an intentionally broad definition of early childhood development to frame our engagement processes.

Our approach combines evidence-based frameworks for optimal early childhood development outcomes

(ARACY's The Nest framework and the Centre for Community Child Health's 'Core Conditions'), reflects the direct needs of children and recognises that children develop in connection with their parents/carers and families

WHAT DID WE FIND?

The engagement processes yielded a deluge of information about how the current systems operate, the everyday events and patterns that are experienced repeatedly, and real-life examples of the impact of systemic structures on children and families. The goal of the system mapping outputs was to reflect the richness of what we had heard during the engagement process.

As a result of what we learnt, we created both 'current state' and 'desired future state' casual loop maps.

The current state map focused on deep systemic forces that hold the existing systems (and outcomes) in place. We were seeking to better understand what is happening in these systems that influence ECD outcomes.

While there are many strengths in the current system, there was a strong focus by participants on undesirable outcomes and their root causes. This is reflected in the resulting map. This focus was informed by a widespread agreement that there remains unacceptably high levels of disadvantage in the early years, despite all the initiatives and efforts over past decades.

For the 'current state', we also developed 5 'iceberg' diagrams, essentially a summary version of the more detailed 'current state' causal loop map which answer the following questions:

- What do we see everyday?
- What patterns do we see repeatedly?
- What structures/laws/conventions are holding the systems in place?

Each iceberg provides a high-level overview of different feedback loops in a way that reveals the cascading links between deeply held societal beliefs and the more visible 'symptoms' in the system.

The 'desired future state' map captures the narratives, forces and outcomes that participants envision for a better ECD system. It is not a mirror image of the current state. Rather, it shows different forces, values and structures driving outcomes in a distinctly different future system.

Results and insights from the mapping process are shared in the sections below.

For more information about our approach to the work and inputs from across the project stages, please see Annexures 1-4. This includes information about the four stages of the project: 1) Desktop Synthesis 2) Participatory Engagement 3) Sensemaking and Exploration and 4) Rapid Testing and Iteration.

The system maps

Current state map

Workshops and interviews with frontline workers allowed us to hear many stories about how different systems work, what it is like being part of these systems and what it is like to interact with them every day. This engagement yielded a deeper level of richness and insights, with the emergence of some strong themes.

There was a consistent focus on the ways the current system undermines family agency and the lack of community connections and empowerment. There were also many examples of a both universal and secondary platforms across health and other systems that were simply failing many families, as these quotes show:

research behind it - but there are very limited opportunities for early detection. Because certainly in the communities that I work in there are very limited opportunities for early intervention. We have no allied health services available without extensive and I mean, 18 months to two years wait lists for these children to be seen".

"Regional and remote access is a joke. We don't have a system that is equitable in any way, shape or form. We don't have a system that is predictable".

"That little boy went from having some telehealth access, at least he was getting something. Now he's getting nothing. So those parents are looking at rejecting the NDIS plans, because there are no services for them to access. And so, their children are actually going backwards and missing out"

"We've even had some family members take their lives now, that's horrific. Five of my case load - five of those children - lost a parent, because the parent couldn't get mental health support, and it was just compounding because their children needed support".

"We have families who are so highly strung about not being able to get their children's services, they move away from the community. And that loss of community members we're having, of course, if you don't have a population, you're not going to get the services. It's a double-edged sword".

"I think the framing around early intervention is a myth. I know that early intervention is best practice. I know the



The 'current state' causal loop map reflects these embedded narratives and the deep systemic forces underpinning the existing ECD system. The map includes 7 categories of deep systemic forces and root causes:

- Deeply held societal beliefs
- Care logic
- Child and family experience
- Market logic
- Government logic
- Service sector logic
- Reform logic

For each category, a number of feedback loops were subsequently developed. Over 30 feedback loops were mapped in total. The headlines for each feedback loop are listed below.

As stated above, participants focused most heavily on what they feel is holding the 'current state' in place, particularly in terms of undesirable outcomes. The map is a reflection of these insights. When discussions turned to the future state, it was clear that participants held a very different vision of what the system could (and should) be.

DEEPLY HELD SOCIETAL BELIEFS

- We are a society that is prepared to live with poverty
- Families are a no-go zone
- Parenting comes naturally
- What's not normal is "other" (the exception)
- There are good mothers and bad mothers

CARE LOGIC

- Care (being human) is a burden on society (read economy)
- Care is women's work / belongs in the shadows
- Erosion of the village
- Reductionism more powerful than care, connection & trust

CHILD AND FAMILY EXPERIENCE

- Families stigmatised
- A system that compounds First Nations trauma
- Home environments under stress

MARKET LOGIC

- Myth of family choice
- Poverty is a choice and should be punished
- Children are in the market but don't influence it
- Prevention doesn't make economic sense

GOVERNMENT LOGIC

- Government must promote and protect the market
- But Government can't 'intervene' in the market
- Silos serve a purpose
- Social services aren't the important work of government
- Local is less professional (but someone's got to do it)
- Failure of accountability, loudest voices
- The Federation Game
- There is no political reward for reform

SERVICE SECTOR LOGIC

- Taking the human out of human services
- Social services operate within a market logic
- Service sector sees itself as solution to problems
- Competition for Influence
- Targeted services mean only by exception, no early intervention

REFORM LOGIC

- Avoidance of the big levers of change
- Never ending search for evidence and shiny new things
- Divided not conquering

Current state map

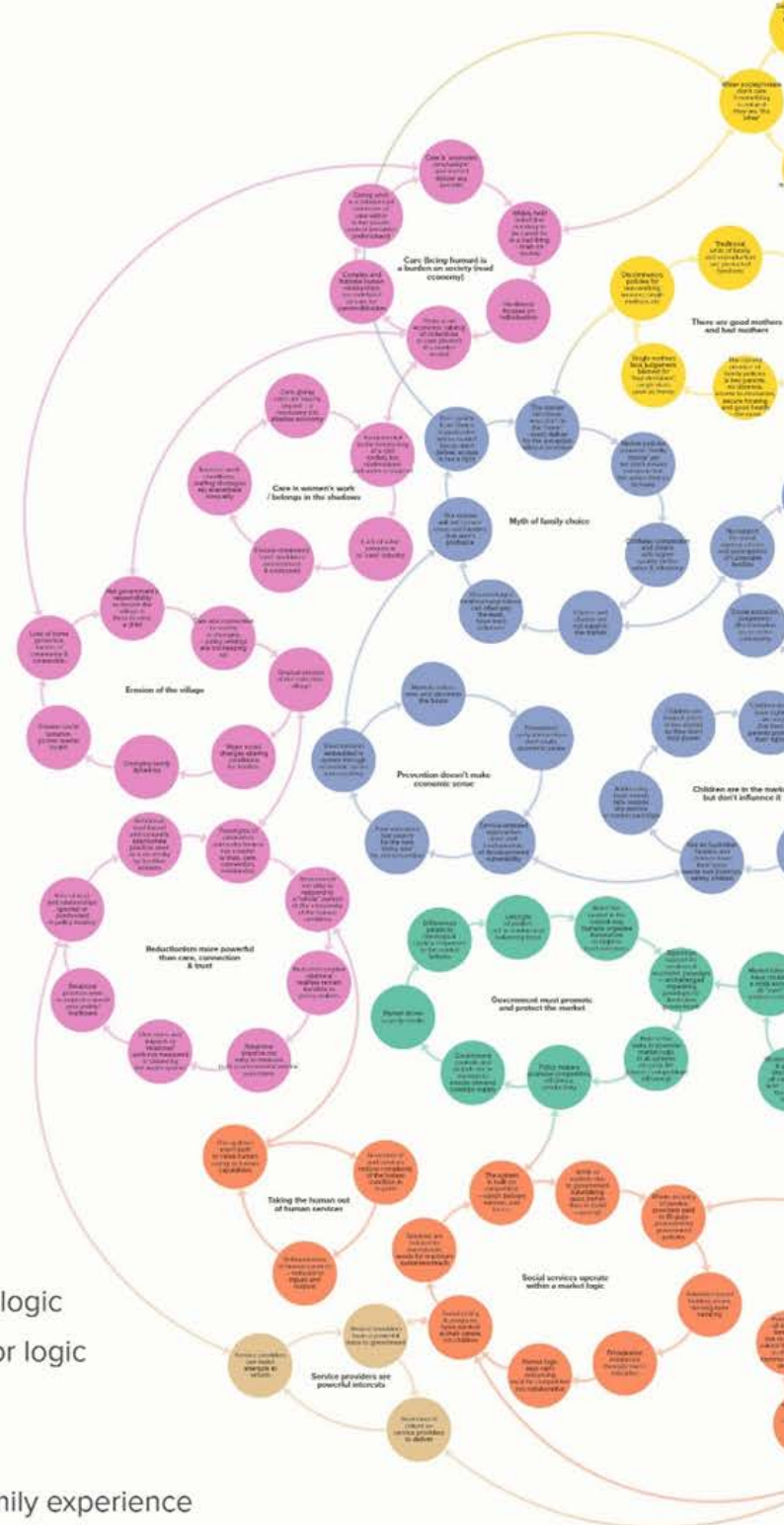
An image of the map is included here to demonstrate the nature of the map. However, to explore each feedback loop in detail, it is recommended that the map is viewed digitally.

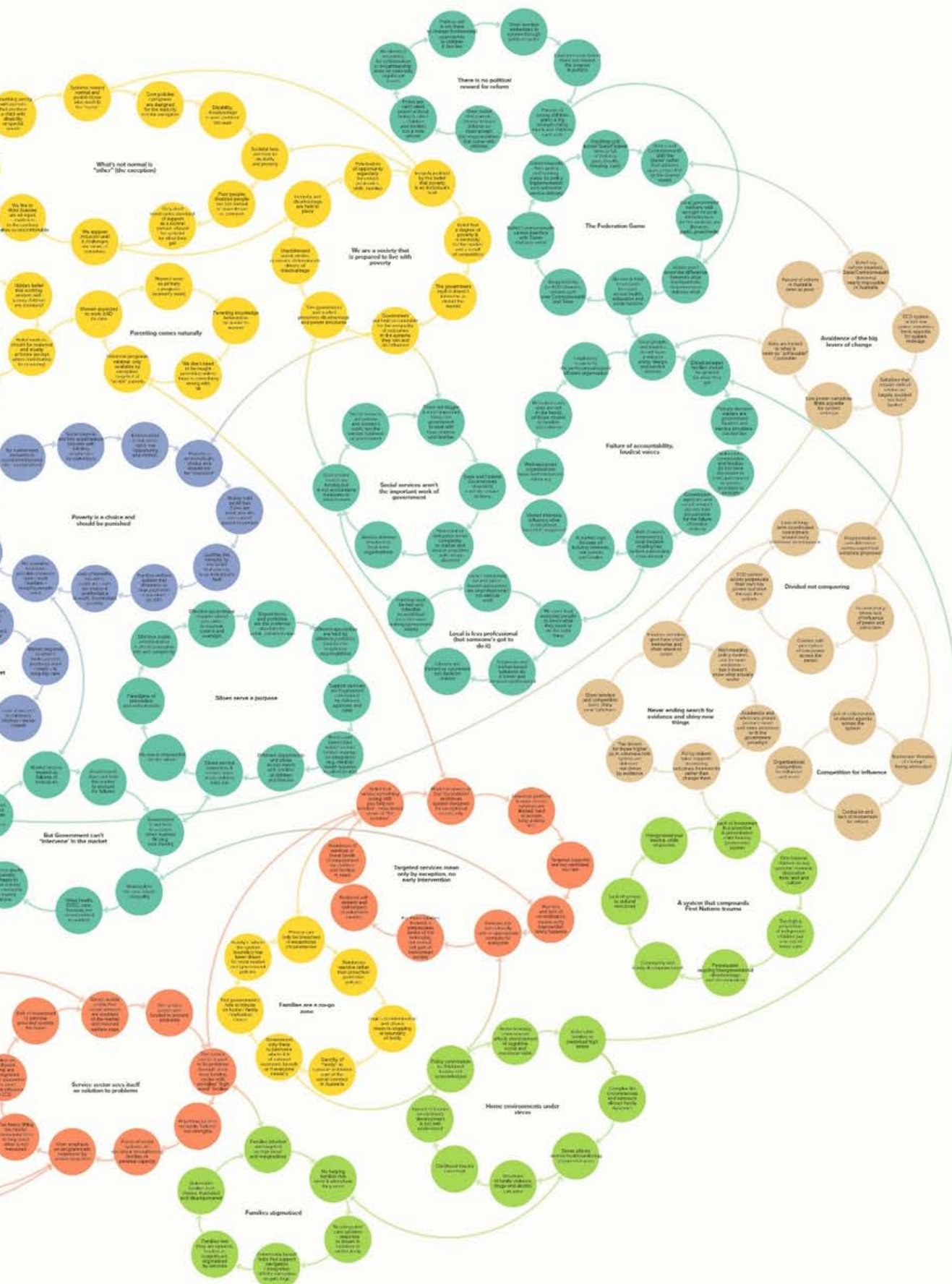
An interactive version of this map is available on the Early Years Catalyst website:

www.earlyyearscatalyst.org.au/field-insights

Legend

- Government logic
- Service sector logic
- Market logic
- Care logic
- Child and family experience
- Deeply held societal beliefs
- Reform logic



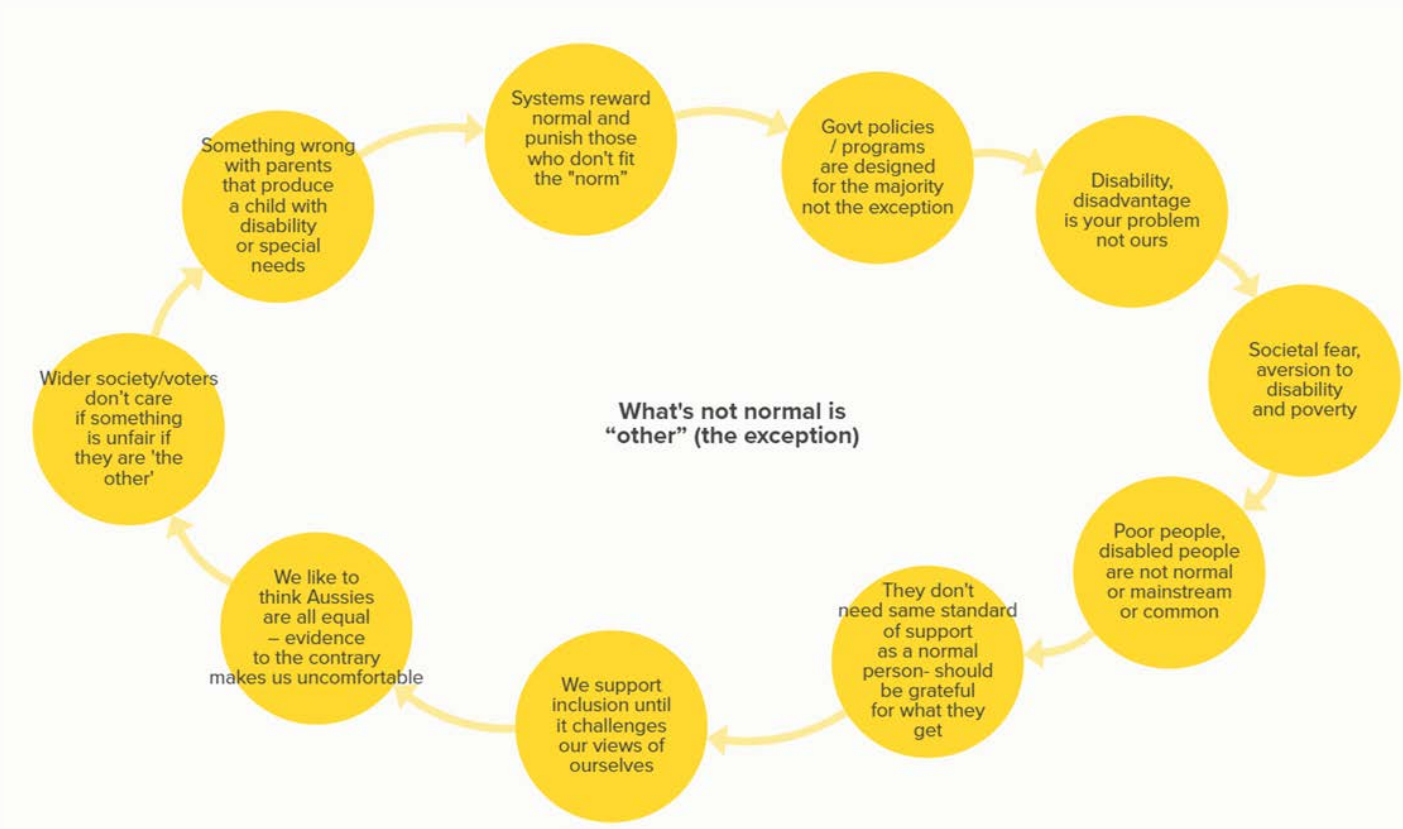


Extracted loops – current state

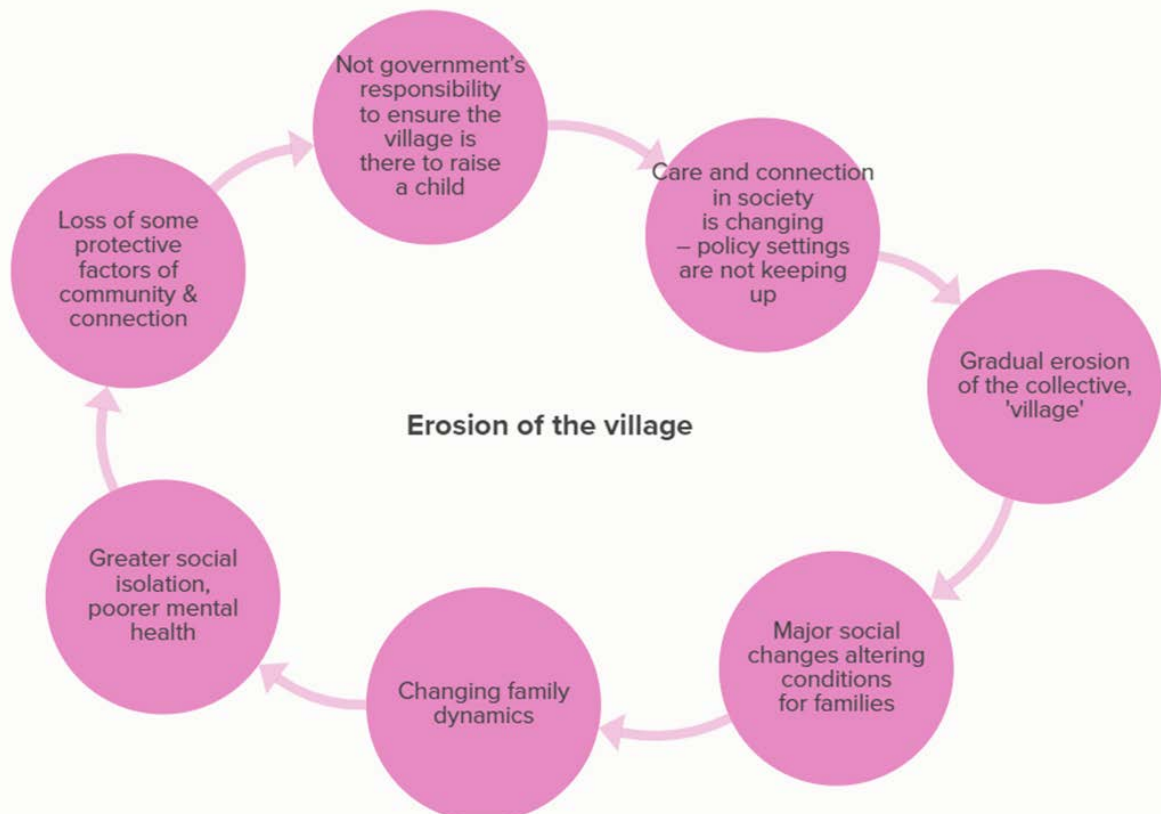
Selected loops have also been extracted to help readers navigate the findings and gain a sense of how to read the broader map.

Deeply held societal beliefs

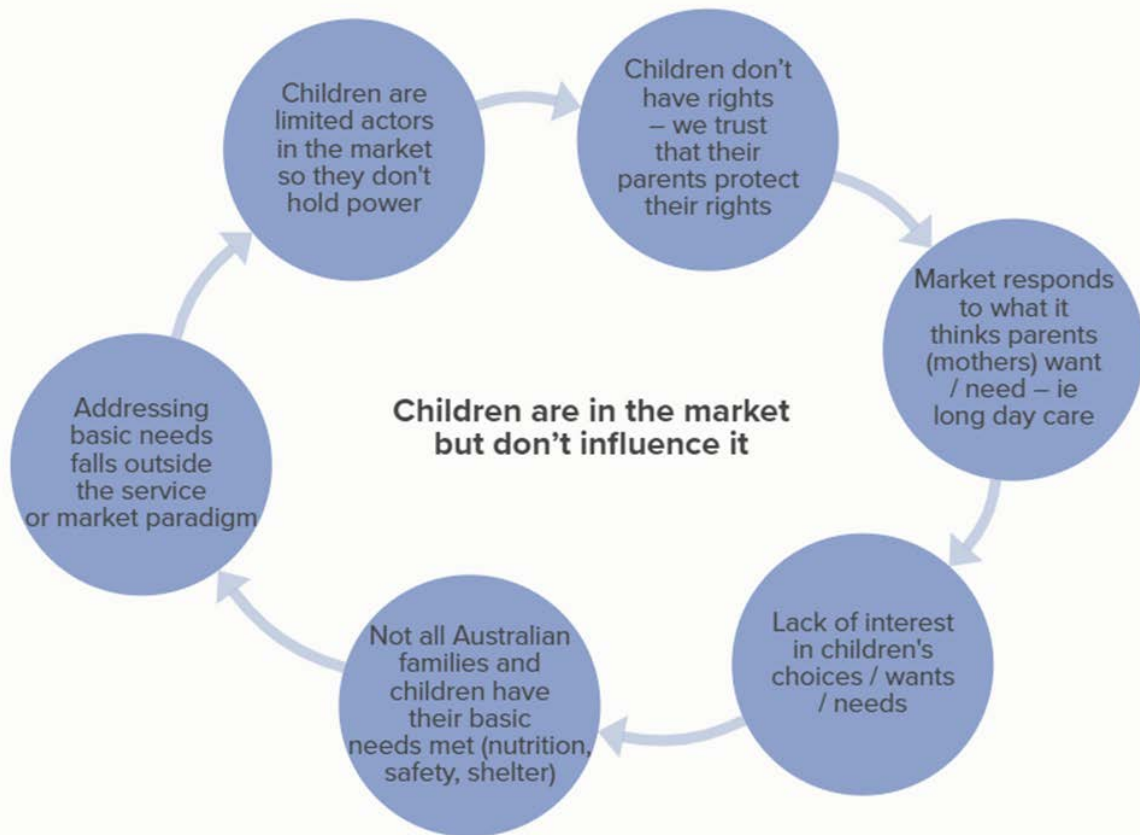




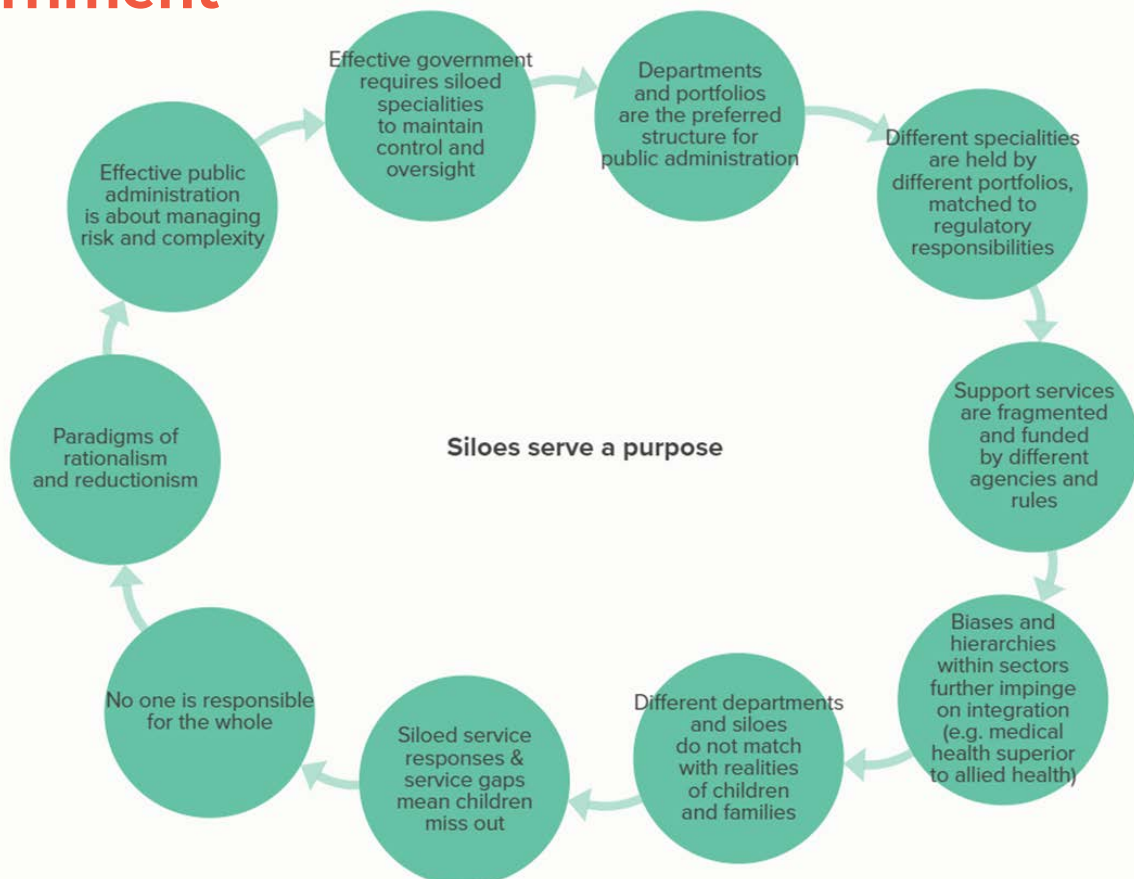
Care logic



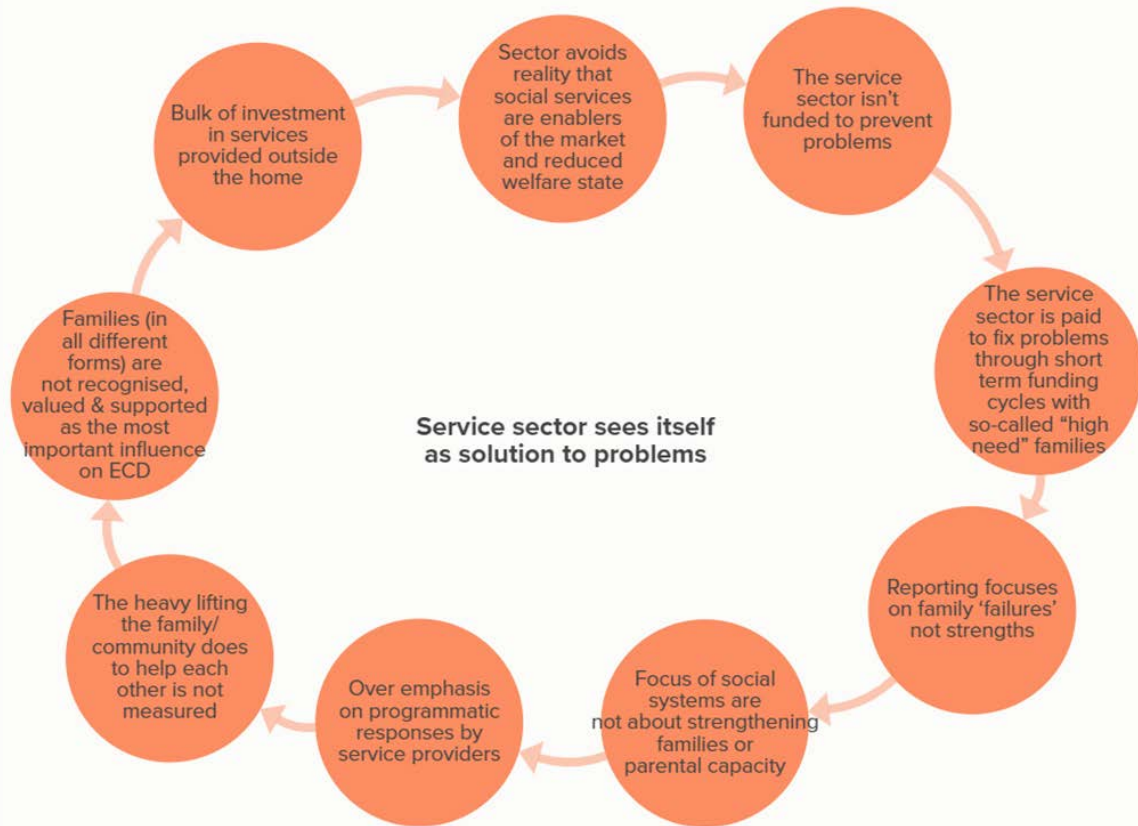
Market logic



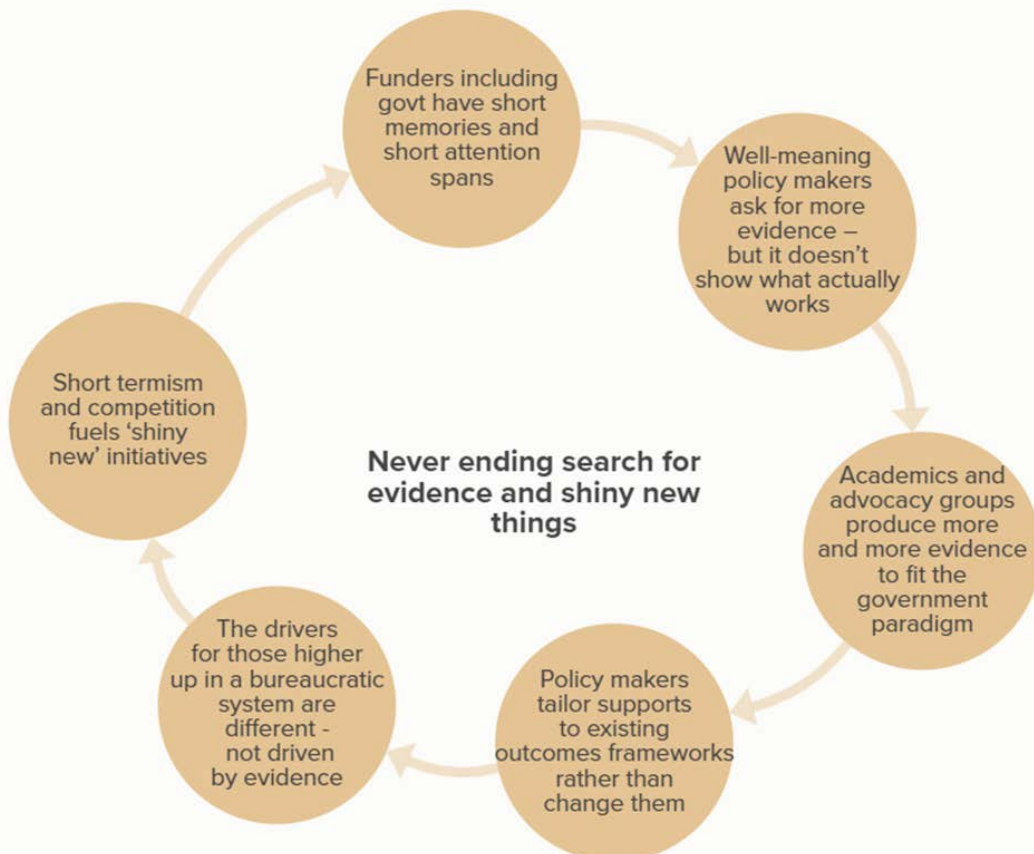
Government logic



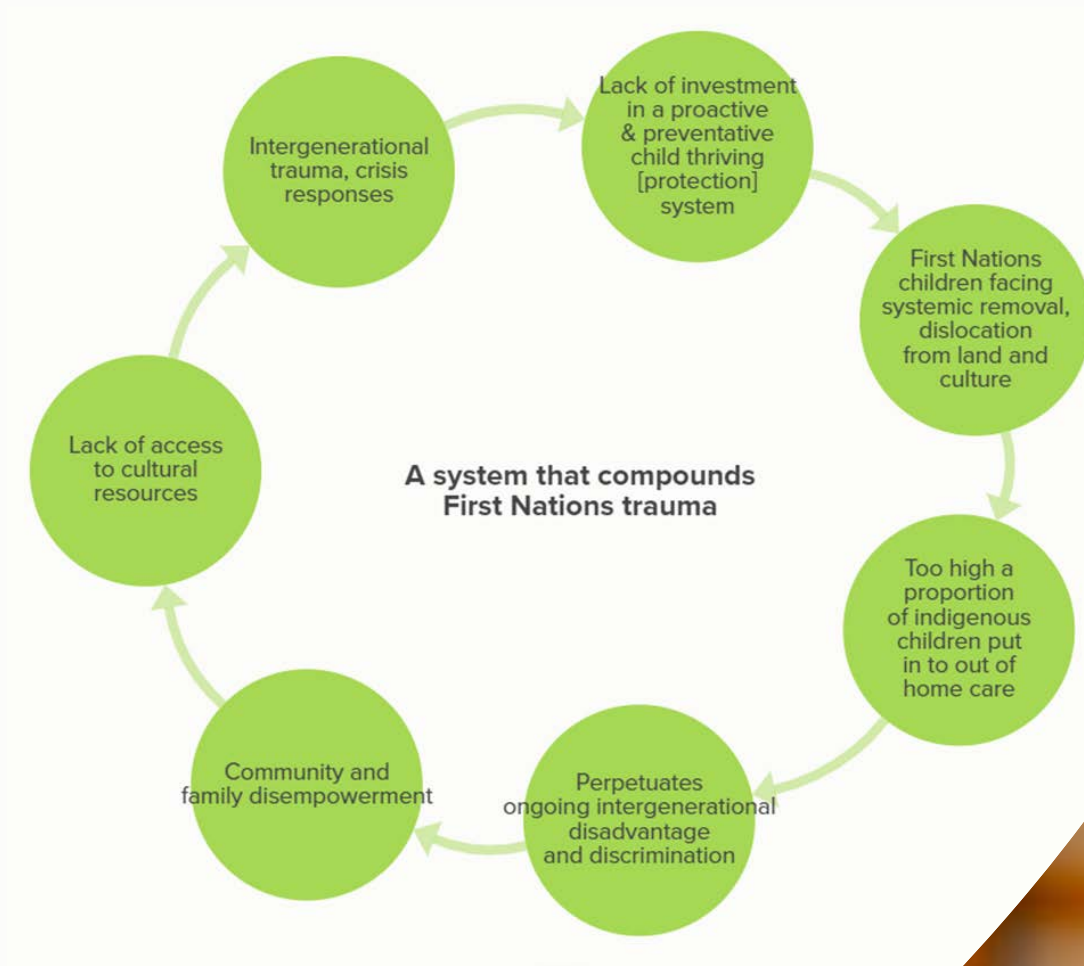
Service sector logic



Reform logic



Child and family experience





Current state icebergs

As mentioned earlier, we also developed five current state 'iceberg' diagrams to provide another way to unpack the deep systemic forces in the causal loop map - in a way that summarises core forces around a deep belief.

The first iceberg provides an overarching summary. The next four icebergs each reflect key feedback loops and provides a high-level overview of the cascading links between deeply held societal beliefs and the more visible 'symptoms' in the system.

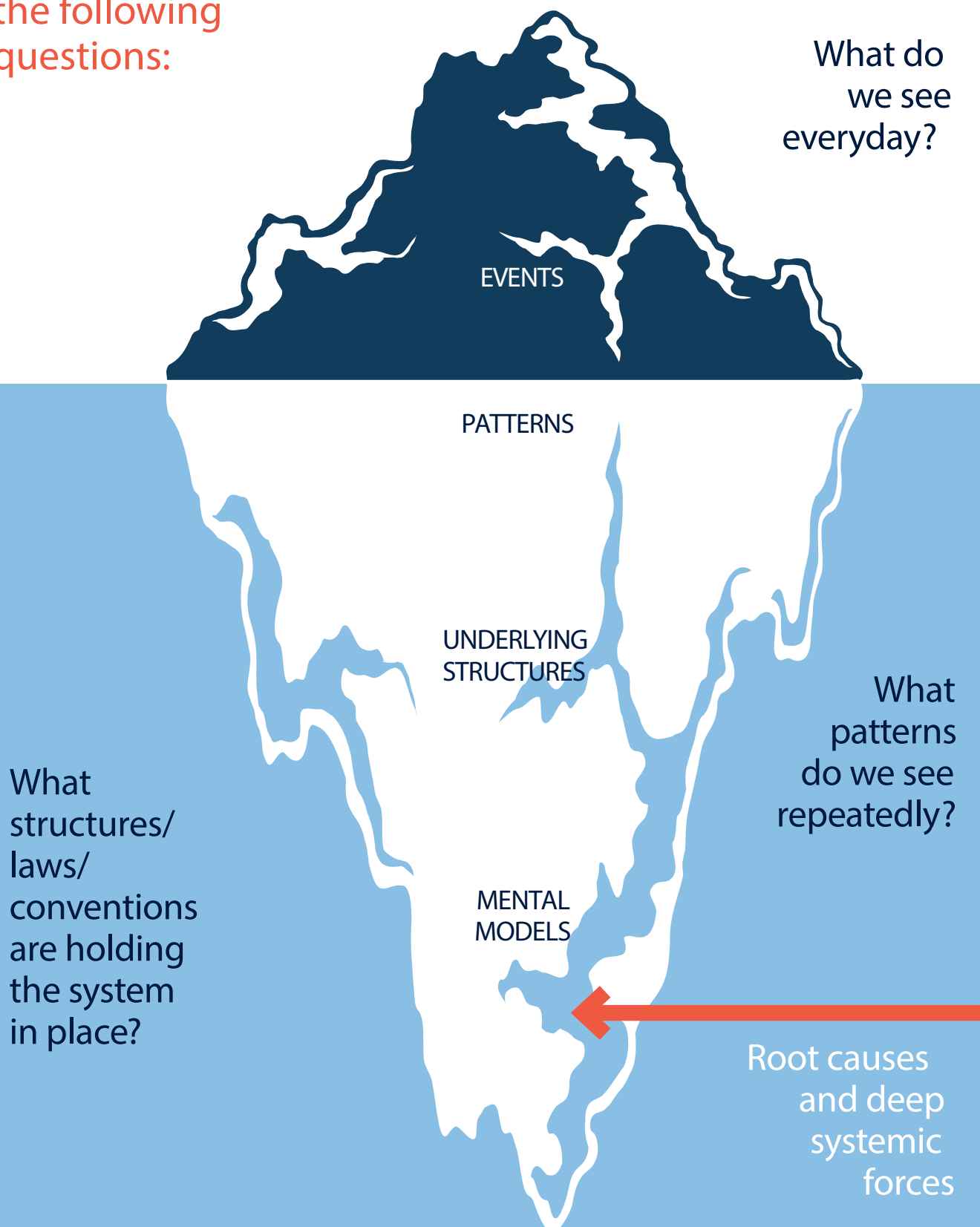
As with the current state causal loop map, the icebergs help to highlight what participants feel is holding the current state in place. And as the next section shows, there was a clear desire to move to a new future state.

The four deep beliefs we illustrated were:

- The family is private
- Market based solutions are better
- Care is not "real" work
- Governments are not accountable for system failures

THE ICEBERG MODEL

Each diagram
was built to answer
the following
questions:



Summary iceberg

Current state

What we see:

- **Not enough children in Australia are thriving (and it's not improving)**
- **The lifelong negative impacts of entrenched disadvantage & poverty start in early childhood & continue**
- **Local communities have eroded, with growing social isolation and lack of local social and community connection infrastructure for families**
- **ECD services & systems operate in silos, without integration or coordination around a family or child**
- **The role of caring and the work of caring professions is under-recognised and under-valued perpetuating inequality for women, and causing workforce shortages and service failures across many sectors**

System Structures

- Quasi- market mechanisms for service systems don't improve access or quality of services
- Government promotes & protects the markets and doesn't intervene where market mechanisms cause service failures for children & families
- The division of responsibility for ECD across State & Federal jurisdictions exacerbates inconsistency, inequality and lack of accountability for ECD outcomes by both levels of government
- ECEC subsidies & affordability is viewed as a productivity issue – not as an early childhood development or equity issue – only children of working mothers are subsidised
- Minimal investment in building local community social, physical & service infrastructure has aided the erosion of communities

Deep Narratives

- We are a society prepared to accept that some people live in poverty (but they could get a job if they really tried)
- Parents know what they are doing – they don't need government & services telling them what to do with their kids
- There are good mothers and bad mothers – and only bad mothers need help
- Early childhood education is just play – children really starting learning when they go to school

What we see:

- **Australians tolerate families and children living in poverty (it's someone else)**
- **Early childhood development needs are not widely understood or prioritised**
- **Blame shifting and avoidance of accountability for early childhood development outcomes by state & federal governments**
- **Services for children and families operate in a competitive market (overseen by government) leading to service failures for families in "non-viable" markets**
- **The cost of ECEC is prohibitive for many families – reducing incentives for mothers to work more with children 0-5 and for children to be engaged with early education prior to universal pre-school**

Patterns of Behaviour

- Families living with social or economic disadvantage are often stressed, stigmatised and feel disempowered by services that are not trauma-informed or culturally sensitive
- Families in rural & remote locations struggle for consistent access to good quality early childhood education, and early intervention by specialist & allied health services
- Targeted services mean only by exception – causing stigma and missing early intervention
- Women still do most caring work – paid and unpaid
- Organisations in the services sector compete for influence and position with government
- Families hear the myth of "family choice" (offered by market mechanisms) but often have no choice

Mental Models & Assumptions

- Children are in the market, but don't influence it
- Services sector sees itself as the solution to these problems (need more services)
- There is no political reward for reform
- Focus and investment on prevention doesn't make economic sense
- Social services are not the important work of government – outsourcing is more efficient

Iceberg 1

The family is private

- 1:6 children living in poverty
- Marginalised families don't access supports
- Increasing social isolation / mental health issues
- No universally accessible parenting / capacity building programs
- Impacts of trauma on children & families more visible

System Structures

- Government policy is framed for two parent, healthy, working families
- Tax & family welfare systems dis-incentivise parents (mothers) working
- Universal access services are limited
- Financial support to access ECEC is complex & hard to navigate
- Funding is directed to "fixing a problem" not preventing it

Deep Narrative

- The family (traditional model) is private and should be protected from interference by the state
- "Normal" families have resources, choice, agency & capacity for participation and exercise of individual power



- **Early childhood education is not compulsory or universally accessible**
- **The most vulnerable children do not attend ECEC**
- **Early intervention services are inaccessible for most children & families**
- **High quality ECEC is unaffordable for many families**

Patterns of Behaviour

- Stigma & shame from targeting of services
- Reactive policy and program development (accounts for 85% of investment)
- Secondary services not able to meet demand for early intervention
- Costs of childcare reduce women's workforce participation
- Families in crisis don't prioritise ECEC attendance

Mental Models & Assumptions

- Traditional family units & gender roles are the backbone of society
- There are good mothers and bad mothers
- Parenting comes naturally (unless there's something wrong with you)
- Caring is "women's work" inside or outside the home
- Only working women deserve financial support for childcare
- Parents know what's best for their children – we don't need to hear children's voices

Iceberg 2

Market based solutions are better

What we see:

- Lack of access to (education, health, community services) services families need or want in many locations - rural & metro
- Even if you can pay – access is limited by waitlists & location
- Disadvantage due to location is being perpetuated
- Choice is an illusion

System Structures

- Social services sector pushed to operate within a market paradigm
- Artificial markets created due to government subsidies
- Services are designed for mainstream to maximise market reach
- Markets reward competition rather than collaboration
- No consequences for market failure – no accountability

Deep Narratives

- Corporate & market-based solutions do it better (and are more professional)
- It's the role of the state to promote market logic in all spheres of social life [choice, competition & efficiency]



What we see:

- **Children can't access early intervention services in a timely way**
- **Children & families can't influence the range or quality of services accessible**
- **Evaluation (& funding) of services is not focused on the impact for families**
- **Services competing rather than collaborating**

Patterns of Behaviour

- Removed the “human” out of human services
- Services sector primary focus is survival not children and families
- Sector reinvents the wheel – presenting simplistic “silver bullet” solutions
- Sector measurement & evaluation aimed at delivering evidence to suit government
- Market failures just accepted as the way it works

Mental Models & Assumptions

- Individual or family choice is the ultimate goal
- Market competition delivers choice
- Children are in the market but don't influence it
- Service users don't deserve a voice (they're not the decision makers - government is)
- If you choose to live in the country you accept less access & choice of services

Iceberg 3

Care is not “real” work

What we see:

- **Workforce crises in the care professions are resulting in service failures in all sectors reliant on those trained in the "caring professions"**

System Structures

- Contribution of care work is invisible & unacknowledged (the private) or undervalued & underpaid (the public)
- Tax & family welfare systems disincentivises work for parents with young children (do not recognise care as work)

Deep Narratives

- Caring is not real work
- Families provide / manage care not government

An iceberg graphic with a dark blue tip above a light blue base. The tip contains the text 'What we see:'. The base contains two sections: 'Patterns of Behaviour' and 'Mental Models & Assumptions', each with a bulleted list. A vertical line on the right side of the page is labeled 'MAPPING THE SYSTEMS THAT INFLUENCE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES'.

What we see:

- **Inconsistent quality & skilled staff and workforces – delivering inconsistent quality care to children and families**

Patterns of Behaviour

- Care professions undervalued, underpaid, unacknowledged – leading to lower standards & skills
- People leaving care professions – staff shortages impacting even basic care

Mental Models & Assumptions

- Caring is "women's work" they want to do
- Caring should not have to be paid for
- Only working women deserve financial support for childcare
- Family care is the best type of care

Iceberg 4

Governments are not accountable for system failures

What we see:

- **Market failures** – children & families miss out
- **Duplication, competition & lack of integration of services**
- **Siloed systems that are impossible to navigate**
- **Policy development without families & children at the centre**

System Structures

- Silos serve their purpose
- Prevention does not make economic sense
- Implementation is outsourced without necessary checks & balances
- Rigid short term funding cycles
- Inability to effectively measure and evaluate programs / services
- No one minister or department responsible for the whole
- No one is accountable for market failures
- A level of disadvantage is built into the system to maintain the economy
- Electoral cycles promote short termism (do not reward long term investment)

Deep Narratives

- Neoliberal philosophy is the foundation of modern Australia
- Government should get out of the way and let the markets do it

An illustration of an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg, which is above the water line, is dark blue and jagged. The submerged part of the iceberg, which is below the water line, is light blue and has a more complex, branching shape. The water line is represented by a horizontal line.

What we see:

- **No national approach, shared vision or leadership on ECD**
- **Nothing substantive changes – huge investment for little return**
- **Short termism – failure to invest in long term approaches**
- **Buck passing – no-one is responsible for the whole**

Patterns of Behaviour

- What can be measured gets funded (government intervening in the market)
- The need for connection, relationships & trust is invisible in policy & funding decision making
- Government not held to account to intervene to correct market failures
- Long term investment doesn't happen
- Sector [providers, experts and advocates] avoids the big levers of change
- Sector divided and lacking influence

Mental Models & Assumptions

- Government exists for responsible public administration & mitigation of risk
- There are always winners & losers – disadvantage just a fact of life
- Social service delivery is not the important work of government
- The market is more efficient
- Government must protect the market
- Government can't intervene in the market
- No one can change the rules of the Federation game
- Politics is adversarial – no reward for collaboration

Desired future state map

Like the ‘current state’ causal loop map, the ‘desired future state’ map was developed from a synthesis of insights gathered through the engagement process.

It is not simply a reversal of the current system. Instead, it reflects the vision of participants for a distinctly different and better future ECD system, underpinned by different systemic forces and beliefs.

In all types of engagement – workshop, survey and interview – we asked the same consistent question:

“If you had a magic wand, what is one thing you would change so that all children & families can thrive?”

This question yielded rich insights into the desired future state of the system. The quotes below capture some of this sentiment.

“Children exist, and can only exist within relationships. So, the importance of those relationships being really positive, and high quality - that’s how children will thrive.”

“In the future, you know, to be able to have children and families be the central point of what community, what society revolves around, as opposed to being economic, wealth and gains and individualism.”

“We need to change our thinking or our lens in regards to many of the issues we’re talking about now. And that is how we actually change the culture of Australians in regards to the way in which we care not only for our kids, but for families and then community - all the way through.”

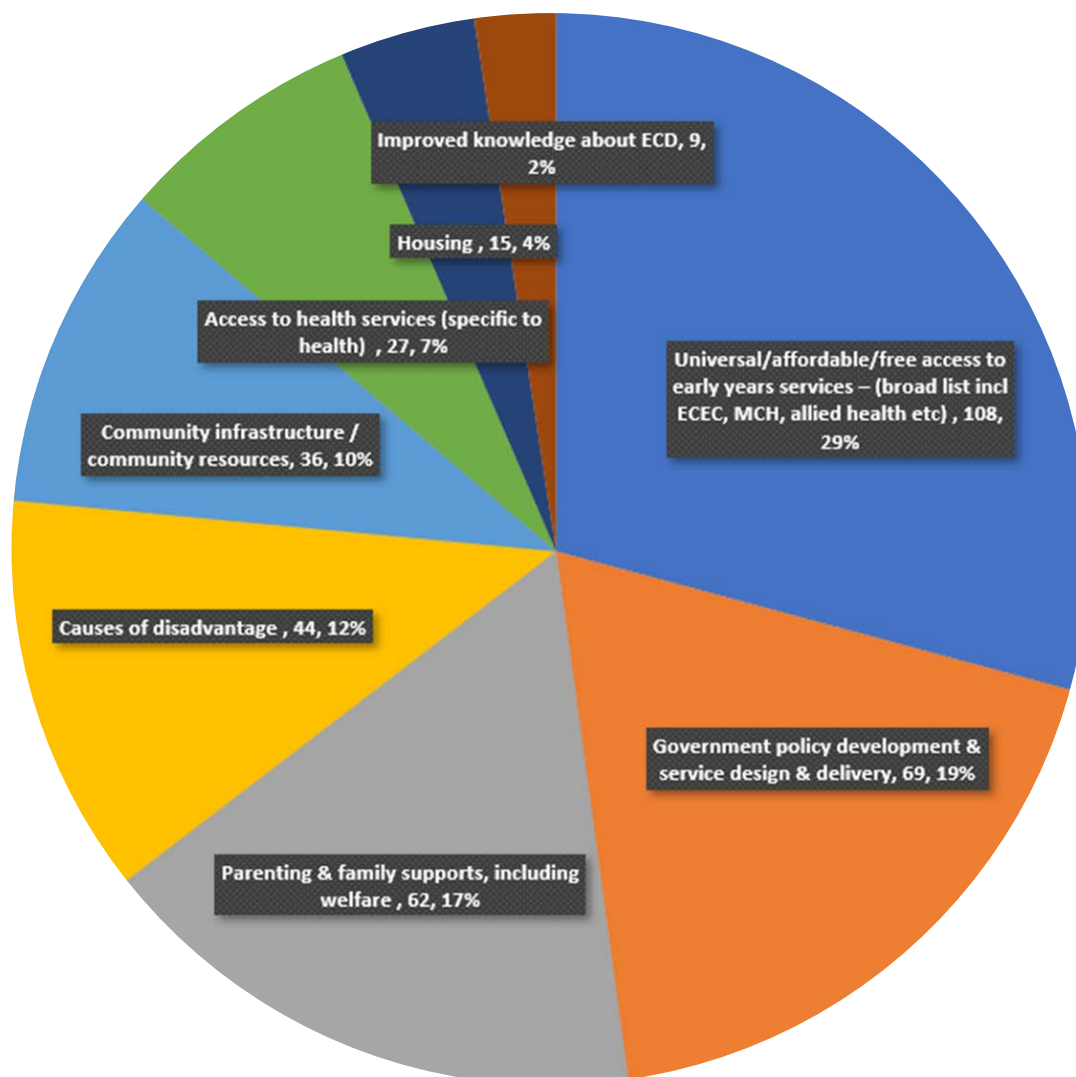
“I would like to see some of the decision making based on what data we are hearing and seeing from communities, and the communities are supported and empowered to collect and use their own data.”

“The scale of what we have got now, it is beyond central government for human services. We need to find ways to get more sensible decision making back at the community level.”

“The systems don’t operate to make these bits work together.”

Data from the first survey on the categories of “magic wand wishes” from respondents is also illuminating. We grouped common threads, as shown in the following image.

Focus of 'magic wand wishes' in Survey 1



The desired future state causal loop map was developed to reflect these elements in a desired future ECD system. The elements were summarised as 5 key categories:

- The lifelong wellbeing of all children in Australia

- Strengthening families, parents and carers
- Strengthening local communities
- Accountable, high quality, proactive ECD systems
- Government holds responsibility for the whole

For each headline, feedback loops were developed. A total of 17 feedback loops were created. These headlines and feedback loops are included below:

THE LIFELONG WELLBEING OF ALL CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIA

- Addressing the underlying causes of disadvantage
- All children and their families have their basic material needs met
- Every child has the right to quality and timely universal services

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES, PARENTS, CARERS

- Strengthening and valuing families (in all their different forms)
- Strengthening parent/carer/community capacity & confidence

STRENGTHENING LOCAL COMMUNITIES


- More inclusive communities
- Infrastructure for community connection
- Empowering local voices
- A system strengthened by difference

ACCOUNTABLE, HIGH QUALITY, PROACTIVE ECD SYSTEMS

- Preventative approaches to child safety and wellbeing
- Accountability for outcomes for children and families
- Reimagined universal platform
- Service systems backed by high quality workforces

GOVERNMENT HOLDS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WHOLE

- Policy making looks at the whole person, embraces complexity
- Government has holistic oversight and proactively intervenes
- Integrated connected systems that work for all families

A photograph of a woman with dark hair tied back, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a black short-sleeved shirt and has colorful tattoos on both arms. She is holding a baby in a blue onesie. The background is blurred, showing other people in a social setting. A large white scalloped-edged shape is on the left side of the image.

We heard the field's
aspirations for a
distinctly different
and better future
early years system.

Future state map

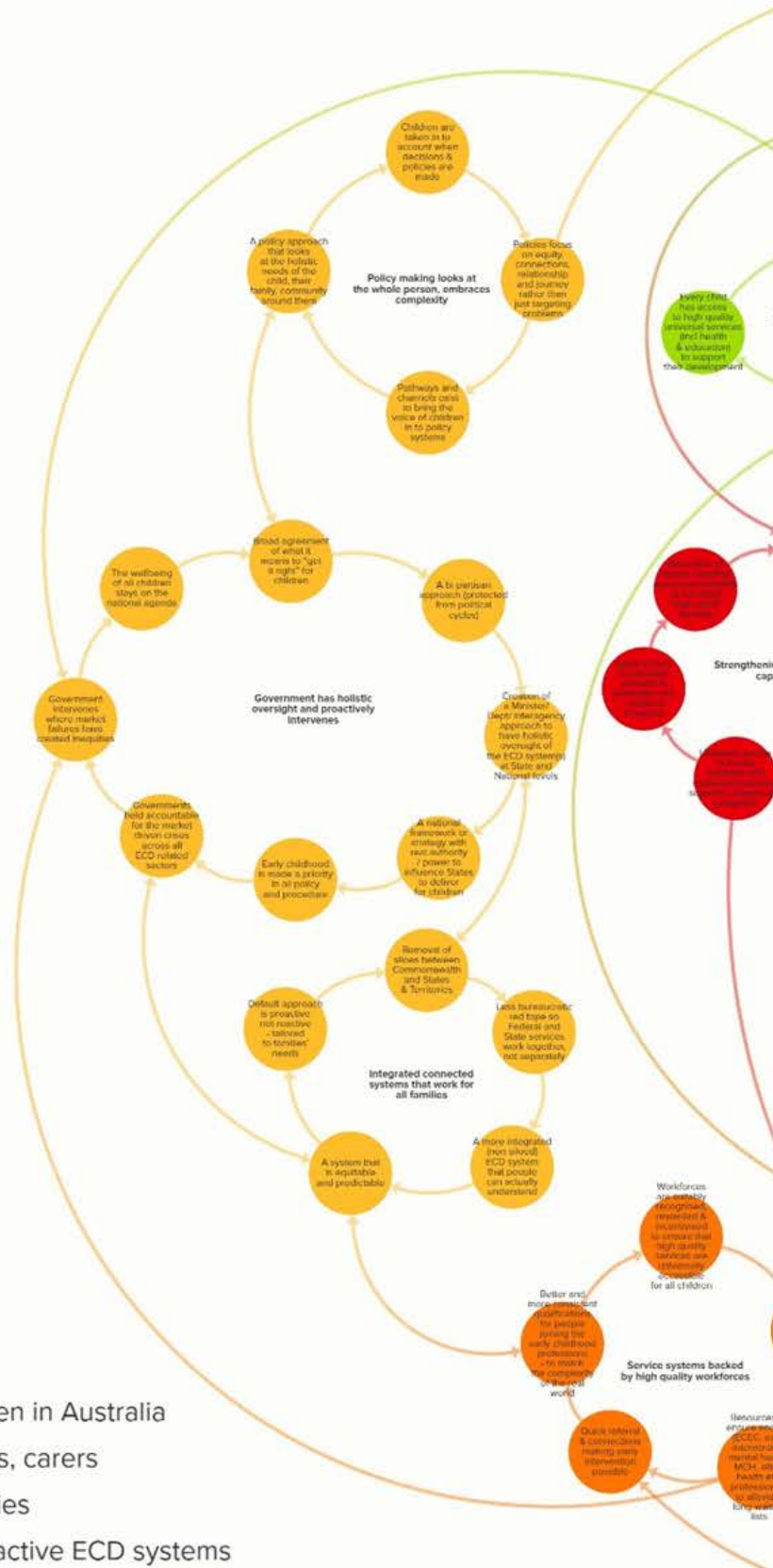
An image of the future state map is included opposite to demonstrate the nature of the map.

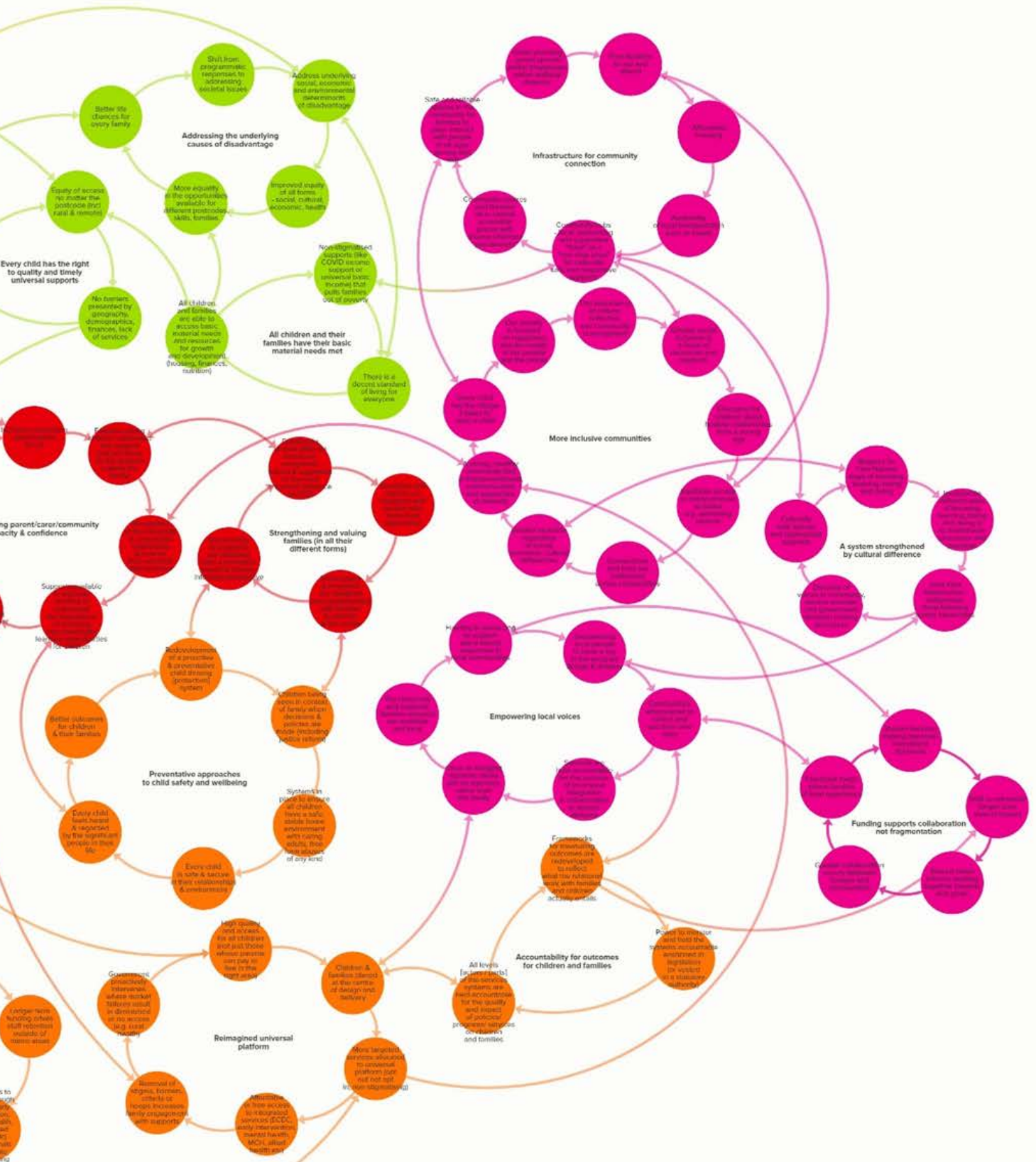
An interactive version of this map is available on the Early Years Catalyst website:

www.earlyyearscatalyst.org.au/field-insights

Legend

- Lifelong wellbeing of all children in Australia
- Strengthening families, parents, carers
- Strengthening local communities
- Accountable, high quality, proactive ECD systems
- Government holds responsibility for the whole

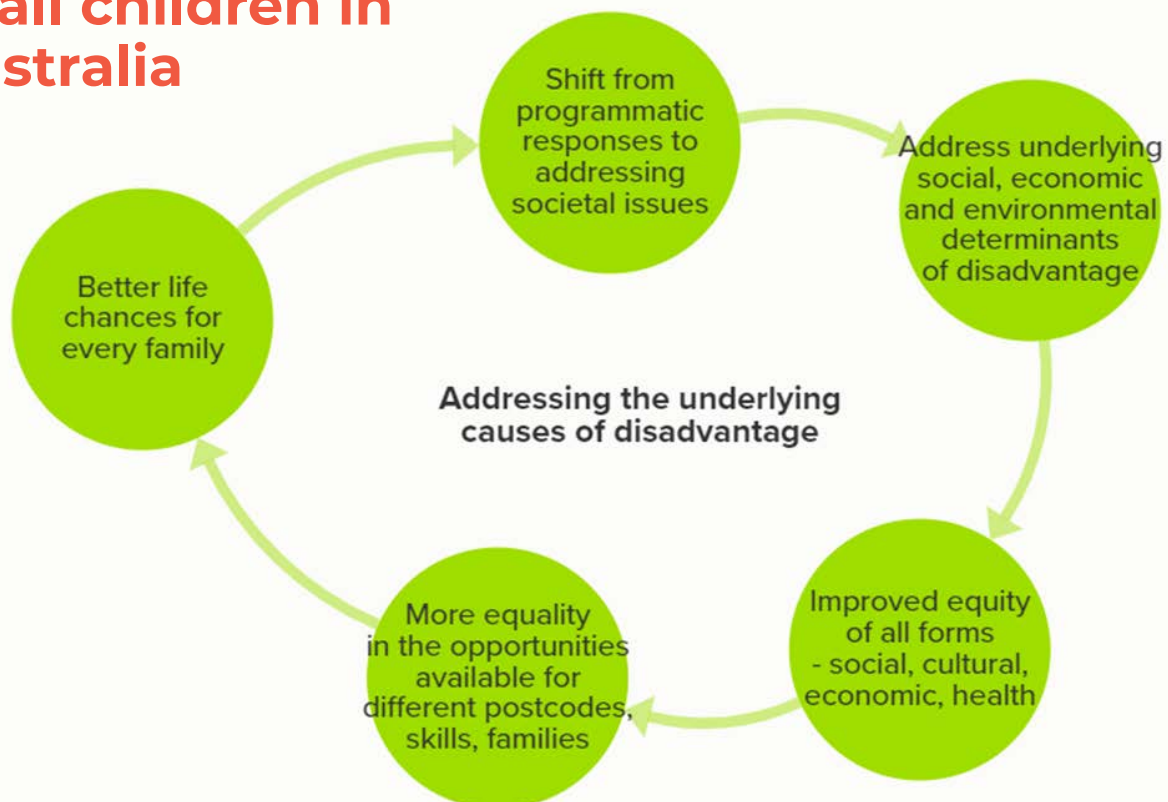




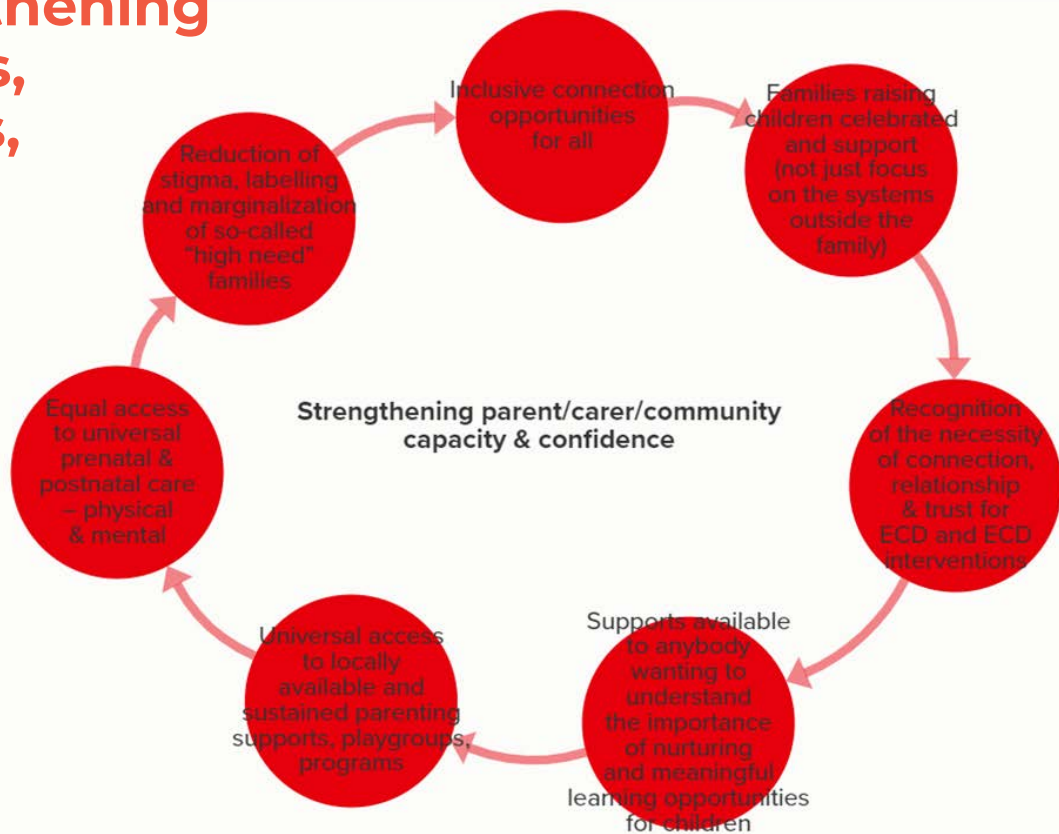
Extracted loops – future state

Selected loops have also been extracted to help readers navigate the findings and gain a sense of how to read the broader map.

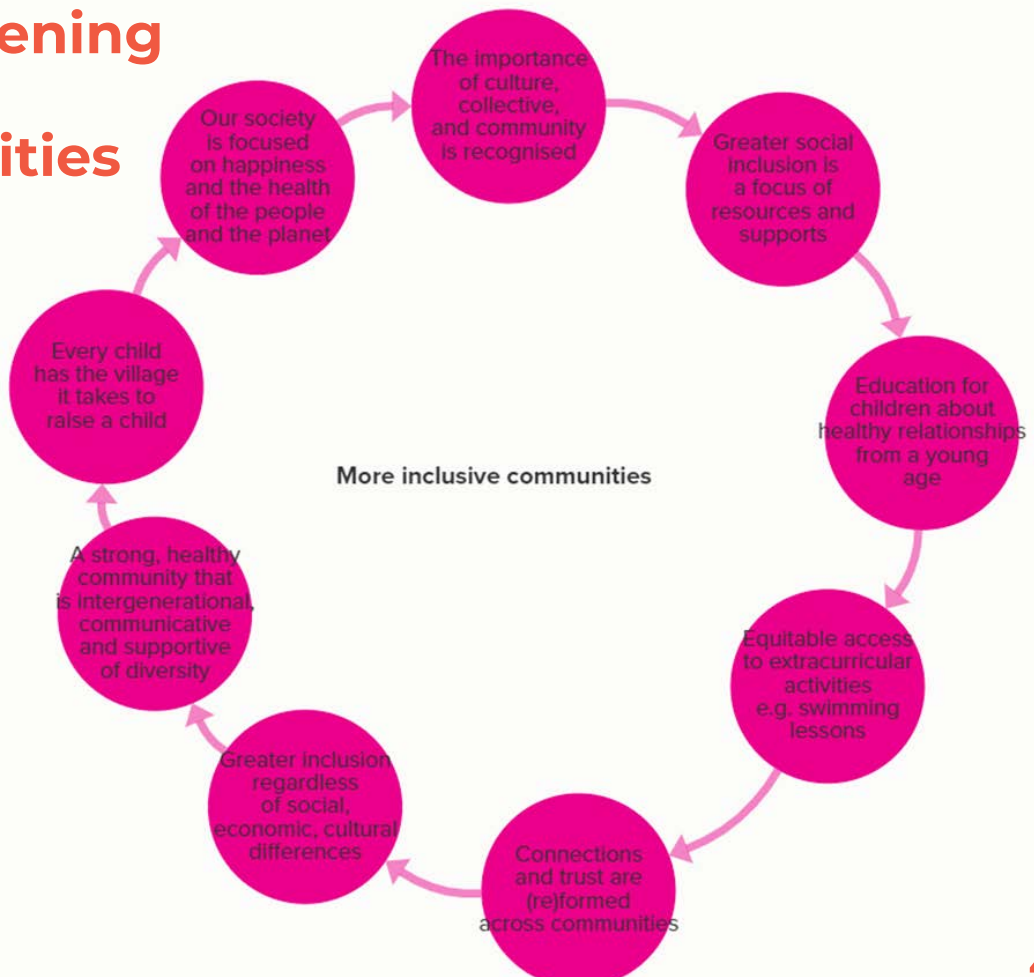
Lifelong wellbeing of all children in Australia



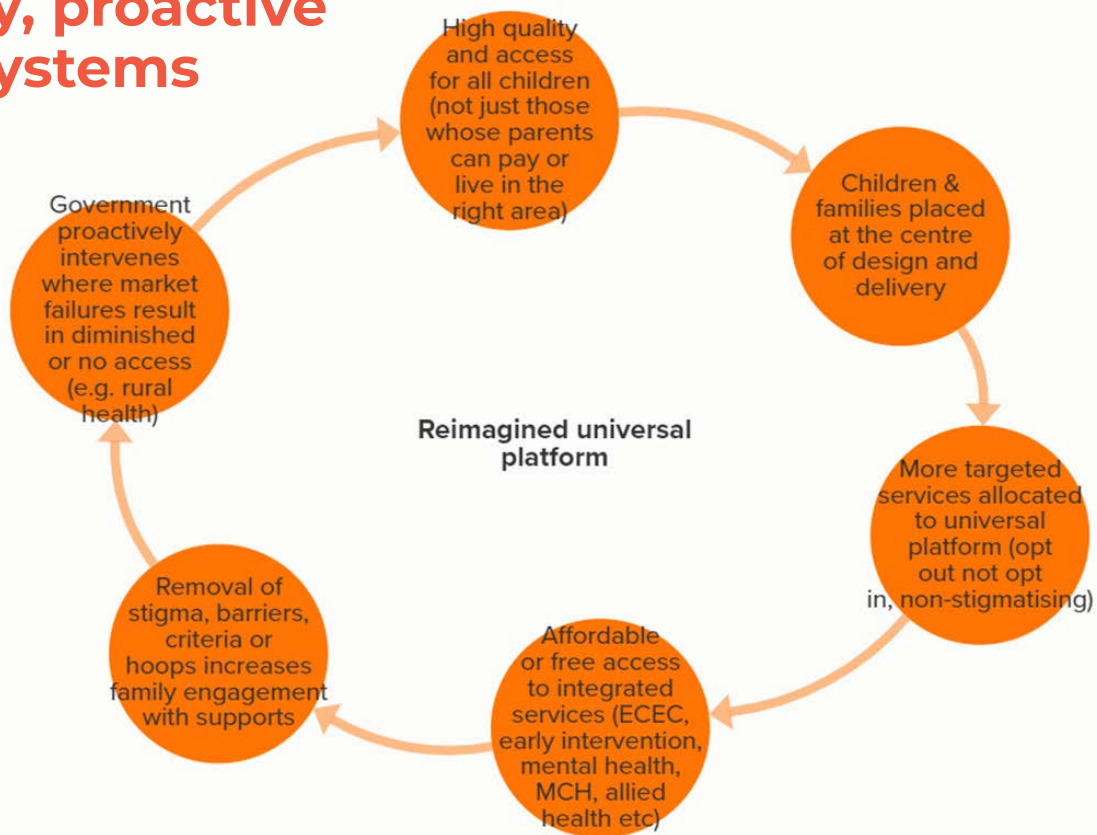
Strengthening families, parents, carers



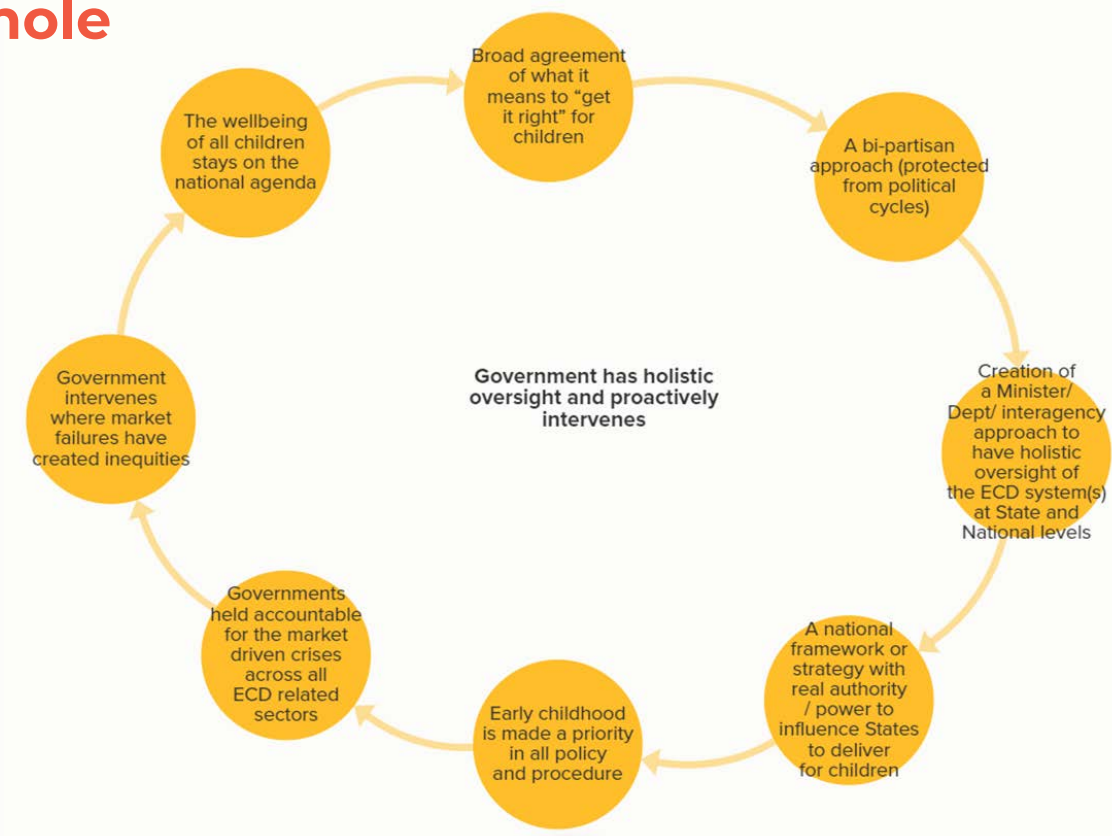
Strengthening local communities



Accountable, high quality, proactive ECD systems



Government holds responsibility for the whole



Future state icebergs

We developed five future state 'iceberg' diagrams, to provide another way to unpack the deep systemic forces in the causal loop map, in a way that summarises core forces around a desired future state.

The first iceberg provides an overarching summary.

The next four icebergs each reflect key feedback loops:

- A society that prioritises the wellbeing of all children
- The work of care is essential for a resilient and prosperous society
- Government is accountable for the whole ECD system
- Strong communities support strong families



Summary iceberg

Future state

What we will see:

- **More children & families are thriving**
- **All children & families have their basic material needs met**
- **All children can access high quality services to support their development, when they need them**
- **Strong inclusive local communities with good physical, social & service infrastructure that responds to local needs**
- **Stronger families – with significantly fewer children in Out of Home Care**
- **Trauma-informed approaches are the norm for all services**

System Structures

- Policy development is always child, family, person centred – embracing complexity
- Resource allocation is focused on prevention & timely intervention
- Reimagined universal platforms – deliver integrated, holistic services, with universal access that prevents stigma
- Government has holistic oversight and accountability for system outcomes (and intervenes to prevent system & service failures)
- Local communities are well resourced to deliver physical, social & service infrastructure
- An enabling welfare system to support strong families & communities
- Services meet demand, staffed by highly skilled workforces

Deep Narratives

- Australia is a wealthy, egalitarian & great country – we don't accept social division or discrimination that creates "haves & have nots"
- Children are our future & we are all responsible for giving them the best start in life
- Social capital is our most valuable asset – we don't let vested interests or economic ideology decide what is acceptable for our children



What we will see:

- **Widespread public focus on the wellbeing of all children & what children need to thrive**
- **All children 3 years + regularly attend early childhood education programs**
- **Recognition & respect for the vital contribution of carers & the caring professions**
- **Locally accessible & high-quality services that proactively support children & families**
- **Government & service providers held publicly accountable for developmental outcomes of all children**

Patterns of Behaviour

- Children's developmental needs are widely understood and prioritised
- All families are connected to ECD services in their local community, via universal programs and local community hubs
- Families experiencing challenging circumstances are supported & enabled, not stigmatised
- Families of all different forms are welcomed and included
- Cultural differences are respected and embraced
- Parenting supports are universally available and the norm – improving home learning environments for children

Mental Models & Assumptions

- All people deserve equity, dignity and the resources to live a fulfilling life
- Every child has a right to the best start in life, whatever their background or circumstances
- We embrace diversity and difference - in children, adults, families and communities
- Parenting is challenging and everyone needs support
- The work of caring is essential to a healthy society

Iceberg 1

A society that prioritises the wellbeing of all children

What we will see:

- **More children & families are thriving**
- **All children & families have their basic material needs met**
- **Equity of access to opportunities, services and supports regardless of location or background**
- **Strong inclusive communities that are well resourced with community infrastructure**

System Structures

- Shift in focus towards a “wellbeing economy”
- Policy development is always child and family-centred, embracing complexity and recognising the interconnecting influences on child wellbeing
- Sustained funding is sufficient for ECD systems to both respond to the needs of children and families and to focus on prevention & early intervention
- Reimagined universal platforms – that deliver integrated, holistic services, with guaranteed universal access that prevents stigma & promotes social cohesion
- Government has holistic oversight and accountability for system outcomes (and intervenes to prevent system & service failures)
- Service providers are accountable for delivering evidence based, high quality services for all children
- Government is held to account by the voting public for child wellbeing outcomes – while in office and at elections

Deep Narratives

- We all share responsibility for the wellbeing of all children – even those we don’t know or who are from families that are “different”
- A measure of a strong, prosperous society is the wellbeing of our most vulnerable – we won’t tolerate children being left behind
- Social capital is our most valuable asset – we won’t let vested interests or economic ideology decide what is acceptable for our children



What we will see:

- **Widespread public focus and action to support the wellbeing of all children, as a national priority**
- **Lived experience and children's voices become a normal part of policy & decision making**
- **Coordinated national strategies that deliver for all children and families in Australia**
- **Well resourced ECD systems that meet the needs of children and families**
- **Government & service providers are held to account for improving ECD outcomes**

Patterns of Behaviour

- Public conversation about children's wellbeing with growing understanding about child development and the importance of the early years for life outcomes
- Voices of children and what children need are sought and heard by decision makers
- Widely available strengths-based and trauma-informed services strengthen families and communities
- All parents access parenting supports and advice reducing stigma and building confidence
- Local communities offer culturally safe and inclusive opportunities for connection through universal platforms like community hubs
- Public debate about intended & unintended consequences of government policy
- Widespread (mainstream) support for advocacy and campaigns to change policy & improve outcomes

Mental Models & Assumptions

- Children have infinite capacity for development and positive life outcomes, with a good start in life
- Every child has a right to a good start in life, whatever their background or circumstances
- Children thrive in strong families in strong communities – this is where we should focus investment
- Children are our future & we must invest all we can, to build a strong future

Iceberg 2

The work of care is essential for a resilient and prosperous society

What we will see:

- The essential contribution of the work of caring (in families and communities) is recognised and respected across society
- More men are taking on the work of care – privately and professionally
- The long-term economic and social impacts on women of being carers are mitigated

System Structures

- An increased focus at all levels on a “wellbeing economy”
- Reimagined approach to family payment / care subsidies available – providing choices for women & families about when / how much / if they work or are full time carers
- All policy & service development accounts for the complexity & value of care work provided by families / communities
- High quality care workforces, well qualified and skilled
- Long-term & appropriate investment in ECD service systems to ensure staff attraction & retention & quality service delivery
- Government policy and investment ensures equity of access to care options for all Australians, regardless of location
- Care workforces have professionalised career paths including consistent qualification requirements

Deep Narratives

- The measure of our prosperity and success as a society includes the wellbeing of our people, which is not measured in financial terms
- We have evolved beyond traditional gender roles, and everyone should be free to choose without stigma, discrimination or disadvantage
- Ensuring that women are treated equally in our society does not diminish men
- As humans, we live in connection with others and share responsibility for caring, especially those who are vulnerable & need ongoing care



What we will see:

- **Government focus and long-term investment in the availability of high-quality care (for every life stage)**
- **The caring professions are careers of choice for more people, with greater diversity & gender balance**
- **ECD systems are well resourced and meet the needs of all children and families**
- **There are affordable & accessible choices about the provision of care**

Patterns of Behaviour:

- Ongoing public conversation about the value of care work and its contribution to our society
- More men are taking on primary care roles and talking publicly about it
- High rates of retention in “care” workforces
- Improved quality, diversity and skill in care workforces
- Women & families are making different choices about who / how care is provided

Mental Models & Assumptions:

- Care is not women’s work – it is vital work to be shared by us all
- Every person in Australia has a right to high quality care, when they need it (through all life stages)
- Social capital is our greatest national asset
- A strong economy is not built on unpaid or underpaid work
- The value we give to different types of work is more nuanced than capacity to create profit

Iceberg 3

Government is accountable for the whole ECD system

What we will see:

- **Changes in the welfare system to reduce the number of children living in poverty, without the basic material needs**
- **Universal access to more ECD services for all children and families**
- **Improved coordination and integration of services and systems**
- **ECD services sufficiently resourced to meet needs of all children and families**
- **Private providers held to account for service failures**

System Structures:

- Long term, bi-partisan, national reform agenda
- Policy development informed by the interconnection of influences in ECD – requiring child well-being impact assessment across all portfolios to avoid unintended consequences
- Family & child-centred policies and programs - the norm
- Greater clarity around division of state and federal responsibilities
- National consistency and coordination to deliver equity for all children
- Existing market mechanisms reformed for improved service delivery and outcomes
- Increased funding to local level implementation and service delivery for better outcomes
- Investment in holistic approaches to strengthening families
- Investment in prevention and capacity building, not just response
- Onus on systems / silos to integrate and coordinate – not on the family to navigate

Deep Narratives:

- Children develop in connection with their families and communities – invest in stronger families and communities and our children will thrive
- We need governments who can respond to people, as whole, complex beings – with policies and systems that are integrated and person-centred
- Blame shifting and responsibility dodging between state and federal governments is not good enough - this is our future
- This issue demands leadership from all levels of government, not political expediency and leaving it for someone else to fix



What we will see:

- **National approach to improving ECD outcomes for all children**
- **Bi-partisan agreement & commitment to a long-term strategy**
- **A single department / minister who is ultimately responsible for ECD outcomes**
- **Greater transparency in reporting on child wellbeing from all levels of government**

Patterns of Behaviour:

- Child wellbeing much more visible as an issue to voters
- Greater understanding about government's role and accountabilities
- Public engagement about the impact of government policy & decision making on child wellbeing
- Services more responsive to child & family needs
- Improved local access to services through improved community infrastructure
- More children and families accessing early intervention supports

Mental Models & Assumptions:

- Government is accountable to the voting public for the wellbeing of all children in Australia
- Living in poverty is the biggest single influence on a child's development, government can change that
- A long term, national & bi-partisan commitment is what is required to really change ECD outcomes
- It is government's responsibility that systems work for people
- If the market mechanisms don't work in the social sector – government can change them

Iceberg 4

Strong communities support strong families

What we will see:

- **Communities with good physical, social & service infrastructure responding to local needs**
- **Place-based approaches are widespread and supported**
- **All families are connected to ECD services in their local community**
- **Strong community networks, business groups and social clubs**
- **Increased local economic development, employment & training opportunities**

System Structures:

- Child & family-centred approaches are the norm in policy development and service design & delivery
- Services are incentivised to work effectively together through service contracts & commissioning
- Place-based approaches underpin policy development & service design
- Service delivery is facilitated through local, integrated universal platforms
- Local government plays a prominent role, with key community organisations - as the intermediary between local communities and State & Federal government
- Local governance & decision-making structures always include community and drive service design and delivery to meet local needs

Deep Narratives:

- It takes a village to raise a child and every family needs a local support network
- As human beings, we all need a sense of belonging and connection with others, in our families and our communities
- Our people are our greatest asset and governments must invest in ways to get the best outcomes for all people in Australia

**What we will see:**

- **Families are resilient, supported and stay together – with less children in Out of Home Care**
- **Children are consistently attending local early childhood education and school**
- **Everyone has a sense of belonging and connection, through universal opportunities and programs**
- **Children and families are accessing high-quality, locally available services when they need them**
- **Children & families access wrap-around supports from local services who work together**

Patterns of Behaviour:

- Strengths based and trauma-informed approaches are the norm when engaging with families
- Services deliver locally responsive programs, adapted to community need
- Diversity of all kinds is celebrated, with inclusion and cultural safety prioritised, in all programs and services
- All communities offer a range of free community activities and connection opportunities, at local venues
- Universal access to family & parenting programs & supports reduce stigma for families and children
- Elected representatives publicly promote and prioritise investment in community strengthening
- More local businesses are funded to deliver for local communities

Mental Models & Assumptions:

- Diversity and inclusion make us a stronger and better country
- All children and families in Australia deserve to belong to well-resourced communities that meet their diverse needs
- Local decision making with strong community voices delivers better outcomes for families and children
- Communities are unique and diverse – there is no one size fits all approach that works everywhere
- Building strong and inclusive communities is a valuable social investment, that pays dividends over the long-term

Getting from here to there

It was clear that participants do have a vision for the future. Analysing all the insights, it was apparent that what participants are seeking is in essence:

A shared and sustained long-term, multi-sector, bipartisan & nation-wide commitment, (protected from partisan positioning, electoral cycles and federal - state tensions) for:

1. The [lifelong] wellbeing of all children in australia

- Ensuring all children and their families have their basic material needs met
- Ensuring every child has access to high quality universal services (including health & education) to support their development
- Redeveloping & investing in a proactive & preventative child thriving [protection] system – that will deliver the best outcomes for children & their families

THIS WOULD BE UNDERPINNED BY EFFORTS TO:

2. Strengthen families, parents & local communities (so every child has the village it takes to raise a child)

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

- Families (in all their different forms) are recognised, valued & supported as the most important influence on ECD
- Social policy and programs are designed (and implemented) with families & children at the centre, from a strengths-based and trauma-informed perspective
- Universally accessible (non-stigmatising) integrated children & family centres and community hubs that welcome all families

STRENGTHENING PARENT CAPACITY & CONFIDENCE

- Universal access to locally available parenting supports, playgroups, programs and inclusive connection opportunities
- Access to universal prenatal & postnatal care – physical & mental

- Recognition of the necessity of connection, relationship & trust for effective interventions and programs

STRENGTHENING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- Funding & resourcing to support place-based responses in local communities
- Empowering local people to have a say in the program design & delivery
- Services are held accountable for the success of local level integration & collaboration in service delivery - putting the onus for bridging the systemic silos on the agencies rather than the family

ALL OF THE ABOVE WOULD BE ENABLED BY:

3. Accountable, high quality service systems that put children and families at the centre of design and delivery

ALL LEVELS OF THE SERVICE SYSTEMS ARE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE QUALITY AND IMPACT OF POLICIES, PROGRAMS & SERVICE DELIVERY AND WHETHER IT REALLY WORKS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

- Frameworks for measuring outcomes and impacts are redeveloped to reflect what the work with families and children really involves
- Power to monitor and hold the systems accountable may be enshrined in legislation (or vested in a statutory authority)

REIMAGINED UNIVERSAL VERSUS TARGETED SERVICES

- With children and families at the centre of service design – it's universal (opt out not opt in) – no stigma, barriers, criteria or hoops

HIGH QUALITY FOR ALL CHILDREN (NOT JUST THOSE WITH PARENTS WHO CAN PAY OR LIVE IN THE RIGHT AREA)

- Government is held accountable and intervenes when/where market failures deliver poor quality

ACCESS TO SERVICES IS GUARANTEED FOR ALL CHILDREN – REGARDLESS OF WHERE THEY LIVE

- Government is held accountable and intervenes where market failures result in diminished or no access (e.g., rural health)

SERVICE SYSTEMS ARE STAFFED BY HIGH QUALITY WORKFORCES

- Workforces are suitably recognised, rewarded & incentivised to ensure that high quality services are universally accessible for all children
- Government is held accountable and intervenes where market failures have created a crisis across all “care” related sectors

From current to future state

The image on the following page is another way to show in a simple diagram how participants envision moving from the current to the desired future state and the characteristics of both systems.

- **As a society, we prioritise the wellbeing of all children** in Australia and recognise that raising thriving children (and families) is the work of the whole nation.

Accountable, high quality, proactive ECD systems

- Preventative approaches to child safety and wellbeing
- Accountability for outcomes for children and families
- Reimagined universal platform
- Service systems backed by high quality workforces

Wrap around supports

Strengthening families, parents and carers

- Strengthening and valuing families in all their different forms
- Strengthening parent / care / community capacity & confidence

Breaking the cycles of disadvantage
Parental confidence & agency

Care logic

- Care is a burden on society (read economy)
- Care is women's work / belongs in the shadows
- Erosion of "the village" to raise a child
- Reductionism more powerful than care, connection & trust

Sector logic

- Taking the human out of human services
- Social services operate within a market logic
- Service sectors sees itself as solution to problems
- Competition for Influence
- Targeted services mean only by exception, no early intervention

Government logic

- Govt must promote & protect the market
- But Govt can't intervene in the market
- Silos serve a purpose
- Social services aren't the important work of govt
- Local is less professional (but someone's got to do it)
- Failure of accountability, loudest voices
- The Federation Game
- There is no political reward for reform

Key

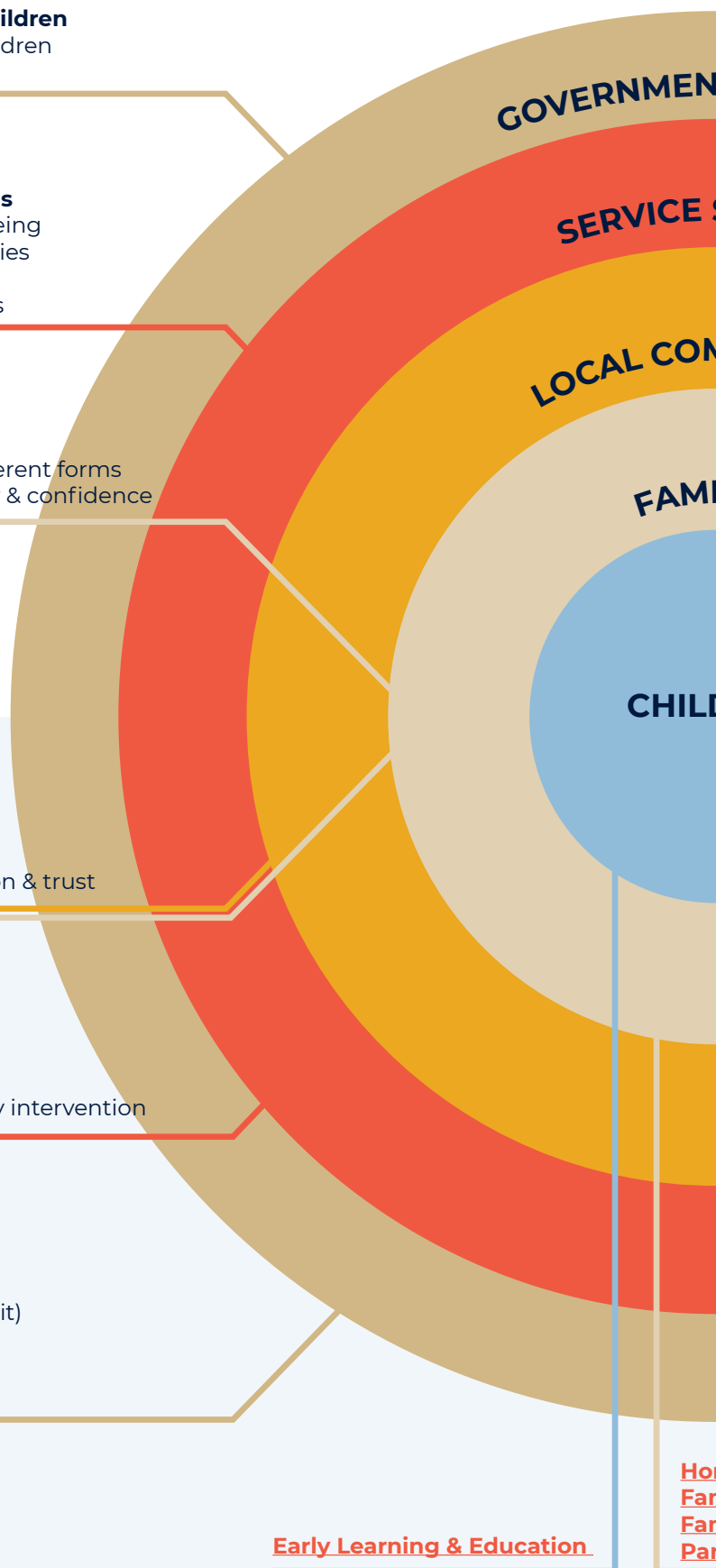
System mapping report: **Navy+No underline**

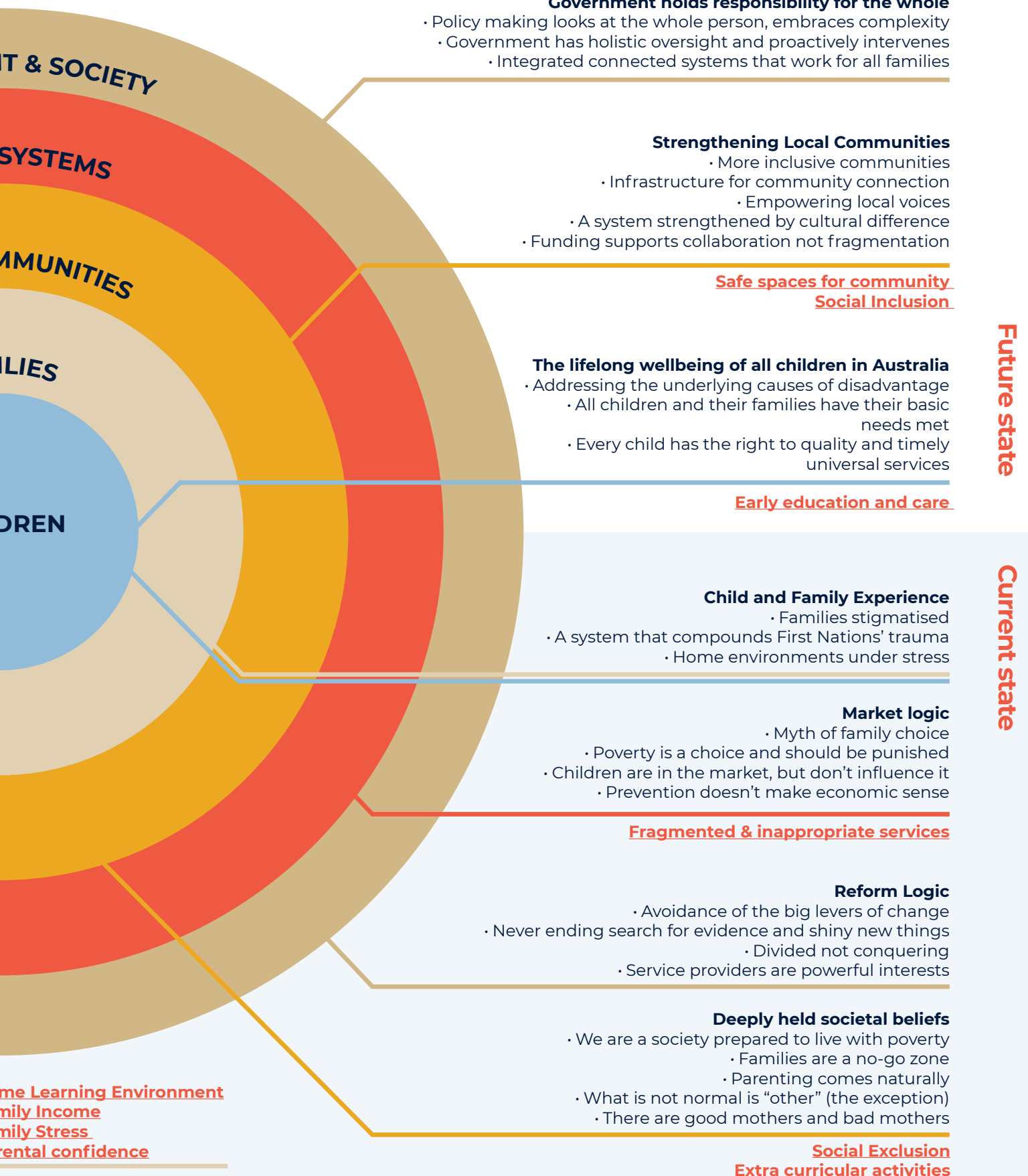
Rapid Review: **Red+Underlined**

Early Learning & Education

Future state

Current state





Sense making and exploration

As stated above, the ultimate purpose of this systems mapping process was to help build a strong foundation for collective strategy development and collaboration by:

- Supporting increased mutual understanding of 'the system' and sets of interconnected systems
- Surfacing underlying patterns and deep systemic structures and forces
- Identifying different possible points of leverage for transformation.

A key element of our approach was ongoing participatory engagement beyond the initial mapping process. This included a 'Sensemaking and Exploration' stage (further described in Annex 3) that included:

- Exploring the maps to further derive insights in to how the system works (or we wished it worked)

- Development of a range of draft leverage points for discussion.

This was achieved through:

- Online briefing sessions held with the EYC and other stakeholders
- A 2-day in-person workshop on 7-8 March 2022 with the EYC and invited guests, including frontline workers who participated in previous mapping workshops.



Map exploration

The in-person workshop enabled participants to immerse themselves in the content and explore the system maps in-depth. With large copies of each map on the wall, and feedback loops extracted from the map, participants were asked to reflect upon a range of questions:

REFLECTIONS ON THE 'CURRENT STATE':

- What do these maps indicate about dominant patterns of behaviour/ forces in the system?
- What does it tell you about the experiences of participants involved in the process?
- Where might the system be more stuck or frozen (unmoving)?
- Where might the system be more dynamic and flexible (changing)?
- What forces seem to be reinforcing (or blocking) each other?

REFLECTIONS ON THE 'DESIRED FUTURE STATE':

- What different patterns or forces does this map contain?
- What does it tell you about the hopes and needs of the participants involved in the process?
- What different possibilities does this map raise for you?

Conversations were focused on collectively making sense of the underlying patterns and deep systemic structures and forces – both current and desired future state.

Identifying leverage points

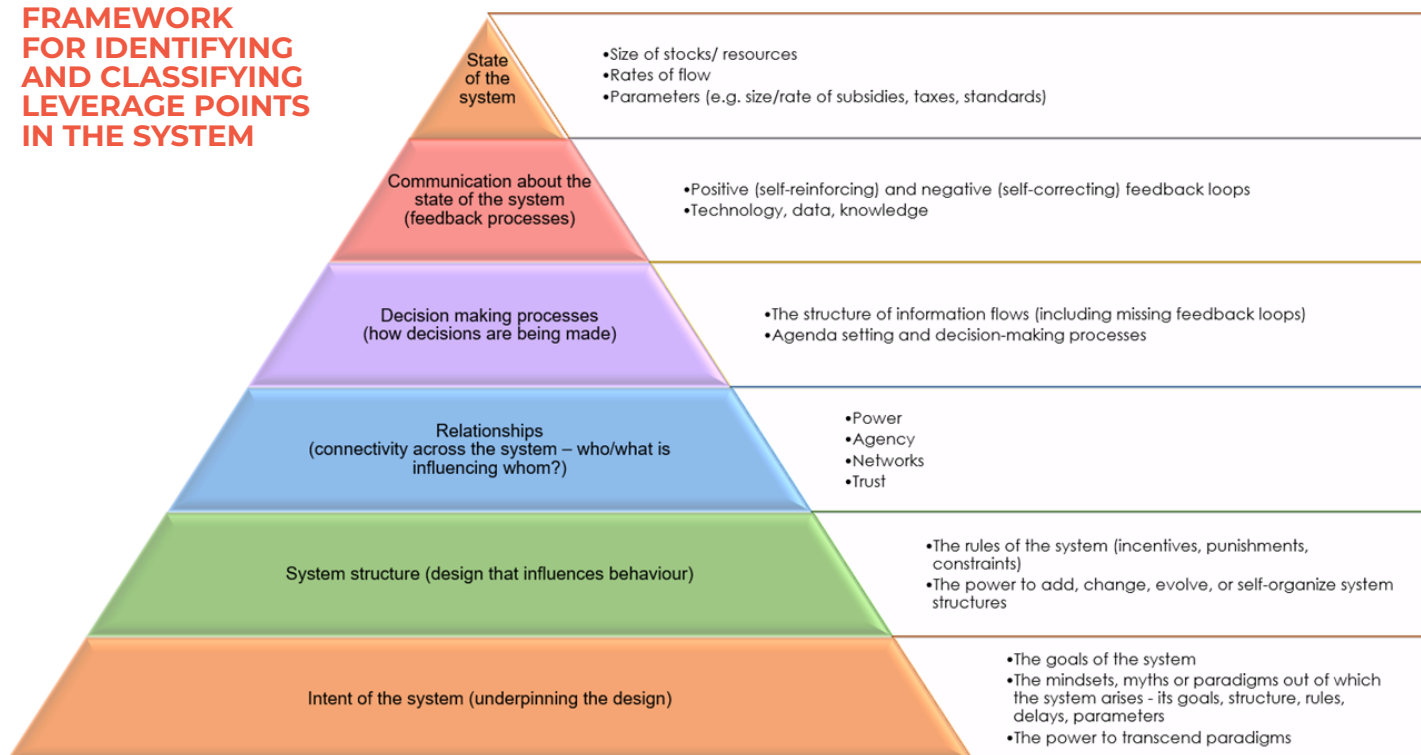
When we can see what is really happening in the systems, we can also start to find potential “leverage points” or areas to intervene or apply pressure, to influence systemic changes. The next step was to therefore revisit the maps to identify different possible points of leverage for transformation.

To guide the exploration of potential leverage points, we used an Orange Compass bespoke framework. Our framework builds upon critical system heuristics, the work on leverage points by Donella Meadows, and conditions of systems change by FSG and others (see image and references below). Our framework utilised six categories of

leverage and provides a range of reflection questions at each level to prompt ideas on points of leverage.

To demonstrate the applicability of this framework for participants and to prompt brainstorming, we developed a range of example leverage points as inputs to the in-person workshop (see Annex 3).

FRAMEWORK FOR IDENTIFYING AND CLASSIFYING LEVERAGE POINTS IN THE SYSTEM



The key leverage points

The key 'leverage points' identified by the participants were largely related to two categories:

- 1) Creating big societal shifts and interventions to shift the ECD system
- 2) Interventions to build an ECD system where all children and families thrive.

1. Creating big societal shifts to help improve early childhood development outcomes:

- A shift in societal focus to prioritising wellbeing over economics
- A shift in societal perspectives of disadvantage and difference; free of racism and judgement against disadvantaged children and communities
- A shift in Australia's socio-cultural identity to become a society that prioritises the wellbeing of all children
- Creating broad recognition that raising thriving children is the work of the whole nation
- Shifts in ways of knowing, being and doing, incorporating cultural and traditional practices, valuing 1500 generations of First Nations' culture.

2. Interventions to build an ECD system where all children and families thrive:

- A national, bi-partisan ECD framework, with shared language and vision, that provides well supported pathways for every child to thrive, in their first 2,000 days and beyond, addressing inequality, poverty and intergenerational vulnerability
- An early childhood movement of professionals, families, children, communities, businesses, and others, building an Australian cultural identity that prioritises children and their needs
- Creation of societal and political understanding that raising thriving children is the work of the whole nation and will result in a stronger, safer, more compassionate society
- Embedding collective and relational ways of working and belonging into our policy making and service systems

- Development of culturally safe, fair, accessible, inclusive services that ultimately change life trajectories and shift societal perspectives
- Systems that deliver more equitable and non-judgemental early intervention, parenting supports, housing and service access - regardless of location
- A shift in national policy processes to embed ongoing learning, adaptation and evolution of approaches and strategies
- A rebalancing of decision-making power – giving greater power to the local community level, supported by equitable and sustainable power sharing processes
- Fit-for-purpose funding and commissioning approaches that include feedback loops from community to government and service providers, delivering fit-for-purpose systems for disadvantaged children and communities.

Rapid testing & iteration

Gaining a sense of possibilities

The final stage of the work was a 'Rapid Testing and Iteration' stage (described further in Annex 4). The objective was to re-engage participants to further test thinking on possible leverage points, as well as the potential future role of the EYC. This was achieved through:

- An open survey (Survey 2) to all stakeholders, completed by 90 respondents
- In-depth interviews with selected stakeholders.

With full results available in Annex 4, the following provides a summary of recommendations based on the survey results.

NORTH STAR (THE ULTIMATE GOAL)

For the north star, respondents clearly endorsed the idea of big societal shifts to help improve early childhood development outcomes. The two most popular were:

- A shift in Australia's socio-cultural identity to become a society that prioritises the wellbeing of all children
- Creating broad recognition that raising thriving children is the work of the whole nation.

KEY INTERVENTIONS

In terms of key interventions to create an ECD system where all children and families thrive, the most popular were:

- A national, bi-partisan ECD framework, with shared language and vision, that provides well supported pathways

for every child to thrive, in their first 2,000 days and beyond, addressing inequality, poverty and intergenerational vulnerability

- Fit-for-purpose funding and commissioning approaches that include feedback loops from community to government and service providers, delivering fit-for-purpose systems for disadvantaged children and communities.

THE ROLE OF THE EYC

Finally, respondents saw the most valuable role for the EYC over the next 6 months, is to:

- Prioritise and support the connecting and linking up of current initiatives
- Prioritise and support the empowering & enabling those on the ground, including the voice of parents, carers and frontline ECD workforces.

Other suggestions for the role of EYC included:

- Setting a new frame outside current system dynamics, by mapping what a future system could look like and how to get there
- Creating a shared roadmap where people can locate their efforts within the broader context
- Focusing on the broader issue of equity which underpins every interconnected ECD system
- Focusing on enabling community-led decision making through place-based approaches.

Where to from here?

This systems mapping process has revealed that there are deep systemic forces influencing behaviour and outcomes in a myriad of ways, within and across the systems that influence early childhood development outcomes.

A unique part of this participatory systems mapping process was the incorporation of lived experience from the frontline of Australia's early childhood development systems. These critical perspectives have shone a light on the shortfalls in the current system and as well as illuminating the possibilities for a different future for early childhood development outcomes in Australia.

There is ongoing work to be done to further map what a future system could look like and how to get there. To state the obvious, if we want a different future, we must do things differently. We must establish new and different patterns and take different approaches to address the problems we know exist currently.

We extend an invitation to all actors embedded in these systems: you may wish to reflect on the role you play in the dynamics of the 'current state', and the role you could play in supporting a transition to the desired, future state.

We are currently preparing a workshop structure which we can offer the field to assist actors in reviewing their role in perpetuating systemic forces and bringing about long term systemic change.

Based on the insights generated throughout this process, the EYC is refining their theory of change – and their role supporting systemic transformation within the ECD systems. The EYC is committed to continuing collaborative ways of working with the field, and to harnessing the knowledge and perspectives of a wider group.

Please reach out to the EYC Backbone Team **backbone@earlyyearscatalyst.org.au** for more information, to get involved or to engage in a future workshop with the EYC.

Annexures

Annex 1 - Our approach to systems mapping

A PARTICIPATORY AND ITERATIVE PROCESS

Orange Compass undertook a four-stage approach to this system mapping process that included:



DESKTOP SYNTHESIS

Bringing together existing (written) current state knowledge about ECD systems and proposals for a desired future state



PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT

With over 300 stakeholders to derive unique insights, especially from 'frontline' workers across ECD systems



SENSEMAKING & EXPLORATION

Joint exploration and synthesis of insights in to system maps and possible leverage points



RAPID TESTING & ITERATION

Working with stakeholders to test findings and further refine maps and recommendations for further action

A key element was participatory engagement. Throughout the whole process, we particularly focused engagement with 'frontline' workers – people working directly in and with systems on the ground.

In Stage 2, called the 'Participatory Engagement' stage, we conducted workshops, interviews and surveys in two phases:

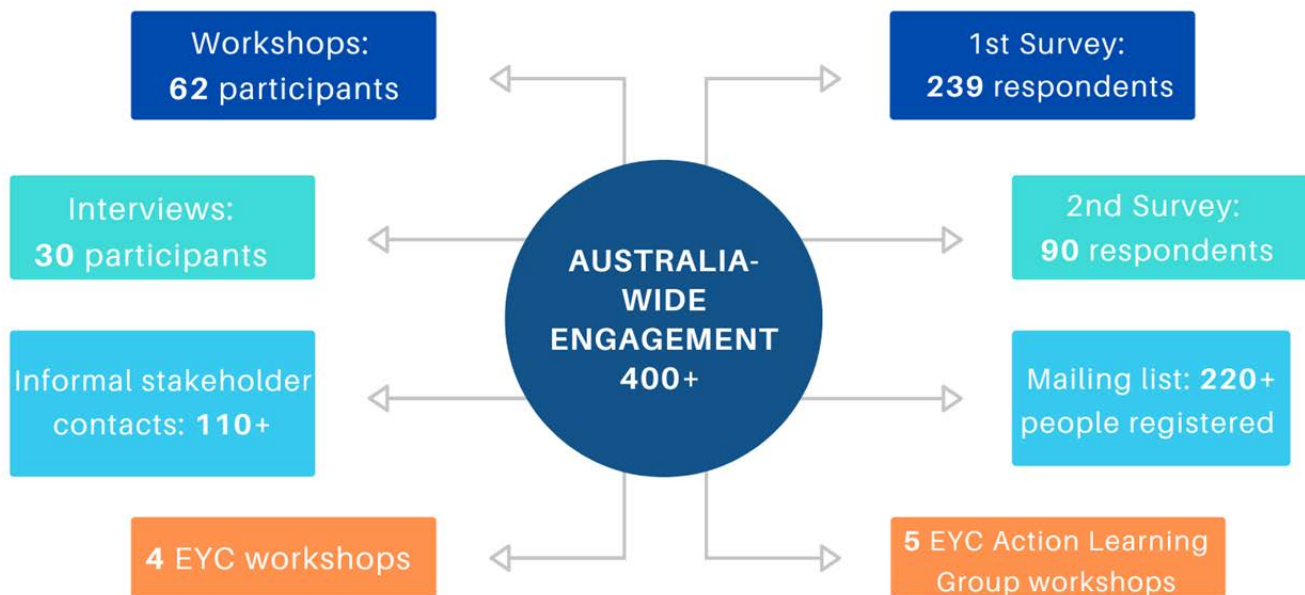
- A) Phase one - involving broad discussions and initial insight generation
- B) Phase two - involving more targeted discussions and deep dives.

During Stage 3, the 'Sensemaking and Exploration' stage, we again engaged participants to test our findings and refine our insights. This included:

- A) Presentation of mapping insights to EYC and other stakeholders in online briefing sessions
- B) Facilitating a 2 day in-person workshop to test insights with the EYC and invited guests.

Finally, during Stage 4, the 'Rapid Testing and Iteration' stage, we further tested our findings through:

- C) In-depth interviews with selected stakeholders
- D) An open survey to all stakeholders to further test leverage hypotheses.



Over the course of the research, over 400 participants were engaged from across Australia, as the image above shows.

ENGAGEMENT DATA

With so many systems intersecting and influencing ECD outcomes, systems mapping is a helpful way to be able to show complexity and connections and develop a shared understanding of deep systemic forces.

Our goal for the systems mapping was to help the EYC build a strong foundation for collective strategy development and collaboration by:

- Supporting increased mutual understanding of 'the system' and sets of interconnected systems
- Surfacing underlying patterns and deep systemic structures and forces
- Identifying different possible points of leverage for transformation.

With the insights generated from field engagement, we chose to map both the 'current state' and the 'future (desired) state' of the ECD systems.

Our approach to systems mapping was not designed to create a detailed or precise representation of reality – rather we produced a simple visual representation that can generate shared understanding and co-inquiry into the nature of the system. The 'system boundary' emerged through the mapping, rather than being a constraint imposed on the mapping from the start.

Of the myriad of system mapping models and methodologies available, we chose to present these as modified causal loop diagrams. This modified causal loop approach has been widely tested and proven successful in a range of contexts. It is a method that has been adapted from a range of sources including The Omidyar Group's 2017 Systems Practice Workbook.

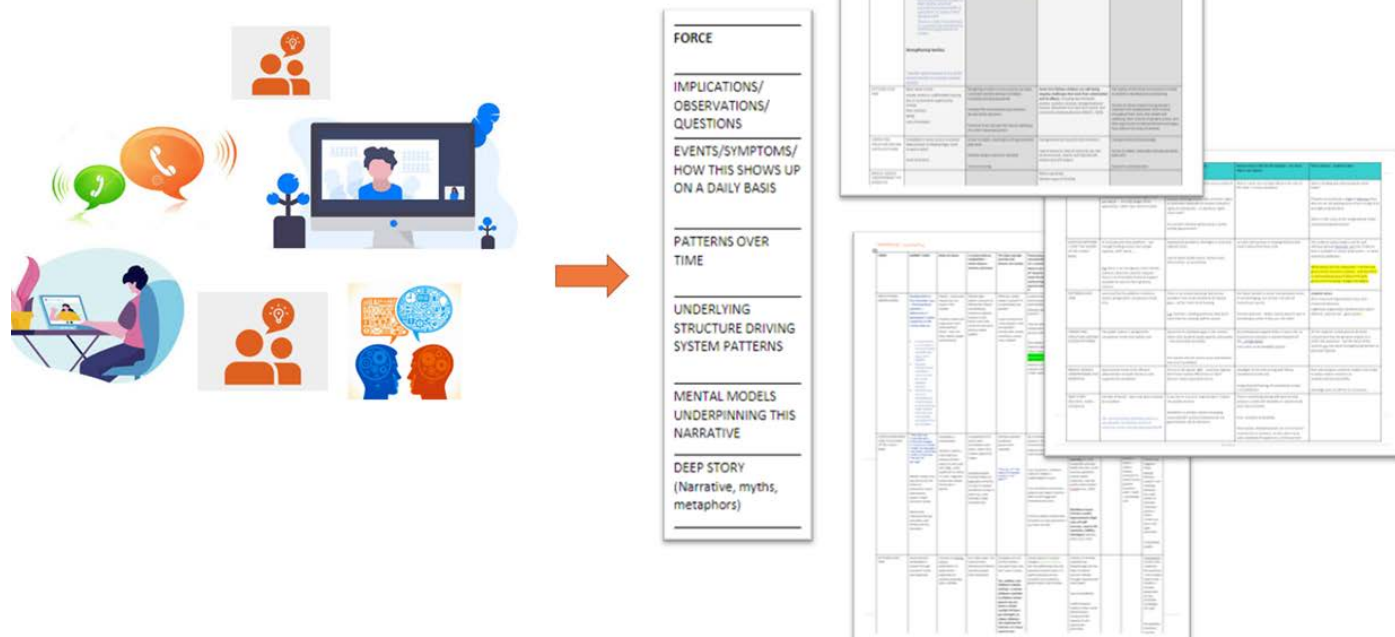
Causal loop mapping is created by drawing on the knowledge and perspectives of stakeholders in a way that enables deep insight into the behaviour of the current system and the underlying conditions that shape this behaviour. It is a visual and sensemaking process that enables the inclusion of 'system stories' that are meaningful to participants.

OUR SYNTHESISING PROCESS

The goal of the system mapping was to reflect the richness of what we had heard during the engagement process. The engagement process yielded a deluge of information about how the current systems operate, the everyday events and patterns that are experienced repeatedly, and real-life examples of the impact of systemic structures on children and families.

Once we had collated transcripts and data from the workshops, interviews and surveys, we went through a process of sorting and coding. Drawing upon the methods of causal layered analysis, we used these insights firstly to cluster and develop 'headlines', before creating 'deep system stories'. For each 'deep system story', we worked across the categories of events, patterns, structures, mental models and myths, cross checking that we had sufficient evidence from the engagement process to justify developing each story into a feedback loop. This large table of synthesised data was further refined to create simplified feedback loops that could form part of a system map.

The maps were captured digitally using Kumu software to facilitate further sharing and exploration.



Annex 2 – Stages 1 & 2: Desktop synthesis and participatory engagement

Our maps were the result of extensive synthesis and analysis of desktop, workshop, interview and survey insights. These insights were used to develop ‘headlines’ and ‘feedback loops’ that generate the maps.

DESKTOP SYNTHESIS

We undertook a desktop ‘rapid review’ of current knowledge, position papers and proposals (current and desired state) that included over 50 papers. Additional inputs and references are available in **Annex 5**. We specifically reviewed 35 papers for their position or ‘theory of change’ and compared:

- Cohort view/perspective represented
- Target cohort/system actor(s)
- Undesirable system outcome(s)
- Any underlying cost(s)
- North star (ideal system state)
- Desirable system outcome(s)
- Leverage point(s)
- Specific ideas/ solutions
- Enabling conditions/stepping stones.

This rapid review was useful to understand the ‘sector’s’ prevailing views of systemic challenges and opportunities. We found that the written reports and advocacy documented

a range of recommendations for government, policy reform, and the early childhood education and care system. Rather than duplicate this work, the focus of our mapping was to reflect the broader view of frontline workers from across different systems.

Despite the different emphasis of the mapping process, there was clear overlap between the rapid review literature and the field engagement on the importance of enabling children to reach their full potential by creating simpler, more flexible, inclusive and supportive ECD systems that can:

- Break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage
- Support healing from intergenerational trauma and discrimination
- Enhance children’s wellbeing through improved community, cultural and environmental conditions.

These shared aspirations were particularly reflected in the ‘desired future state’ conversations and resulting map.

PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT - SURVEY DATA

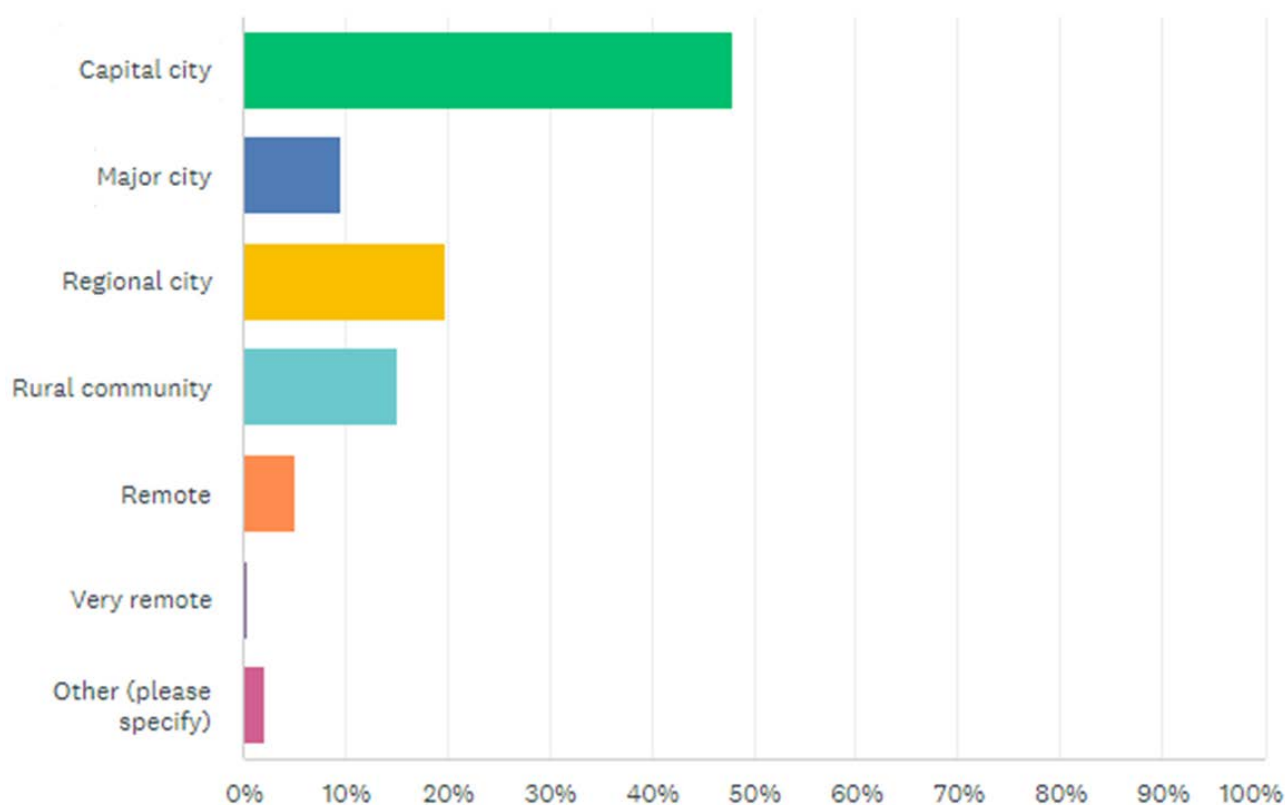
Survey data was another important source of information. The first online survey was framed around “what do children and families need to thrive?”. It was a short survey with 7 questions and was open from 1 December 2021 to 2 February 2022. There were 239 respondents, with many high quality and thoughtful written responses to open text questions.

Importantly, the survey was completed by a diverse range of respondents in every State and Territory except Tasmania and more than half resided outside capital cities. See chart below.

The survey generated a range of important insights. As an example, we asked the question **“In your experience, which of the below are**

easy for families / parents / carers to find and access?” The top 10 easiest to access services showed that many ‘universal’, local and early learning services were working well including:

- Parks / play equipment / green spaces
- Libraries
- GP or Local Doctor
- Kindergarten / Preschool
- Childcare / Early Learning Services
- Playgroups
- Hospital – including obstetrics
- Dental care
- Community activities and events
- Parenting supports / advice / programs.





Likewise, we posed the question, **“In your experience, which of the below are hard for families to find and access?”** Interestingly, this revealed significant challenges with many specialist and targeted services as well as in systems of health and housing. It also showed that postcode matters. Some of the easiest to access for some families, such as dental care, are much harder for other families in different locations. The 10 hardest to access services were:

- Mental health supports
- Affordable and secure housing
- Allied Health Services – psychology / speech pathology / occupational therapy
- Medical specialists including paediatricians
- Emergency supports – crisis accommodation / family violence support / emergency housing / food relief
- Disability support – including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

- Drug and alcohol treatment / support
- Parenting supports / advice / programs
- Dental care
- Childcare / Early Learning Services.

PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT - WORKSHOPS AND INTERVIEWS

Finally, as mentioned above, we undertook a range of workshops and interviews to help us understand key systemic forces.

Workshop participants came from a wide range of backgrounds and areas of interest and expertise including:

- Academia
- Allied health
- Data and digital ecosystems
- Disability
- Early childhood education and care
- Family and children Services
- First Nations
- GP services
- Health

The workshops and interviews allowed us to hear many stories of how different systems worked

- Local Government
- Mental health
- Out of home care
- Place-based initiatives
- Playgroups
- Remote services (including First Nations communities)
- Refugee & Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) services
- State Government.

In-depth 1:1 interviews also delivered unique system insights from experts in a range of areas including:

- First Nations experiences of the system
- Government policy development and implementation
- Impacts of racism
- Impacts of the justice system and incarceration
- Intergenerational issues
- Large scale systems reform
- Market structures and macro economics

- Place-based responses.

The workshops and interviews allowed us to hear many stories of how different systems worked and what it is like being part of these systems or interacting with them every day. This generated a deeper level of richness and insights, with some strong themes emerging throughout this engagement process.

In addition to our 'frontline' workshops and interviews, we also held several workshops with the EYC. The EYC explored many issues including:

- Existing deeply held mental models
- Nudge points and the enabling conditions for change in the system
- Impacts of neo-liberal ideology
- Societal beliefs about the family unit
- Poverty and the impacts of poverty
- The inherent strengths and values of families to realise aspirations for their children
- Family agency and choice.

Annex 3 – Stage 3: Sensemaking and exploration

A key element of our approach was ongoing participatory engagement beyond the initial mapping process. The 'Sensemaking and Exploration' stage, included:

- Development of a range of draft leverage points for discussion
- Presentation of mapping insights to the EYC and other stakeholders in online briefing sessions
- Facilitating a 2 day in-person workshop with the EYC and invited guests to test insights and generate leverage hypotheses.

IDENTIFYING LEVERAGE POINTS

Surfacing underlying patterns and deep systemic structures and forces – both current and desired state – was a critical first step culminating in the development of the draft causal loop systems maps.

The next step was to explore the maps to identify different possible points of leverage for transformation. When we can see what is really happening in the systems, we can also start to find potential “leverage points” or areas to intervene or apply pressure, to influence systemic changes. To guide the exploration of potential leverage points, we used an Orange Compass bespoke framework. Our framework builds upon critical system heuristics, the work on leverage points by Donella Meadows, and conditions of systems change by FSG and others.

Our framework utilised six categories of leverage and provides a range of reflection questions at each level to prompt ideas on points of leverage. Demonstrating the applicability of this framework, we developed a range of example leverage points as inputs for the in-person workshop (see below).

WORKSHOPPING POSSIBLE LEVERAGE POINTS

During the in-person workshop on 7-8 March 2022 with the EYC and invited guests (the participants) were asked to:

- Create a 'north star'
- Discuss possible leverage points
- Develop a leverage hypothesis.

Example leverage points

EXAMPLES OF LEVERAGE POINTS • Hypothetical examples of “solutions” using leverage points	
STATE OF THE SYSTEM	
Redirect funding flows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pool resources/funding for services in local areas for reallocation as appropriate
Redistribute resources to improve affordability and access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise child development & early intervention - make access to services free for families • Adjust subsidy sizes (CCS)
Strengthen key workforces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve pay & conditions for frontline workforce (across health, education, community services) • Provide longer term funding to drive staff retention & continuity outside of metro areas
Invest in infrastructure for community connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create more safe and reliable spaces in the community for families to play/ interact with people of all ages (young and old)
COMMUNICATION ABOUT THE STATE OF THE SYSTEM	
Reform the culture of measurement & evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refocus what gets measured - to what matters & what works (like trust, connection, relationship, wellbeing) • Invest in & maintain robust evaluation mechanisms
Invest in digital platforms that enable collaboration & integration across systemic silos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop integrated digital ecosystems for data sharing across system boundaries (e.g., across health, welfare, education) whilst maintaining informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and data standards
Increase accountability through transparency of outcomes reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public release of postcode level outcomes data on a regular basis
DECISION MAKING PROCESSES	
Enable local led-decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support community-led place-based approaches which embed community governance and shared decision-making processes (with government & service providers)
Enforce accountability for outcomes for children and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold all levels of the services systems accountable for the quality and impact of policies/ programs/services on children and families • Enshrine power to monitor and hold the systems accountable in legislation (or vest in a statutory authority)
Implement a national measure of wellbeing to inform policy & decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a national wellbeing index that has postcode specific data • Reinstall ABS wellbeing measurement funding
Incorporate different ways of knowing, learning, being and doing into decision making processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish joint First Nations & Non-indigenous - Deep Listening Yarning Circles - across community, service provider and government decision making processes

Increase & diversify the accepted evidence base for policy & decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise context specific knowledge and case studies from lived experience - as valuable evidence for policy making & decision making (not just assume RCTs are gold standard)
RELATIONSHIPS	
Amplify family & community voices as partners in program design & delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elevate the contribution of community / family voices in policy & program design - as the consumer / end user • Require policy / programs to be co-designed (from start to finish) with those involved as standard practice
Broaden the accepted definition of “expert” for the purposes of policy & decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include lived experience as expert input into policy & decision making • Challenge the ‘insider track’ influence of institutional advocacy • Challenge how the system rewards a certain type of expert
Recognise the voice of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include the voice of children as an input to policy & program development – where it will have a direct impact on the lives of children
Encourage power elites to share power with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use levers (corporate responsibility) to encourage market leaders to share power • Use political levers to pressure government to share power at local levels
SYSTEM STRUCTURE	
Reform the tax, welfare & family payments system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement tax reform to alter the current patterns of wealth redistribution • Redesign the welfare system to encourage independence through incentives not punishment • Pay all families a subsidy to offset the costs of “child care” - whether the parent is working or providing care at home
Simplify Government accountability for the outcomes of children & families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a single point of responsibility & accountability for the outcomes of children & families • A Minister for “XX” and the Department of “XX / XX” Commission • Minister/Department/interagency approach to have holistic oversight of the ECD system(s) at State and National levels
Reform Local / State/ Commonwealth responsibilities for health, education and social services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reallocate responsibilities of health and education between the three tiers of government to address system failures and gaps • Establish an independent National Care Commission with statutory powers of audit & enforcement • Make Child & Family Outcomes a National Cabinet priority
Expand the universal service system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the range of services that are included in the universal access service system • Shift to an opt out not opt in model • Minimise the services that are targeted and create stigma

Incentivise collaboration & cooperation across boundaries & silos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change short term funding cycles • Build in incentives for collaboration into service contracts & funding agreements • Redesign commissioning to require integration & collaboration • Embed rules around incorporating a diversity of perspectives
Change Government policy to support market intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge the Government “can't intervene” in the market myth • Hold Governments accountable where markets fail & result in diminished or no access (e.g., rural health) • Government takes action to ensure equitable access to services
INTENT OF THE SYSTEM	
Challenge the prevailing paradigms (that prioritise economic rationalism above human, social & environmental wellbeing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create grass roots dialogue about the type of society we want to be - Are we a society that is prepared to live with poverty & the marginalisation of disadvantage / disability or otherness? • Challenge paradigms of rationalism and reductionism that run counter to trust, care, connection, relationship & cause failures in our service systems • Challenge the bipartisan support for the neoliberal economic paradigm that holds inequity & disadvantage in place
Increased participation in representative democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take action to turn around the current trend of disengagement & apathy with politics in Australia • Help people understand their individual and collective power within representative democracy • Build capacity & awareness of how to pull those levers
Increased leadership from our elected representatives & public service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge the quality of representation by MPs – when tied to party policy platforms – hold local MPs accountable for their voting choices on social policy etc • Radical option – reform how Australia votes on social and environmental policy issues using more frequent digital polling • Or no voting at all – make it independent like the RBA • Pressure Governments to make long-term, multi-sector, bipartisan & nation-wide commitments to ensuring the wellbeing of all children and families • Protect the commitments from partisan positioning, electoral cycles & federal - state tensions
Shift our collective mindsets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise, value and incorporate First Nations ways of knowing, learning, being and doing • Change our conceptualising & approach to “care” in Australia • Challenge mindsets that see needing care (being human) as a burden on society (read economy) or that care is women's work / belongs in the shadows

Annex 4 - Stage 4: Rapid testing and iteration

GAINING A SENSE OF PRIORITIES

During Stage 4, the 'Rapid Testing and Iteration' stage, a key goal was to re-engage participants to further test our findings and gain a sense of priorities through:

- In-depth interviews with selected stakeholders
- Testing leverage hypotheses via an open survey (Survey 2) to all stakeholders.

INTERVIEWS

As part of the testing process, interviews were conducted with eight key stakeholders to hear their views on the findings of the systems mapping process, possible leverage points and potential future roles for the EYC. The emphasis from interviewees was either largely on the convening role that the EYC could play, or the topics that the EYC could focus on. Suggestions included:

Setting a new frame outside the current system: The EYC could help to set a new frame outside the current system, taking the time to map what a future system could look like and how to get there. This would require picking one or two key issues, ideally ones where there is widespread agreement, and co-designing with a range of stakeholders. For example, if the issue was market failure, then the work would be "what would an alternative system look like and how would it work?"

Create a shared roadmap where people can locate their efforts:

To overcome fragmentation, the EYC could take on a role of bringing together other actors in the system to develop a shared roadmap that shows how all the different collective efforts might complement each other. It would help organisations situate themselves within the broader effort.

Focus on the broader issue of equity that underpins every system:

The EYC could create the space for people from across all the different ECD sub-systems to talk to each other about big issues such as funding models, mindsets that view Australian families more as service customers, collecting different types of data and having different types of conversations.

Focus on enabling community-led decision making:

Place-based approaches appear to be the right scale for meaningful systemic change. The EYC could facilitate work that builds on existing place-based approaches to strengthen systems for community led decision making, funding alignment and service redevelopment.

SURVEY 2

As a final step in our research process, a second survey was developed to test thinking on possible leverage points, as well as the potential future role of the EYC. Ninety respondents completed the survey. A summary of the responses is provided below.

Responses are ranked in descending order – the most popular/voted for is first.

If you could create one big societal shift to help improve early childhood development outcomes, which of the below do you think would have the most impact?

1. A shift in Australia's socio-cultural identity to become a society that prioritises the wellbeing of all children.
2. Creating broad recognition that raising thriving children is the work of the whole nation.
3. A shift in societal focus to prioritising wellbeing over economics.
4. A shift in societal perspectives of disadvantage and difference; free of racism and judgement against disadvantaged children and communities.
5. Shifts in ways of knowing, being and doing, incorporating cultural and traditional practices, valuing 1500 generations of First Nations' culture.

If you could make the following happen, which would you choose to generate an ECD system where all children and families thrive?

1. A national, bi-partisan ECD framework, with shared language and vision, that provides well supported pathways for every child to thrive, in their first 2,000 days and beyond, addressing inequality, poverty and intergenerational vulnerability.
2. Fit-for-purpose funding and commissioning approaches that include feedback loops from

community to government and service providers, delivering fit-for-purpose systems for disadvantaged children and communities.

3. Systems that deliver more equitable and non-judgemental early intervention, parenting supports, housing and service access - regardless of location.
4. Creation of societal and political understanding that raising thriving children is the work of the whole nation and will result in a stronger, safer, more compassionate society.
5. Development of culturally safe, fair, accessible, inclusive services that ultimately change life trajectories and shift societal perspectives.
6. An early childhood movement of professionals, families, children, communities, businesses, and others, building an Australian cultural identity that prioritises children and their needs.
7. A rebalancing of decision-making power – giving greater power to the local community level, supported by equitable and sustainable power sharing processes.
8. Embedding collective and relational ways of working and belonging into our policy making and service systems.
9. A shift in national policy processes to embed ongoing learning, adaptation and evolution of approaches and strategies.

Of the following cohorts in the ECD systems: whose voices do we need to hear more loudly? Who should have a seat at decision making tables?

1. Parents and carers
2. Frontline ECD workforces
3. Individuals with lived experience of ECD system challenges
4. Children
5. Community
6. Elders
7. Grandparents
8. Community service organisations
9. Community leaders
10. Youth community leaders

Over the next 6 months, what should the Early Years Catalyst prioritise and support for the most impact?

1. Connecting and linking current initiatives
2. Empowering & enabling those on the ground
3. Building the evidence base for change
4. Establishing an Australia –wide EYC network of local catalysts
5. Convening diverse stakeholders
6. Amplifying existing initiatives
7. Prototyping and testing new ideas

What will enable you to join our collective efforts?

1. Flexible opportunities to join
2. Support from your organisation
3. Time or time release
4. Sector-wide leadership
5. Capacity building

What sort of activities interest you?

1. Receiving regular updates / communications
2. Learning events showcasing innovation, evidence & good practice
3. Contributing your / your organisation's expertise
4. Facilitated networking opportunities
5. Co-designing tools/ resources/ solutions with others working on similar challenges
6. Communities of practice

Are you interested in building your capacity as a catalyst for change for your community? If so, what sort of activities would support you?

1. Communities of Practice
2. Mentoring from within the field
3. Structured training program

Annex 5 - Additional inputs & references

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