

Evaluation of the activities and outcomes delivered under the Children's Ground approach

Final Report

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ALLEN + CLARKE
CONSULTING



Acknowledgements

Allen + Clarke Consulting would like to thank all the stakeholders who contributed to the evaluation of the activities and outcomes delivered under the Children's Ground approach.

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Ethics approval

This evaluation received ethics approval from Menzies Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference Number: 2024-4992).

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Glossary

Term	Definition
ACCHO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations
ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
AEDC	Australian Early Development Census
Allen + Clarke Consulting	<i>Allen + Clarke</i>
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
FTE	Full time equivalent
KEQs	Key Evaluation Questions
NT	Northern Territory
NT Health	Northern Territory Department of Health
IAHP	Indigenous Australians' Health Programme
The Department	Australian Government Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing

Executive Summary



1 Executive summary

1.1 The evaluation

In 2024, the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing (the Department) engaged [Allen and Clarke Consulting](#) (Allen + Clarke) to undertake an evaluation of the Children's Ground approach with a view to making recommendations to inform the Australian Government's consideration of future funding for Children's Ground.

The evaluation was designed to answer the following five Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs):

- How well are the activities being implemented under the Children's Ground approach?
- How effective is the Children's Ground Approach?
- To what extent are the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach contributing to improved outcomes?
- How well do the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach align with government priorities?
- What do the evaluation findings mean for how the Australian Government funds Children's Ground?

The evaluation received Human Research Ethics Committee approval on 21 November 2024.

Data analysed for the evaluation included engagement and outcome data from Children's Ground's evaluation reports, annual reports, and reporting to the Department. Data collection and analysis for the evaluation also included individual and small group interviews with staff from various Australian and Northern Territory government departments, staff from other service providers, current and former Children's Ground staff, and members of the communities in which Children's Ground works.

A program logic was developed during the evaluation to support communication of the actual and expected outcomes from the Children's Ground approach. Utilising the program logic, contribution cases were developed to support conclusions on the outcomes achieved through the Children's Ground approach.

1.2 Children's Ground and the Children's Ground approach

Children's Ground

Children's Ground is a First Nations organisation focused on addressing intergenerational poverty and driving sustainable change within First Nations communities over a 25-year timeframe. Established in 2013, its work spans five key service areas: learning, family health and wellbeing, economic development, community development, and creative and cultural development.

The Children's Ground approach

The Children's Ground approach is an integrated system of services that targets whole-of-community change over a generation (that is, 25 years). The approach is place-based, holistic, community-led and governed, and focuses on prevention, early intervention and empowerment. Children's Ground delivers activities in four communities in Central Australia (Mpweringke Anapipe, Irrkerlantye, Uyenpere Atwatye, and Yarrenyty Arltère), three in Darwin (Knuckey's Lagoon, 15 Mile, and Minmarama), and one in West Arnhem (Marlkawo).

Under the Children's Ground approach, an 'activity' is a service delivered or facilitated by a person employed by Children's Ground to people living in small, discrete communities, which aims to achieve certain short, and longer-term outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. The substantive content of the activity delivered or facilitated by a Children's Ground staff member to an individual varies depending on what is required in the individual's particular circumstances to achieve specified outcomes. What is required to achieve the specified outcomes (i.e., what is the 'need' that the activity must respond to and how should that need be met) is decided by communities using community decision-making processes.

The 'full' Children's Ground approach refers to a state where, in relation to a particular geographic community, Children's Ground has:

- the necessary resources to deliver or facilitate all the services (specified as part of the Children's Ground approach) required to achieve the short and longer-term outcomes under each of the integrated service areas, and
- 'critical mass' (i.e., 75% > of community members participating in Children's Ground activities).¹

Due to the nature of the Children's Ground approach, if these conditions are not met, the Children's Ground approach will not have the maximum impact possible.

1.3 Summary of findings

KEQ1

How well are the activities being implemented under the Children's Ground approach.

Children's Ground delivers a wide range of mutually supporting activities to First Nations people living in a small number of discrete communities, which face significant challenges associated with overcrowding, environmental health, access to services, and safety. Members of these discrete communities are linked through kinship, geography, or both. Children's Ground's activities are generally delivered either inside the community or on-country in surrounding areas of cultural significance. Activities are delivered by community members

¹ Children's Ground assesses progress towards 'critical mass' through the processes described in sections 5.4 and 5.5. Activities are still delivered before 'critical mass' is achieved.



employed or volunteering for Children's Ground, working in partnership with Children's Ground's non-community staff, which is an essential enabler for their effective implementation. Children's Ground's revenue comes primarily from non-government donations (61% in 2023) and grants (35% in 2023).

The cost of implementing Children's Ground's activities is primarily regional staff FTE (including regionally based research and evaluation staff) (66%), with lesser operational cost (20%), and shared services staff (16%). Shared services costs cover finance, IT, people and cultural, and management. Children's Ground also employs partnerships, investment, and fundraising staff, who are self-funded and are not included in the above percentages.

Activities are implemented well (i.e., efficiently and effectively) under the Children's Ground approach, primarily because their delivery responds directly to the needs and circumstances of the communities that Children's Ground works with. The cost of implementing Children's Ground's activities is reasonable given the circumstances of the communities Children's Ground works with and the alignment of the Children's Ground approach with leading practice for response to complex disadvantage. There is potential for both greater efficiency and effectiveness to be achieved. This will require consistent, comprehensive, and long-term funding for Children's Ground (see recommendation 1). It will also require Children's Ground receiving access to longitudinal indicator data to measure progress towards outcomes for the individuals, families, and communities that Children's Ground works with (see recommendation 6).

KEQ2

How effective is the Children's Ground approach?

The Children's Ground approach is an effective mechanism for service provision and aligns with leading practice for prevention and responsiveness to complex disadvantage through holistic design, place-based design, and First Nations-led design. Children's Ground demonstrates strong capability in leading whole of community and First Nations system design and solutions. Children's Ground has developed a highly effective employment pathway for community members, which addresses key barriers to employment and enables extensive employment of community members. Similarly, Children's Ground has developed highly effective community decision-making and community governance structures and processes, that empower communities and enable them to exercise effective control of the Children's Ground approach. This greatly increases the effectiveness of the Children's Ground approach. Children's Ground utilises both formal partnerships with organisations and informal relationships with staff from organisations to improve the effectiveness of both the Children's Ground approach and other services. Entering into formal partnerships with more organisations will increase the effectiveness of the Children's Ground approach (see recommendation 5).

KEQ3

To what extent are the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach contributing to improved outcome?

Children's Ground is demonstrating significant progress towards shorter-term outcomes across its integrated service areas. In particular, the contribution analysis undertaken for this evaluation concluded that the Children's Ground approach makes a direct contribution to First Nations children engaging in early years, cultural, and on-country learning, First Nations people engaging in health promotion and support, and First Nations employment.

A lack of access to longitudinal indicator data to measure progress towards outcomes for the individuals, families, and communities that Children's Ground works with means that direct evidence of Children's Ground's impact on longer-term outcomes was not available (see recommendation 6).² However, on the basis of the Children's Ground's theory of change and logic model, and on the quality of the progress on shorter-term outcomes, it would be reasonable to assume that there has been progress made towards longer-term outcomes.

KEQ4

How well do the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach align with government priorities?

The evaluation found that the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach align closely with government priorities, as set out in departmental and inter-departmental plans and strategies, and in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Specifically, the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach directly align with:

- 10 Closing the Gap outcomes and indirectly with 7 Closing the Gap outcomes,
- 10 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan priorities and indirectly with 2 priorities,
- all eight Early Years Strategy outcomes,
- all five Early Childhood Strategy goals, and
- all four National Justice Reinvestment Program principles.

See **section 7** for the outcomes, priorities, goals, and principles that were analysed for alignment.

² The longitudinal indicator data required is generally collected and held by Australian Government departments, Northern Territory Government departments, and government funded service providers. Children's Ground collects its own indicator data where possible and appropriate (e.g., engagement in activities).

KEQ5

What do the evaluation findings mean for how the Australian Government funds Children's Ground?

The evaluation found there is strong evidence that Children's Ground is achieving the shorter-term access and engagement outcomes specified in the program logic (**Figure 4** in **section 2.2**) through delivering activities under the Children's Ground approach. Given Children's Ground's achievement of the shorter-term (1 – 6 year) outcomes and the evaluation findings regarding the effectiveness of the Children's Ground approach it is reasonable to extrapolate that full implementation of the Children's Ground approach in a community could, based on the program logic, achieve the longer term (7 – 20 and 20+ year) outcomes sought from the Children's Ground approach.

Successful implementation of the full Children's Ground approach will require ongoing and long-term investment and support by several Australian Government departments (see recommendations 1 and 2). There are also several areas where Children's Ground could make improvements, which would improve its ability to partner with the Australian Government, communities, and other service providers (see recommendations 3, 4, 5, and 7).

Based on the evaluation findings, any government funding for Children's Ground should:

- be long-term and consistent with notifications of the outcome of funding processes well in advance of the end of existing agreements,³
- be flexible and scalable to support Children's Ground's responsiveness,
- avoid imposing onerous reporting obligations,
- recognise and enable key elements of the Children's Ground approach, and
- recognise and respond to the contextual factors affecting the communities that Children's Ground works with.

Funding that does not align with these considerations will perpetuate barriers to the effective delivery of Children's Ground's activities, and therefore to achieving outcomes for the individuals, families, and communities whom Children's Ground works with.

Given Children's Ground applies holistic service design and delivery, activities that deliver outcomes under any one service area also deliver outcomes under other service areas. This complicates drawing direct lines of responsibility between specific activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach and individual Australian Government departments. However, a single department has been identified as best placed to fund each activity, based on the alignment of the activity and its outcomes to departmental and inter-departmental priorities. The Australian Government agencies that are best placed to fund activities under the Children's Ground approach are:

³ In its report on Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory, the Productivity Commission recommended default contract lengths of 7 years (Recommendation 8.1, Productivity Commission, 2020).



- the Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing,
- the Department of Social Services,
- the Department of Education,
- the National Indigenous Australians Agency,
- Indigenous Business Australia,
- the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, and
- the Attorney-General's Department.

The costs associated with any funding for Children's Ground could be shared between the Australian and Northern Territory governments, and this should be considered.

Alongside secure, long-term funding from other sources, there is a clear potential for increased philanthropic funding to enable Children's Ground to make large, one-off investments in infrastructure, plant, and materials to greatly increase the effectiveness of its activities in several communities (see recommendation 8).

1.4 Recommendations

Eight recommendations are made in response to the evaluation findings.

R1

Recommendation 1:

The Australian Government should consider committing to a comprehensive multi-departmental, long-term funding approach for Children's Ground. The funding approach should include an initial period of seven years to enable Children's Ground to demonstrate progress towards longer-term outcomes in the communities currently supported in Central Australia and Darwin. Specifically, the Australian Government agencies listed in **Table 1** below should consider committing to fully fund the delivery of activities under specific service areas to enable long-term delivery of activities by Children's Ground. The Australian and Northern Territory governments should consider sharing the costs of any funding for Children's Ground.

Table 1: Government agencies and Children's Ground activities

Australian Government agency	Service area
Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing	Family Health and Wellbeing
Department of Social Services	Learning and Wellbeing (activities primarily targeted at children aged 0-6 and their families)
Department of Education	Learning and Wellbeing (activities primarily targeted at children aged 6+ and their families)
National Indigenous Australians Agency	Community Development and Wellbeing
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations; Indigenous Business Australia	Economic Development and Wellbeing
Attorney-General's Department	Creative and Cultural Development and Wellbeing

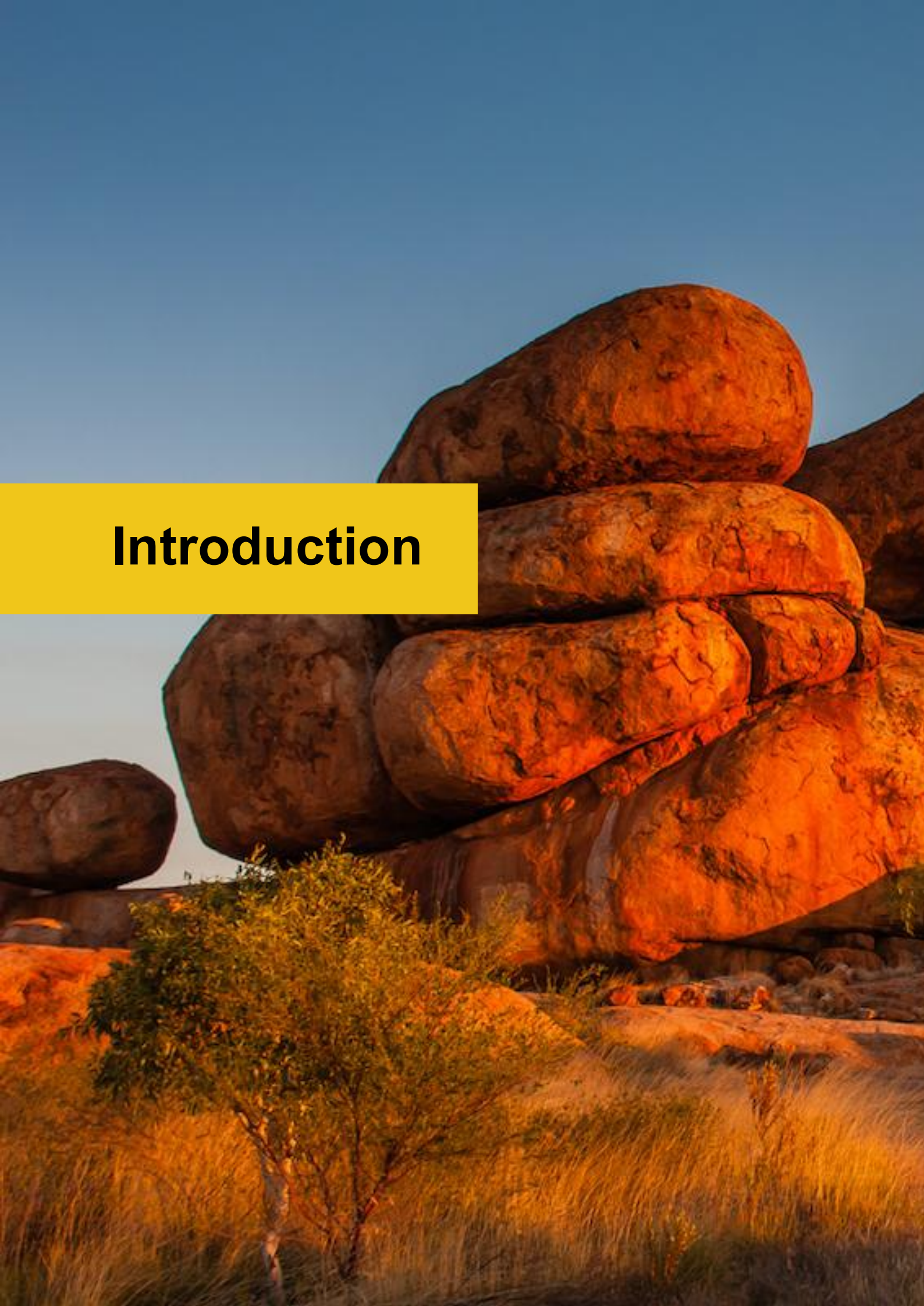
R2

Recommendation 2:

The Australian Government should establish an inter-agency Governance Group to support the implementation of any funding agreements. If the costs of funding the Children's Ground approach are shared with the Northern Territory Government, the relevant Northern Territory Government agencies should be included in the Governance Group.



R3	Recommendation 3: Children's Ground should increase engagement from under-represented groups, with a particular view towards strengthening the viability of Children's Ground as a justice reinvestment option.
R4	Recommendation 4: Children's Ground should consider enhancements to its already effective cultural governance processes.
R5	Recommendation 5: Children's Ground should strengthen and formalise relationships with other service providers in Central Australia and Darwin.
R6	Recommendation 6: The Australian Government and Children's Ground should establish processes to enable access to and generation of data to indicate progress towards outcomes (beyond access and engagement) of the Children's Ground approach.
R7	Recommendation 7: Children's Ground should improve communications with government stakeholders.
R8	Recommendation 8: Children's Ground should continue to work to expand the amount and maximise the effectiveness of philanthropic funding.

A landscape photograph featuring large, stacked, reddish-brown boulders under a clear blue sky. In the foreground, there is a small green bush and tall, dry grass. A yellow rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the word "Introduction" in black text.

Introduction

2 Introduction

2.1 Background

The Australian Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing commissioned *Allen + Clarke* to undertake an evaluation of the Children's Ground approach.

Children's Ground is an organisation focused on addressing intergenerational poverty and driving sustainable change within First Nations communities over a 25-year timeframe. Established in 2013, its work spans five key service areas: learning, family health and wellbeing, economic development, community development, and creative and cultural development. Utilising a strengths-based approach, the organisation prioritises local talent and leadership to deliver integrated, holistic services from pre-birth through to adulthood. Children's Ground works with eight communities across Central Australia and the Top End in the Northern Territory (NT).

Children's Ground has opted not to register under the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006*, meaning that recognition as an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation under some government policies and procedures is complex. However, Children's Ground does meet the definition of an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation provided under Priority Reform Two in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

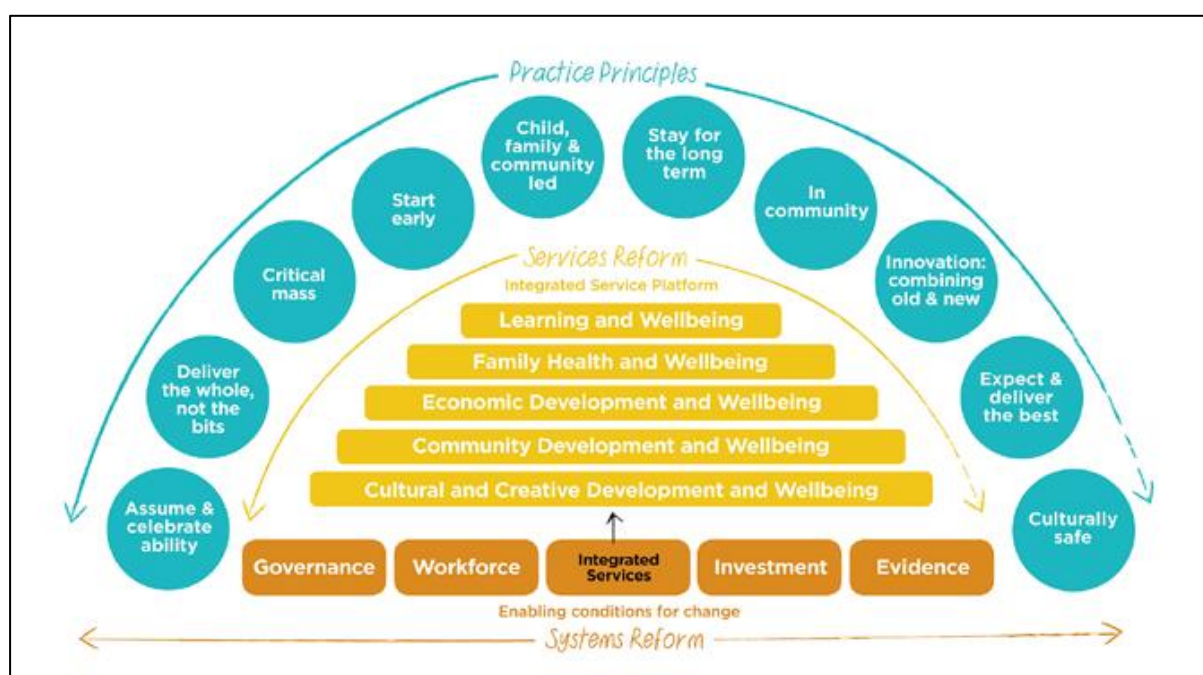
2.2 The Children's Ground approach

The Children's Ground approach is an integrated system of services that targets whole-of-community change over a generation (that is, 25 years). The approach is place-based and focuses on prevention, early intervention and empowerment. It recognises First Nations governance, solutions and systems of knowledge, complemented by Western leading practice.

The Children's Ground approach includes a set of practice principles, integrated service platforms, and system enablers (**Figure 1**). The approach seeks to reform:

- 'how' services are delivered and governed (10 practice principles)
- 'what' services are delivered (integrated and culturally responsive service platform across five service areas)
- systems structures that are 'enabling conditions for change' (five system reforms).

Figure 1: Children's Ground approach



Source: Children's Ground, 2024a

The Children's Ground approach is underpinned by a theory of change that describes, at a high-level, how outcomes will be achieved (**Figure 2**). Achieving outcomes requires change across three levels (**Figure 3**).

Figure 2: Children's Ground theory of change

INPUT	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	IMPACT
The Children's Ground Approach (Practice Principles; Service Reform; System Reform)...	...is implemented in collaboration with communities experiencing extreme inequity...	...to bring about Community, Systemic and Societal change over the course of a generation...	...so that children, families and community enjoy social, cultural, political, economic wellbeing.

Source: (Children's Ground, 2024a)

Figure 3. Levels of change required by the theory of change

Community change	Systems change	Society change
- First Nations people in our local communities have access to, and lead, quality integrated and culturally responsive services that are inclusive and place-based, and that create safety and wellbeing. - Every child enjoys wellbeing with their families. - Whole communities shift from intergenerational inequity to intergenerational opportunity and wellbeing.	- A national integrated service delivery and policy system that meets the long-term needs of children, families and communities, and builds on their identity, history, strengths and ambitions. - A system that values First Nations knowledge systems.	First Nations history and culture are celebrated as central to our nation's identity.

Source: Children's Ground, 2024a.

The Children's Ground approach is underpinned by an Outcomes and Evaluation Framework. The framework includes 10 high-level outcomes, short-term (one to three year) progress measures on access and engagement, medium-term (four to six year) outcome indicators, and long-term (seven or more years and 20 to 25+ years) outcome indicators.

Activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach

Children's Ground delivers activities through its five integrated service areas. These are:

- Learning and wellbeing** – western and cultural early childhood learning, after-school and holiday programs and extra-curricular learning and wellbeing.
- Health and wellbeing** – health promotion, social and emotional wellbeing, child and maternal health promotion (including engaging mothers not otherwise accessing services, increasing access to bush medicine, and communicating traditional practices), nutrition, and environmental health.
- Economic development and wellbeing** – employment, training, mentoring, financial literacy, and enterprise development.
- Community development and wellbeing** – local governance, safety, community development, social and cultural capital, and celebration.
- Creative and cultural development and wellbeing** – creative and cultural knowledge and practice, and language.

See **section 4.1** for more detailed descriptions of activities delivered under each of these service areas.

Under the Children's Ground approach, an 'activity' is a service delivered or facilitated by a person employed by Children's Ground to people living in defined communities, which aims to achieve certain short-, and longer-term outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.

All activities delivered by Children's Ground can be categorised under one of the five integrated service areas listed above, based on the primary outcome(s) that activity is intended to achieve.

The substantive content of the activity delivered or facilitated by a Children's Ground staff member to an individual varies depending on what is required in the individual's particular circumstances to achieve specified outcomes. Importantly, what is required to achieve the specified outcomes (i.e., what is the 'need' that the activity must respond to and how should that need be met) is decided by communities using the processes discussed in **section 5.4**. This means that Children's Ground's activities are most usefully understood as services delivered by a staff member working in a defined role under a particular service area to achieve specific outcomes.

For the purposes of the evaluation, using this view of service provision enables a description of the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach, despite necessary variation in the substantive content of 'services' that Children's Ground staff provide in each community. It also enables analysis of the cost of activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach and an assessment of their reasonableness and cost-effectiveness.

Children's Ground reported that, in 2023 (Children's Ground, 2024a):

- 1,486 community members engaged with Children's Ground
- 456 children (aged 0 – 8 years) engaged in health and/or learning activities
- 401 children (aged 0 – 8 years) engaged in early learning activities
- 1,354 children and their family members engaged in targeted and universal health promotion and support
- 1,126 children, young people and families engaged in cultural knowledge and practice activities
- 184 community members engaged in governance activities, and
- 112 First Nations adults were employed with Children's Ground.

Children's Ground's ability to consistently access or generate indicator data required to measure progress towards outcomes beyond access and engagement is inhibited by several factors, which are discussed in **section 4.2**.

Defining the full Children's Ground approach

Throughout this evaluation report, references are made to the "full Children's Ground approach". This term refers to a state where, in relation to a particular geographic community, Children's Ground has:



- the necessary resources to deliver or facilitate all the services required to achieve the short and longer-term outcomes under each of the integrated service areas, and⁴
- 'critical mass' (i.e., 75% > of community members participating in Children's Ground activities).⁵

If these conditions are not met, the Children's Ground approach will not have the maximum impact possible. This is because:

- as a holistic approach, the achievement of outcomes in one service area (e.g., family health and wellbeing), depends on the achievement of outcomes in another service area (e.g., learning and wellbeing). See **section 4** for a detailed discussion of Children's Ground's alignment with leading practice with holistic design.
- as the Children's Ground approach involves activity participants in activity design and delivery through community decision-making processes and employment pathways, the proportion of the community participating in activities greatly impacts on the effectiveness of activities. See **sections 5.3** and **5.4** for a detailed discussion of these factors.

Program logic

As part of the evaluation, a program logic model (**Figure 4**) was developed to show the relationship between the activities that Children's Ground delivers and the expected outcomes and goals of these activities. The program logic model uses the language of existing Children's Ground frameworks, including:

- the enabling conditions for change, practice principles, and integrated service platform from the Children's Ground approach
- the aspirations and outcomes from the Children's Ground Outcomes and Evaluation Framework.

The program logic model is displayed as a diagram that reads from bottom to top and includes four levels. Each level of the program logic should lead, consequentially, to the next. The four levels include:

1. **Inputs:** The inputs are foundational to all other levels. Without these, the Children's Ground approach cannot proceed effectively. The inputs include five building blocks that Children's Ground describes as 'enabling conditions for change' and the 10 practice principles that guide how Children's Ground works with communities.
2. **Activities:** The activities are the initiatives delivered under the Children's Ground approach, covering enabling activities and the five integrated service platform areas. The actual activities delivered in a community are described in community plans which respond to the needs, aspirations, and opportunities within each community and

⁴ Children's Ground has advised that it defines 'necessary resources' through specified positions and associated FTE allocated to each service area.

⁵ Children's Ground assesses progress towards 'critical mass' through the processes described in **sections 5.4** and **5.5**. Activities are still delivered before 'critical mass' is achieved.

therefore differ between communities and change over time. The types of activity delivered within each service area are described in **section 3**.

3. **Outcomes:** The outcomes are the main changes that the activities are expected to achieve. These include changes for children, families and communities, as well as changes expected to be achieved over the shorter term and longer-term. Children's Ground's Outcomes and Evaluation framework specifies the indicators that enable measurement of progress towards each outcome.
4. **Goals:** The goals are the ultimate benefits of the Children's Ground approach, reflecting the aspirations for children, families and communities. The Children's Ground approach is expected to contribute to the achievement of these goals over a 25-year period.

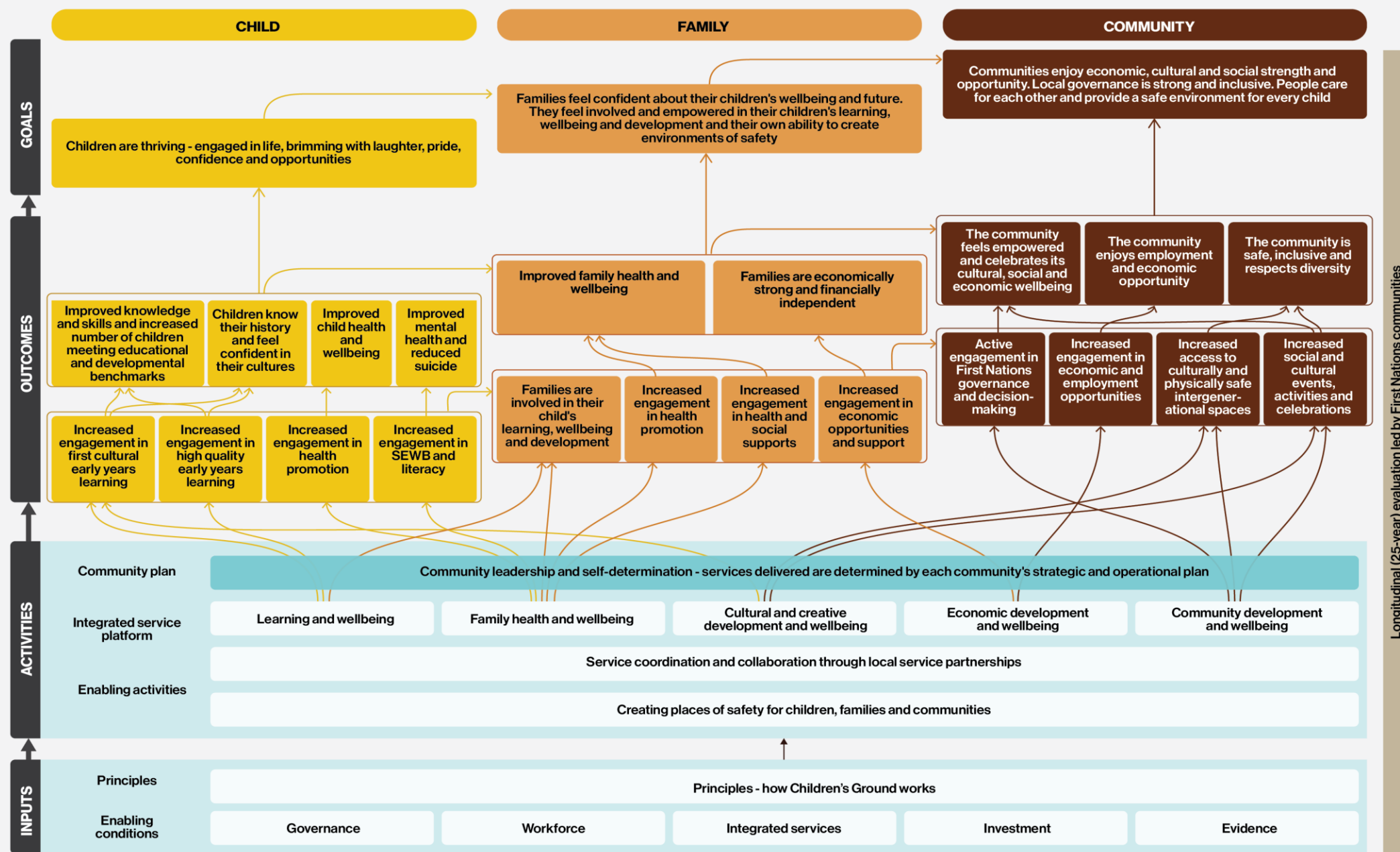
The graded shading in the bar on the right of the program logic model is intended to show that some outcomes are expected to be achieved throughout the 25-year implementation period while others are not expected until the generation of children who have grown up with the Children's Ground approach move into adulthood. The way the outcomes and goals 'step up' from child to family to community is intended to show that, to an extent, outcomes are expected to be achieved sequentially for children, then families, and then communities. The outcomes follow a logical sequence of increased access/involvement/engagement over the shorter term to improved conditions and wellbeing over the longer term.

While the program logic model shows a linear sequence between activities and outcomes, it is a theoretical simplification of the real world. The arrows between activities and outcomes only show the main relationships. In reality:

- The community plans include a different 'dose' of activities in each of the integrated service platform areas and as described earlier, this dose may go up and down in response to needs, aspirations and opportunities.
- The achievement of outcomes is expected to be stronger when the full Children's Ground approach is being implemented, as activities and results interplay and build upon each other. The program logic model groups each set of outcomes into a single box to illustrate this interplay. Another way to show this would be to have feedback loops between each outcome.

The Children's Ground Outcomes and Evaluation Framework includes specific indicators for the outcomes in the program logic model (e.g., rates for preventable illness and injury), including for different time periods (one to three years, four to six years, seven or more years and 20 to 25+ years). Children's Ground does not consistently have access to the indicator data required to measure progress towards the outcomes, as much of the data that is required is collected and held by government agencies and government-funded service providers. For several reasons, other than the indicator data Children's Ground already collects (e.g., engagement data), it is not possible for Children's Ground to collect the indicator data it requires to measure and report progress towards many outcomes in a robust and efficient way. Given these data are already collected and held by government agencies and government funded service providers, enabling Children's Ground's access to these data should be a priority (see recommendation 6).

Figure 4. Children's Ground approach program logic model





Overview of the evaluation

3 Overview of the evaluation

3.1 Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this evaluation was to assess the effectiveness, impact, and relevance of activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach.⁶

The objectives of this evaluation were:

1. To inform strategic funding decisions, including the continuation of Indigenous Australians' Health Programme (IAHP) funding for the Family Health and Wellbeing Framework and potential investment by other Australian Government agencies.
2. To support improvements in the design, delivery, and reporting of Children's Ground activities, contributing to stronger funding proposals.
3. To provide actionable recommendations for aligning Children's Ground activities with government priorities and exploring alternative funding models, including philanthropic contributions.

3.2 Design and methods

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, guided by an implementation-effectiveness design (Bernet et al., 2013). The evaluation integrated qualitative and quantitative data to address the Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) and used contribution analysis (Mayne, 2008) to examine causal relationships between Children's Ground activities and reported outcomes. Contribution cases were prepared for:

- increased engagement in early years learning (**Appendix A:**)
- increased engagement in health promotion and support (**Appendix B:**), and
- increased engagement in employment opportunities and support (**Appendix C:**).

The evaluation used a staged methodology to ensure a logical progression through planning, data generation, and analysis phases, with overlapping activities enabling immediate analysis of collected data. Engagement with Children's Ground and key stakeholders was central to the evaluation process, ensuring cultural safety and alignment with the principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination.

⁶ Under NIAA's Stronger Communities for Children program, Children's Ground also delivers services outside the scope of the Children's Ground approach. Only services delivered under the Children's Ground approach were in-scope for this evaluation.

3.3 Key Evaluation Questions

#	Evaluation questions
1	How well are the activities being implemented under the Children's Ground approach?
1.1	What activities are delivered, to whom and how?
1.2	What are the main enablers and barriers to the effective implementation of activities?
1.3	What is the cost of delivering the activities being implemented under the Children's Ground approach?
1.4	To what extent is the relationship between inputs and outputs timely, cost-effective and reasonable?
2	How effective is the Children's Ground approach?
2.1	To what extent does the Children's Ground approach align with leading practice for prevention and responsiveness to complex disadvantage through holistic, place-based, community and First Nations-led design?
2.2	What capability does Children's Ground bring to leading whole of community and First Nations system design and solutions?
2.3	To what extent is Children's Ground achieving employment of local community-based First Nations people? What is the impact of this on individuals, children and families?
2.4	To what extent is Children's Ground achieving local community decision-making and leadership of First Nations people? What is the impact of this on the effective delivery of activities?
2.5	How effective are the Cultural Governance Committees and other mechanisms in empowering communities through genuine partnerships?
2.6	What is the quality of Children's Ground's partnerships with health, education and youth services that operate in Central Australia and the Top End?
3	To what extent are the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach contributing to improved outcomes?
4	How well do the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach align with government priorities?
5	What do the evaluation findings mean for how the Australian Government funds Children's Ground?
5.1	Which Australian Government departments are best placed to fund which activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach?
5.2	What is the potential for an increased role of philanthropic funding in supporting Children's Ground?
5.3	To what extent do Children's Ground's service areas provide a viable justice reinvestment option for government?

3.4 Data sources and methods

The evaluation generated data and information from a range of mixed methods and sources. These are shown in **Table 2** below.

Table 2: Evaluation data sources and methods

Data sources and methods	
	Desktop analysis Documents and data were reviewed from two main sources: (1) Children's Ground documents including annual reports, evaluation reports, financial data, and activity work plans and performance reports associated with funding from the Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing; and (2) government strategies, plans, agreements and reviews.
	Yarning discussions with community members 47 community members participated in yarning discussions held in four communities and during an on-country session. Participants shared their perspectives on their experiences in engaging in Children's Ground activities, including strengths and barriers, the benefits of the activities, and ideas for improvement. The yarning discussions occurred alongside the delivery of Children's Ground sessions which the evaluation team also observed.
	Interviews with key stakeholders Individual and small group interviews were held with 31 current and former staff of Children's Ground, 10 government officials (Australian and Northern Territory governments), and seven staff from other local services. The interviews canvassed the scope of KEQs, tailored to each stakeholder. Some stakeholders were interviewed multiple times.
	Discussions with cultural governance committees Two in-person sessions were also held with Children's Ground's regional cultural governance committee members to sense-check emerging data and to fill knowledge gaps. Committee members also participated in yarning discussions during data collection. During the report drafting process, two online sessions were held with Children's Ground regional cultural governance committees to validate and refine the interpretation of key data.

3.5 Ethics approval

Full ethical approval for the evaluation was granted on 21 November 2024, following assessment by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Northern Territory Health and Menzies School of Health Research (NT HREC), including the Aboriginal Ethics Sub-Committee (NT HREC Reference Number: 2024-4992).

3.6 Evaluation strengths and limitations

In reflecting on the design and implementation of the evaluation, three main strengths were identified:

- **Aboriginal leadership and guidance:** The evaluation team, which included Aboriginal leadership, was guided by local Aboriginal leaders, including members of Children's Ground's cultural governance committees and their evaluation leads. Their guidance on community engagement validation of the interpretation of data strengthened the credibility of the evaluation process and the validity of the findings.
- **Engagement and dialogue:** The majority of evaluation participants engaged strongly and openly in interviews and yarning discussions, particularly Children's Ground staff



and community members. While this report has not used direct quotes from these engagements, the data enabled a comprehensive understanding of the Children's Ground approach, in action. This was strongly aided by in-person engagement at Children's Ground's premises, in communities and on-country. Seeing the Children's Ground approach in action was a real strength.

- **Contribution analysis:** Building up contribution cases on the basis of a program logic and, largely qualitative, evidence of observable outcomes proved to be a robust way to answer outcome-orientated evaluation questions in the absence of quantitative indicator data to assess progress towards outcomes.

The main limitations with the design and implementation of the evaluation include:

- **Quantitative data:** Notwithstanding the strength of the contribution cases, access to quantitative indicator data relevant to outcomes of interest would have strengthened the contribution analysis.
- **Sampling of qualitative data:** The sampling of evaluation participants created some natural limits to the representation of participants. The evaluation relied, to some extent, on Children's Ground's support to identify community members to participate in the evaluation and this cohort of people were, naturally, likely to include those who were closely engaged and connected to Children's Ground and the Children's Ground approach. The evaluation attempted to engage with local people who did not engage in activities under the Children's Ground approach but concluded that they had insufficient knowledge about Children's Ground or the approach and that their participation would not meaningfully strengthen the evaluation. The evaluation engaged with some people who had been employed by Children's Ground but were no longer connected.
- **Inability to access Marlkawo:** The evaluation was conducted at the beginning of the Top End's wet season. Road closures meant that Marlkawo was inaccessible. While a reasonable amount of data was collected from Children's Ground's Marlkawo staff, very limited data was collected from Marlkawo residents. The data collected in relation to Marlkawo indicates that, due to Marlkawo's remoteness, the delivery of the Children's Ground approach is substantially different to the delivery of the Children's Ground approach in the communities in and around Alice Springs and Darwin. As such, the data utilised to produce this report, the findings, and the recommendations may have limited relevance for supporting decision-making regarding the delivery of the Children's Ground approach in Marlkawo.



FINDINGS

The background of the slide is a photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, there is a vast, flat, reddish-brown sandy area. In the background, there are steep, layered red rock cliffs under a clear blue sky. A semi-transparent yellow rectangular box is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the image, containing the text.

KEQ 1

How well are the activities
being implemented under the
Children's Ground approach?

4 KEQ 1 - How well are the activities being implemented under the Children's Ground approach?

The following sections provide an overview of what activities are delivered under the Children's Ground approach, the main enablers and barriers to effective delivery, and the cost and cost-effectiveness of the activities.

4.1 Children's Ground's activities

This sub-section responds to KEQ 1.1: What activities are delivered, to whom, and how?

Children's Ground delivers a wide range of mutually supporting activities

Under the Children's Ground approach, the number of people in a community and the number of people in a community who participate in Children's Ground activities do not necessarily affect the nature, extent, and form of activities delivered. Rather, the nature, extent, and form of activities delivered under each integrated service area are decided by communities through the processes set out in **section 5.4**. In practice, insufficient funding (discussed in **section 4.2**) places constraints on the ability of Children's Ground to fully implement the decisions of communities on the delivery of activities. Regardless, Children's Ground delivers a wide range of mutually supporting activities in each community. Collectively, the activities delivered by Children's Ground are aimed at creating the conditions necessary for long-term change for individuals, families, and communities. In this respect, Children's Ground fills a service provision niche in all the communities it works with by supporting people to receive the foundational support they require for improved outcomes across all domains.

Children's Ground provided data on FTE employed in Central Australia and the Top End for 2024. Analysis of this data, alongside analysis of Children's Ground's evaluation reports and interview data, supports identification of the activities delivered by Children's Ground in each region in 2024. Descriptions of the activities delivered under each service area are set out below. Across all service areas, Children's Ground also acts as an interface between individuals, families, communities and other service providers, supporting people to access services that Children's Ground does not provide itself.

Learning and Wellbeing

Children's Ground delivers on-country and in-community education, where children learn cultural practices, language, and Western education side-by-side in a culturally and physically safe environment. Services are holistic, integrating health, wellbeing, literacy, numeracy, and family support with strong involvement from Elders and local First Nations staff. This includes bush baths, baby smoking ceremonies, collecting and preparing bush food and medicine and conversations about uses and benefits and learning about traditional cultural practices. In 2023, primary-aged children in Central Australia participated in on-country learning in partnership with Yipirinya School, including English and First Language education alongside



cultural practices like learning about plants, seasons, animals, and traditional medicines. During Sorry Business at Sandy Bore in Central Australia, Children's Ground staff provided round-the-clock early years and primary education, combining Western and cultural teaching to ensure children maintained their schooling despite community mourning, particularly for students who had relocated from outside Central Australia.

Creative and Cultural Development and Wellbeing

Creative and Cultural Wellbeing is integrated into all activities delivered by Children's Ground, particularly within learning activities. However, specific Cultural and Creative Development and Wellbeing activities are also delivered. For instance, in Darwin, Children's Ground provided extended hours programs for children, often in partnership with other organisations. These programs include boxing classes (in partnership with a local boxing gym), Aussie rules football (in partnership with the AFL), and fishing and bush trips. In Alice Springs in 2023, Children's Ground organised the "Ampe-mape Alyelhome Kids Sing!" project and the Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe Art Exhibition, celebrating the cultural heritage of the Arrernte community.

Family Health and Wellbeing

Children's Ground staff provide holistic support through on-site wellbeing checks, nutrition programs, and health education integrated into everyday activities. Families are actively engaged in health promotion, with a focus on improving physical, emotional, and cultural wellbeing through culturally centred practices and community-led initiatives. Specific activities include:

- healthy routines and education
- nutrition education, food security, and healthy meals
- social and Emotional Wellbeing promotion
- cultural Health and Wellbeing
- physical Health promotion and activity
- maternal and child health promotion (including traditional mother-baby care practices and mothers' and babies' groups that engage new mothers and pregnant women in learning about western health services and scheduling, led by First Nations women with cultural and western-trained midwifery backgrounds)
- health check-ins and promotion conversations, and
- targeted preventative health (skin, ears, eyes, dental, weight, and immunisation).

Children's Ground's Family Health and Wellbeing activities seek to complement and enable clinical services provided by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), as opposed to replace them. Children's Ground's Family Health and Wellbeing activities also align with the objectives of the Indigenous Australians' Health Programme, in that they:

- are designed to improve the health of Aboriginal people



- support people to access primary healthcare services, including services provided by ACCHOs, and
- are intended to improve the responsiveness of other services to improve their ability to cater for the members of Children's Ground's communities (**see section 5.2**).

Community Development and Wellbeing

Children's Ground staff promote community governance and community-led decision-making (see **section 5.4**) through facilitating and resourcing community planning sessions, strengthen cultural practices, and support economic and social initiatives, such as supporting the Kweyenpe Aboriginal Corporation to secure installation of hydropanels to provide access to drinking water in Irrkerlantye. Community Development and Wellbeing activities also act as enablers for activities delivered under other services, for instance transporting community members to activities conducted under other service areas, such as learning on country sessions. Children's Ground considers that its support for community governance and community planning are foundational to its other Community Development and Wellbeing activities.

A key Community Development and Wellbeing activity conducted by Children's Ground is "Walk, talk, and act", which is an ongoing process whereby Children's Ground staff engage with community members to communicate key concepts like governance, leadership and financial capacity, while ensuring the Children's Ground approach is both wanted by the community and viable. Engagement is led by local people, with a family-by-family approach, incorporating early learning and cultural and community activities. Walk, talk, and act informs and supports the community decision-making processes set out in **section 5.4**.

Economic Development and Wellbeing

Children's Ground staff facilitate local employment, skills development, and support for community-led enterprises, fostering economic independence and long-term wellbeing. This includes providing community members opportunities to be involved in Children's Ground's first language resources enterprise as creators, authors, contributors, musicians, artists and designers, and engaging in different enterprise stages, from concept and content development through to sales and marketing. Economic Development and Wellbeing activities also include support provided to community members to gain the documentation necessary for employment at Children's Ground, and financial and consumer literacy.

Children's Ground delivers activities to First Nations people living in a small number of discrete communities

Children's Ground's activities under the Children's Ground approach are generally delivered to First Nations people who are members of a small number of discrete communities, linked through kinship, geography or both.

Characteristics of communities

Children's Ground delivers activities under the Children's Ground approach in four communities in Central Australia (Mpweringke Anapipe outstations and the Town Camps Irrekerlantye, Uyenpere Atwatye, and Yarrenyty Arltere), three in Darwin (Knuckey's Lagoon,

15 Mile, and Minmarama/Kulaluk), and one in West Arnhem (Marlkawo).⁷ The permanent population of the communities Children's Ground works in range from 10⁸ to 282⁹ individuals. The transient population of the communities can vary significantly, particularly in Darwin, as individuals from surrounding areas used the communities on a temporary basis when visiting or relocating to Darwin.

While the communities in Central Australia and Darwin are not all geographically remote, the lack of personal transport and consistent public transport has the effect of creating varying degrees of artificial remoteness.

There is significant variation in the quality of housing, infrastructure, utilities, and community facilities between communities. However, these factors are universally poor, with standards significantly below what most Australians would consider acceptable. All the communities visited during the evaluation clearly faced significant challenges associated with overcrowding, environmental health, access to services, and safety. This is not to be taken as a comment on the individuals living in those communities, rather, it is included as necessary context for understanding the complex, interrelated, and challenging issues affecting the communities that Children's Ground works with.

Characteristics of participants

In Central Australia, participants in Children's Ground activities were almost exclusively Arrernte. By contrast, in Darwin, participants were members of a range of language groups. Due to road closures, the evaluation was not able to travel to West Arnhem.

Participants in Children's Ground's activities ranged from newborns through to very elderly community members. Children aged 0-8 years make up around 30% of participants.

Most participants live in the geographic communities in which Children's Ground delivers activities. However, a reasonable proportion of participants live outside the geographic communities but are linked to communities through kinship. Children's Ground provides transport for such individuals to the geographic communities for the purpose of participating in activities with their relatives.

In 2023, a total of 1,486 community members were engaged with Children's Ground. While Children's Ground's reporting only captures people who directly participate in activities, depending on the activity being delivered (e.g., environmental health) and factors unique to particular communities (e.g., the proximity of individual houses), additional individuals could be categorised as indirect participants in Children's Ground activities (for example, safety

⁷ The Mweringke Anapipe region is a group of outstations within the Mmpweringke and Anapipe areas of country. Children's Ground works directly with three outstations across these two areas. Children's Ground reports the Mweringke Anapipe as a 'community', so this report adopts the same approach.

⁸ Tangentyere Council. (n.d.). *Irrkerlantye (White Gate)*. Retrieved February 2025, from <https://www.tangentyere.org.au/irrkerlantye-white-gate>

⁹ Northern Territory Government. (2025). *BushTel – Remote Communities of the NT: Community Profile 35*. Retrieved May 6, 2025, from <https://bushtel.nt.gov.au/profile/35>. Children's Ground advises that this source is the best available, but likely underestimates the population.

improvements facilitated by Children's Ground to community infrastructure benefiting people who use that infrastructure when Children's Ground activities are not being delivered).

Quantitative data showing the proportion of men and women engaging in Children's Ground's activities as participants, volunteers, or employees was not available for the evaluation. The ethical approval for the evaluation also prohibited the evaluators from collecting demographic data, including the sex or gender of evaluation participants. However, during interviews, many evaluation participants noted that many more women than men are involved with Children's Ground. Several potential reasons were provided for this. These include that:

- men were apprehensive to be seen engaging with children in public as a result of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response and associated stigma
- the large proportion of men who are serving custodial sentences has significantly lowered the possible number of men who can engage with Children's Ground
- the large proportion of men who have served custodial sentences has induced a level of ongoing disconnection between men and communities, and
- the nature of many activities currently delivered by Children's Ground are ones that, in western culture, are female dominated, and that male members of Children's Ground's communities have internalised this viewpoint.

Children's Ground clearly undertakes efforts to overcome these barriers and to engage more men in various capacities. Given the intergenerational nature of these barriers, increasing the engagement of men is likely to be a relatively slow and methodical process, which Children's Ground is well suited to undertake. Efforts currently underway include creating and supporting opportunities for men to demonstrate and teach their skills and knowledge through hunting, ceremony, and craft work. It is important to note that these barriers are not universally present, and that there was evidence that Children's Ground is already successfully engaging men in both activities specifically tailored to men, and in its 'general activities'.

Children's Ground delivers activities in communities, in partnership with community members

The activities are delivered by community employees, non-community employees, and community volunteers¹⁰. Activities are generally delivered either inside the community or on-country in surrounding areas of cultural significance.

For activities delivered in communities, Children's Ground either utilises existing community infrastructure (e.g., a community bower shed) or brings in the assets required to create a comfortable and safe location to deliver activities (e.g., shade cloths and ground mats). In two

¹⁰ The report uses 'community volunteers' to refer to community- and family-members who work with Children's Ground staff to deliver or support the delivery of activities in their communities. Please see **section 5.3** for further discussion of the role of community volunteers in the delivery of Children's Ground's activities.

communities in Darwin, Children's Ground utilises buildings owned by another service provider inside the communities as permanent office space for Children's Ground staff.

For activities delivered on-country, Children's Ground provides buses and vans to transport participants from their community to the location of the on-country activity, as well as the assets required to create a comfortable and safe location to deliver activities (e.g., large ground mats, chairs, and tables).

A small proportion of Children's Ground activities take place in regional hubs (i.e., permanent office and storage facilities in Alice Springs, owned by Children's Ground, and Darwin, leased by Children's Ground). These activities involve members of multiple communities, for example cultural governance meetings. Children's Ground provides transport for community members to attend these activities, picking them up from, and dropping them back to, their communities.

Most activities are delivered in partnership by both Children's Ground employees who were qualified in a Western sense (i.e., who have attained regulated qualifications under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) or international equivalents) and Children's Ground employees who bring with them cultural knowledge, expertise, and leadership, and community connection. In many cases, the latter staff are members of the community they are working in. Children's Ground's employees are supported to deliver activities by community volunteers (see **section 5.3** for further discussion relating to the pathway Children's Ground provides from community volunteer to community employee). These three groups of people work together in partnership to apply their collective expertise to the delivery of a given activity. This partnership ensures that Western and First Nations knowledge and skills were both applied to, and transmitted by, the delivery of activities, and that they are equally valued.

4.2 Enablers and Barriers

This sub-section responds to KEQ 1.2: What are the main enablers and barriers to the effective implementation of activities?

Children's Ground builds trust, is consistent and responsive

The alignment of the Children's Ground approach with leading practice for prevention and responsiveness to complex disadvantage through holistic, place-based community and First Nations-led design is a key enabler for the effective implementation of activities. This is discussed in detail in **section 4**. Similarly, Children's Ground's facilitation of First Nations leadership, community decision-making, and cultural governance are also key enablers, which are discussed in detail in **sections 5.3 to 5.6**.

The section below briefly describes other key enablers for the effective implementation of activities. These enablers were closely linked and provided mutually supporting benefits.

Children's Ground principles and their consistent application

Children's Ground's principles and the extent to which they were consistently maintained and applied enables effective implementation of activities by:



- supporting the employment and retention of First Nations staff by creating a welcoming and safe environment, contributing to high levels of motivation
- increasing engagement with activities by community members through engendering trust in Children's Ground and its staff, and
- supporting the development of strong relationships between staff and community members, which were leveraged in a variety of ways.

Flexibility and responsiveness of Children's Ground approach

The Children's Ground approach is highly flexible, enabling it to be responsive to the rapidly changing needs of the community where Children's Ground works, and the community-based staff employed. In particular, the Children's Ground approach demonstrates a strong ability to respond to cultural considerations. Several examples of this flexibility and responsiveness shared by evaluation participants related to Children's Ground continuing to deliver activities to communities that had relocated for sorry business. In at least one instance, this involved delivering activities more than 150km away from the community's usual location.

Consistency and Regularity

The extent to which Children's Ground delivers its activities consistently and regularly in communities differentiated Children's Ground from other service provider organisations.

Many community members faced a range of barriers to regular participation in Children's Ground activities. These barriers include low trust in service provider organisations, health issues, trauma, experience of violence, challenging living conditions, and cultural obligations. The effect of these barriers, along with Children's Ground working in relatively small, often relatively isolated communities, is that both actual and potential participant numbers can vary significantly. To enable effective implementation of activities in the context of these barriers, Children's Ground consistently delivers its core activities in communities regardless of the number of participants on a particular day. This provides community members opportunities to access Children's Ground over time and to choose when and how to engage in activities at their own pace, often after witnessing their relatives choosing to engage. Consequently, the consistent delivery of Children's Ground activities in communities enables:

- increases in the proportion of community members participating in Children's Ground's activities
- increases in the level of engagement of existing participants
- Children's Ground to develop and maintain accurate understandings of communities' needs and aspirations, and
- responsiveness to the changeable needs and context of the individuals and communities to whom Children's Ground delivers activities.

Enabling assets and infrastructure

The availability of enabling assets and infrastructure has a significant impact on the effectiveness of activities and the ability of Children's Ground to implement the Children's Ground approach. Key enabling assets include buses and vans, which, in the context of a

severe lack of personal and public transport, Children's Ground uses to enable activities through transporting:

- people from their geographic community to on-country learning activities
- members of kinship communities who lived outside the geographic communities Children's Ground works in, to activities taking place inside those geographic communities
- people from their geographic communities to Children's Ground's regional hubs to participate in regional Cultural Governance Committee meetings
- supplies and materials to activity delivery locations
- community members to appointments or meetings with other service providers or organisations, and
- children to and from schools.

Key enabling infrastructure includes office space inside geographic communities. Where this was present, Children's Ground was able to permanently base community and non-community staff in communities, greatly increasing:

- community members' ability to access support provided by Children's Ground to engage with other organisations and services
- Children's Ground's staff's understanding of rapidly changing circumstances in the community, enhancing the responsiveness of activities to those circumstances, and
- Children's Ground's ability to create culturally and physically safe environments.

Key enabling infrastructure also includes community bower sheds inside geographic communities. Where this infrastructure is present, Children's Ground is able to deliver activities more efficiently as they are not required to store supplies and materials offsite and transport these to and from activities. Having permanent activity delivery locations inside communities also increases the visibility of Children's Ground in the community and means that Children's Ground is better able to create and maintain a physically and culturally safe environment for community members, contributing to higher levels of engagement with activities. Having permanent facilities also increases the likelihood of community members engaging with Children's Ground activities. Finally, in the communities in Darwin that have permanent community bower sheds utilised by Children's Ground, Children's Ground is able to support communities to arrange and facilitate multi-stakeholder meetings, where staff from various service providers come to the communities to plan service delivery and are held accountable for commitments they make. The strengthening of community governance, service delivery, employment, and communal interaction enabled by this infrastructure is a clear demonstration of the benefit of the enhanced impact that permanent place-based facilities enable.

Children's Ground delivers activities despite insufficient funding, limited collaboration, and socioeconomic challenges

Insufficient and inadequate funding

Inadequate funding is the primary barrier to Children's Ground implementing the full Children's Ground approach in any community. A lack of comprehensive and recurrent funding that can be applied across domains means that Children's Ground is unable to employ any staff in certain roles. This inhibits Children's Ground's ability to achieve outcomes across all service areas. The effect is more pronounced in some service areas than others. Further, the recurrent funding that is provided and able to be applied to specific service areas is not of sufficient quantity to enable Children's Ground to employ enough FTE to deliver all activities required for achieving outcomes in those service areas. This hinders staff effectiveness by causing ad hoc capacity gaps, compromising professional development, strategic planning, and the development of partnerships with other service providers. These ad hoc capacity gaps lead to high staff workload and staff working outside their scope of practice, which causes difficulty in retaining staff and is inefficient. See **Figure 8** in **section 4.3** for an indication of the extent of FTE shortfall across each service area.

Children's Ground also receives insufficient capital funding to enable timely investment in essential enabling assets and infrastructure. Enabling assets include vehicles, learning resources, tools, and food storage and preparation appliances. Enabling infrastructure includes buildings, utilities, and safety measures such as fencing.

Limited collaboration

Limited collaboration and structured engagement with service providers working with individuals from Children's Ground's communities inhibits Children's Ground's ability to quantitatively assess community needs, measure the impact of Children's Ground activities, and engage in effective joint service planning for greater overall benefit. Limited collaboration also limited other service providers' knowledge about what Children's Ground does and how it works with children and families. In Central Australia, a key driver for limited formal collaboration between Children's Ground and other Aboriginal services was local organisational politics. Government funding for Children's Ground under the IAHP may have exacerbated these issues. The multi-stakeholder meetings facilitated by Children's Ground in some communities in Darwin are an effective way of addressing the barrier posed by limited collaboration amongst service providers.

Lack of access to longitudinal data

Children's Ground does not consistently have access to comprehensive longitudinal indicator data required to measure progress towards health, education, and economic indicators at the level of the individuals, families, and communities that it works with. The longitudinal indicator data required is generally collected and held by Australian Government departments, Northern Territory Government departments, and government funded service providers. Children's Ground has attempted to work with a range of data custodians to gain access to these data but has not been able to establish any formal agreements.

Access to this data would enable Children's Ground to measure and demonstrate the effect of its activities on the populations it works with over time. It would also support Children's Ground to, if necessary, adjust the design or delivery of activities to improve their effectiveness.

Children's Ground collects its own indicator data where possible and appropriate (e.g., engagement in activities).

Socioeconomic factors

Socioeconomic factors like poor or non-existent infrastructure, the initial and ongoing impact of COVID-19, overcrowding, and poor health create a range of fundamental challenges that both reduce the potential effectiveness of activities and increase the investment required to attain the maximum potential effectiveness. The extent of many of these factors is expected to reduce over time through the delivery of the Children's Ground approach, which means that progress towards the longer-term outcomes sought from the Children's Ground approach should become quicker and more efficient over time.

4.3 The cost of Children's Ground's activities

This sub-section responds to KEQ 1.3: What is the cost of delivering the activities being implemented under the Children's Ground approach?

Children's Ground 2023 funding sources

In the year ended 31 December 2023, Children's Ground received \$11,945,988 in revenue. **Figure 5** breaks this down by source.

Figure 5: Children's Ground revenue by source, 2023

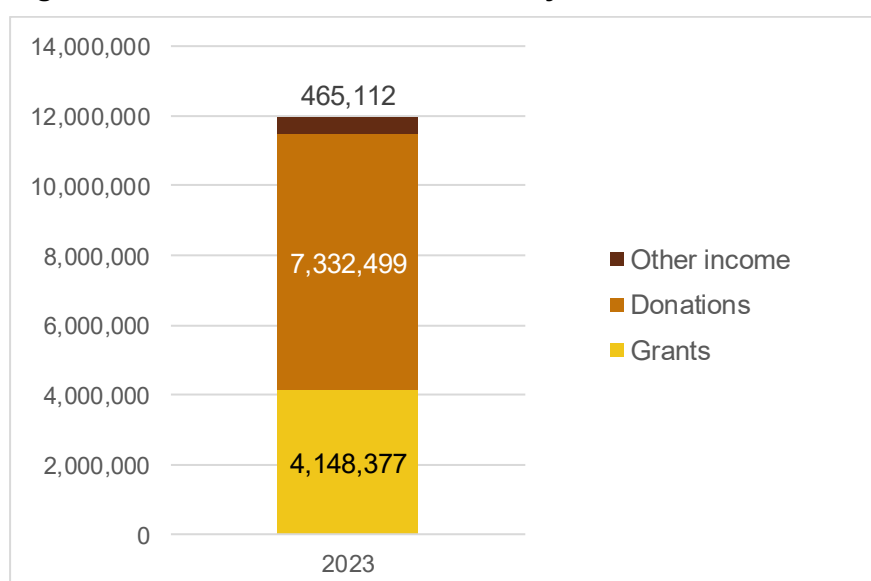


Figure 5 shows that \$4,148,377 (35%) was from grants, \$7,332,499 (61%) from donations (philanthropic, corporate, and general), and \$465,112 (4%) was from other income.

Figure 6 breaks down the grant funding by source, showing most grants are government funding.

Figure 6: Children's Ground grant revenue by source, 2023

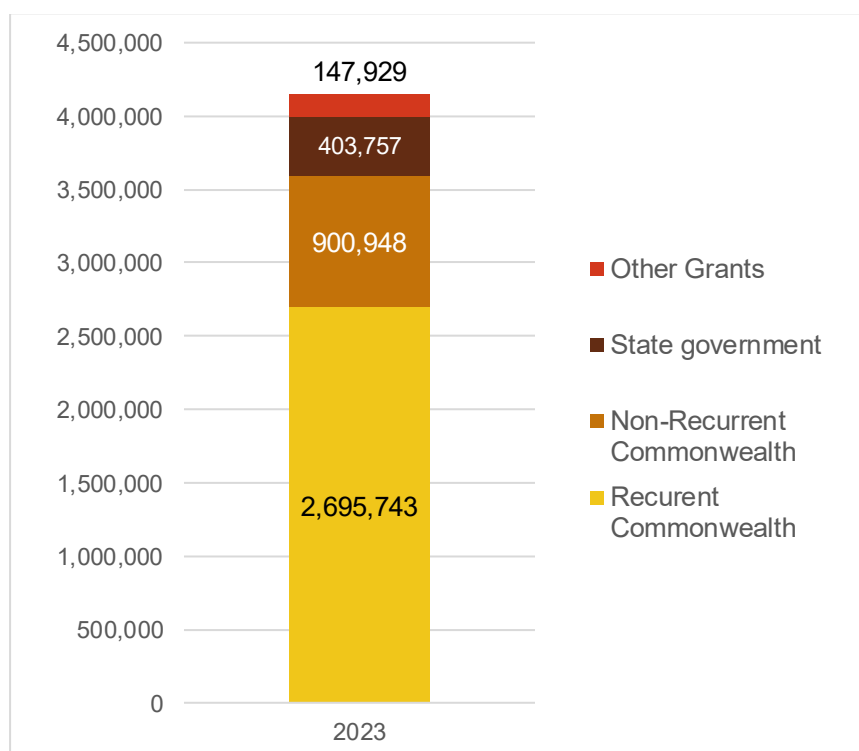


Figure 6 shows \$2,695,743 from recurrent Commonwealth grants, \$900,948 from non-recurrent Commonwealth grants, \$403,757 from NT Government grants, and \$147,929 from other grants.

Children's Ground 2023 operating costs

Children's Ground's expenditure in 2023 was \$12,264,258. Employment benefit expenses (salaries and wages, etc) made up the largest proportion of this, at \$9,055,129 (73.8%).

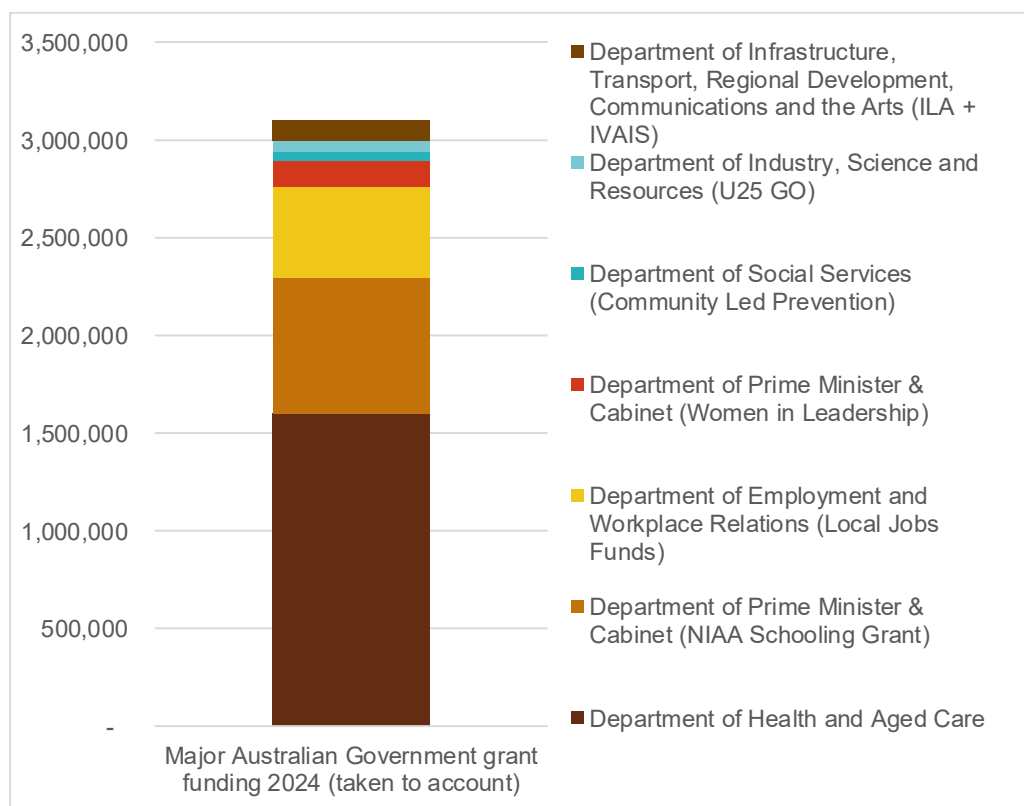
Children's Ground 2024 funding sources

Children's Ground provided the evaluation with budget data for the year ending 31 December 2024, as well as modelling that indicates what Children's Ground considers would be necessary to deliver the full Children's Ground approach.¹¹ This shows that Children's Ground received \$3,100,388 in what it characterises as "Major Government funding" from Commonwealth grants (excluding grants for the delivery of Stronger Communities for Children and an infrastructure grant in the Stronger Communities for Children communities, which were

¹¹ Children's Ground's annual report for 2024 was not available at the time of writing, meaning full funding source data for 2024 was unavailable. Children's Ground provided this data to support the evaluation during Children's Ground's 2024 audit period, meaning it may be subject to change. The data in this section relating to 2024 revenue and expenses is therefore indicative only. It is provided to illustrate current and future costs associated with delivering activities under the Children's Ground approach.

not used for the delivery of the Children's Ground approach). **Figure 7**, below, shows the amount of Commonwealth grant funding by agency. **Appendix D:**, provided by Children's Ground, shows all Commonwealth and Northern Territory grant funding taken to account in 2024, including the proportions of grants allocated to Children's Ground's shared services function, research and evaluation function, and Central Australia and Top End Regions.

Figure 7: Commonwealth grant funding for Children's Ground by agency, 2024



Children's Ground 2024 operating costs

The 2024 data provided by Children's Ground shows that personnel costs were \$8,968,985. Of this, \$6,825,004 was for Regional Staff in Central Australia and the Top End, leaving \$2,143,981 for Children's Ground's shared services staff, including partnerships, investment, and fundraising staff. The \$6,825,004 for Regional Staff can be further broken down by service area and region, as shown in **Table 3**. **Table 3** does not show costs associated with the "Creative and Cultural Development" service area separately. Children's Ground has advised that these costs should be recorded as part of "Learning and Wellbeing", as it considers that creative learning is a core aspect of quality learning.¹² **Table 3** also shows "Extended hours/holiday program" as a separate service area, as it was reported as such in the data Children's Ground provided. The "Contributing Australian Government agencies" column

¹² Under the full Children's Ground approach, "Creative and Cultural Development" personnel costs would be \$342,187.

shows the Australian Government agencies that Children's Ground identified as contributing to funding for activities delivered under the relevant service area.

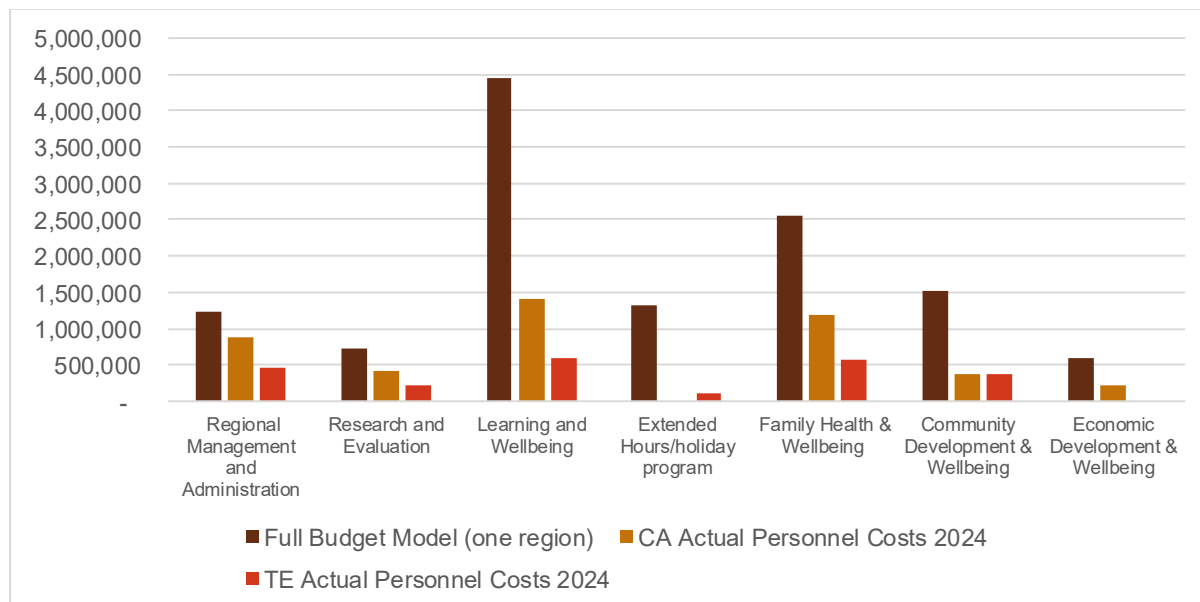
Table 3: Children's Ground 2024 Regional Staff cost and contributing Departments

Service area	Service area total (both regions)	Central Australia	Top End	Contributing Australian Government agencies
Learning and Wellbeing	\$1,986,230	\$1,399,255	\$586,975	National Indigenous Australians Agency Department of Social Services
Extended hours / holiday program	\$117,867	-	\$117,867	Department of Social Services Department of Industry, Science, and Resources
Family Health and Wellbeing	\$1,773,908	\$1,194,731	\$579,177	Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing
Community Development and Wellbeing	\$749,871	\$369,784	\$380,087	None
Economic Development and Wellbeing	\$226,202	\$226,202	-	Department of Workplace Relations, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications
Regional Research and Evaluation	\$641,036	\$427,357	\$213,679	National Indigenous Australians Agency, Department of Health,

				Disability, and Ageing, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
Regional Management, Admin, and HR	\$1,329,890	\$873,707	\$456,183	Some costs met through apportionment from service area grants and philanthropic funding
Totals	\$6,825,004	\$4,491,036	\$2,333,968	

Figure 8, below, shows actual expenditure on personnel by region and service area in 2024 as a proportion of what Children's Ground considers would be required to deliver the full Children's Ground approach to four communities in one region. Children's Ground considers that its existing expenditure on shared services staff to be fixed. I.e., it will not significantly increase or decrease based on the level of funding provided for service delivery in each region.

Figure 8: Children's Ground personnel expenditure by region and service area, 2024, compared to full budget model for one region



In 2024, Children's Ground's non-personnel operating costs (excluding depreciation) were \$2,120,481. **Table 4**, below, shows the non-personnel operating costs by service area and region. Like **Table 3** above, **Table 4** does not show costs associated with "Creative and Cultural Development" separately. Children's Ground advised that these costs should be recorded as part of "Learning and Wellbeing", as they consider that creative learning is a core aspect of quality learning. **Table 3** also shows "Extended hours/holiday program" as a separate service area, as it was reported as such in the data Children's Ground provided. The

“Contributing Australian Government agencies” column shows the Australian Government agencies that Children's Ground identified as contributing to funding for activities delivered under the relevant service area.

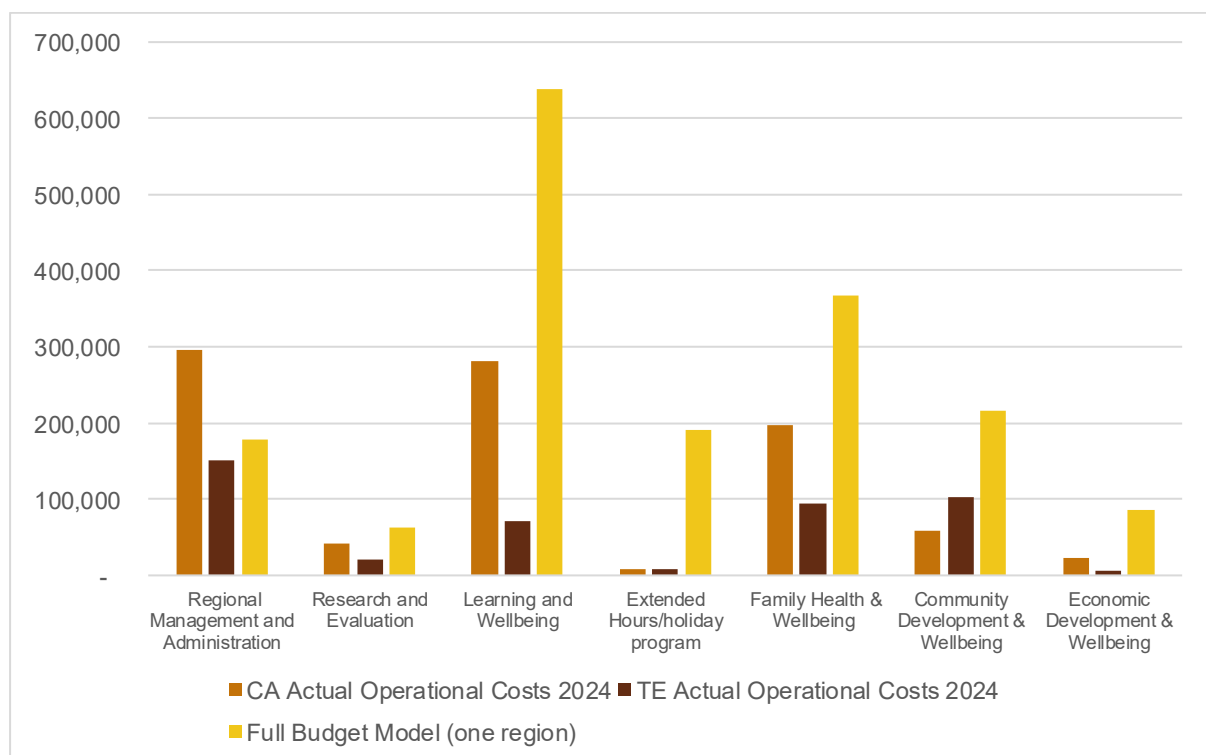
Table 4: Children's Ground non-personnel operating costs and contributing Departments

Service area	Service area total	Central Australia	Top End	Contributing Australian Government agencies
Learning and Wellbeing	\$352,134	\$281,447	\$70,687	National Indigenous Australians Agency
Extended hours / holiday program	\$16,401	\$8,568	\$7,833	Department of Social Services Department of Industry, Science, and Resources
Family Health and Wellbeing	\$290,876	\$197,209	\$98,667	Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing
Community Development and Wellbeing	\$161,258	\$58,167	\$103,091	None
Economic Development and Wellbeing	\$30,439	\$23,760	\$6,679	Department of Workplace Relations, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications
Regional Research and Evaluation	\$63,479	\$42,319	\$21,160	National Indigenous Australians Agency,

				Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
Regional Management, Admin, and HR	\$446,228	\$295,868	\$150,420	Some costs met through apportionment from service area grants and philanthropic funding
Totals	\$1,360,875	\$907,338	\$453,537	

Figure 9, below, shows Children's Ground's actual expenditure on regional operating costs in 2024 compared to what Children's Ground considers would be required to deliver the full Children's Ground approach to four communities in one region. Children's Ground advised that in 2024 the operational expenditure under "Regional Management and Administration" was abnormally high due to repairs and maintenance required to bring elements of the buildings in the Central Australia hub up-to-date as well as security expenses. Children's Ground does not consider these costs to be normal expenditure activity in delivery of the Children's Ground approach.

Figure 9: Children's Ground 2024 operating costs



To deliver the full Children's Ground approach in four communities in one region, Children's Ground considers that it would require \$1,739,555 in non-personnel operating costs in each region per year.

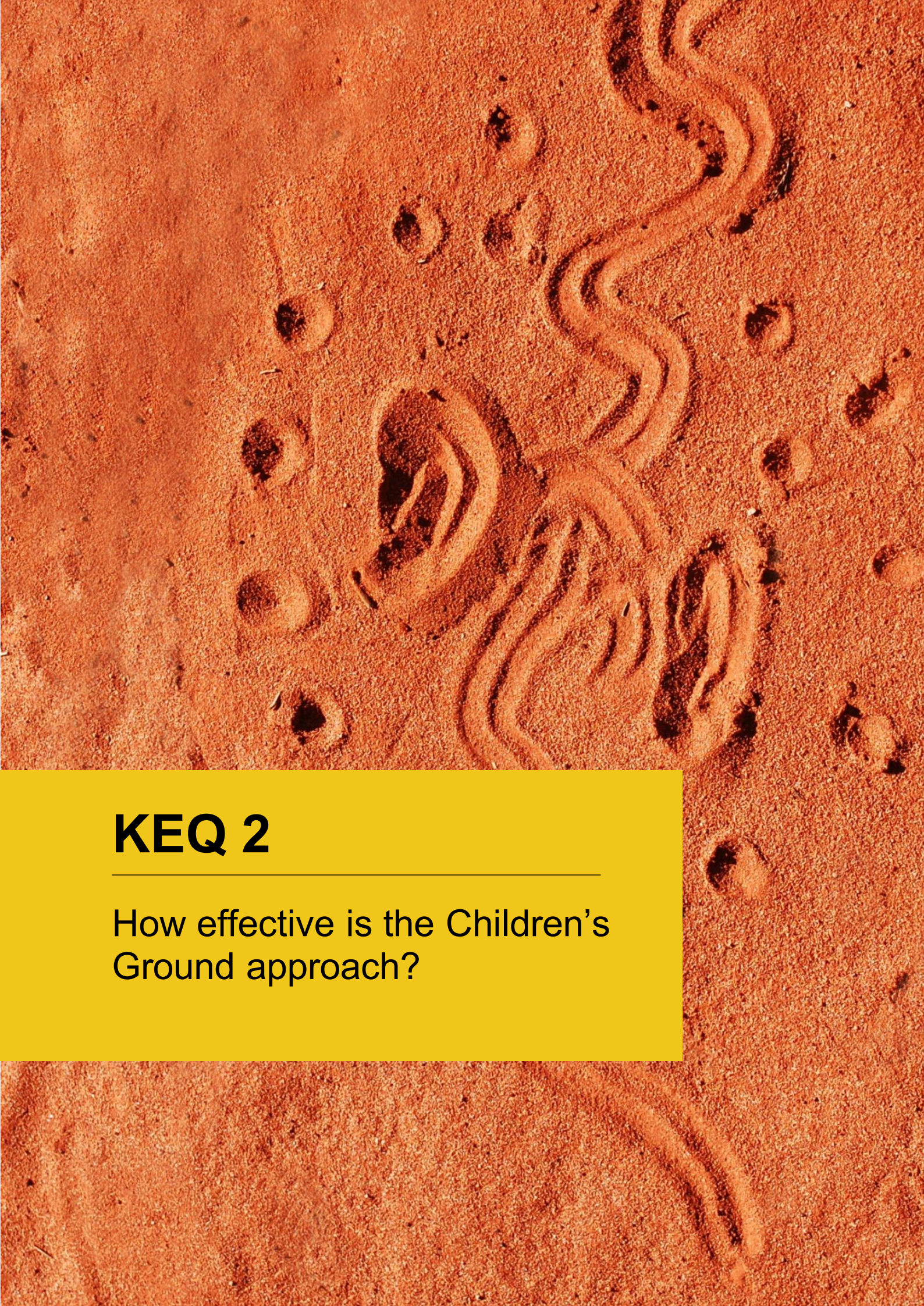
4.4 Relationship between inputs and outputs

This sub-section responds to KEQ 1.4: To what extent is the relationship between inputs and outputs timely, cost-effective, and reasonable?

The relationship between inputs and outputs for the Children's Ground approach is timely, cost-effective, and reasonable given the circumstances of the communities Children's Ground works with and the alignment of the Children's Ground approach with leading practice for response to complex disadvantage (see **section 4**). To address areas of possible concern regarding the relationship between inputs and outputs:

- as discussed in **section 8.2**, Children's Ground's investment in securing philanthropic funding is reasonable given the costs associated with securing that funding and the benefits that are achieved through its application.
- as discussed in **section 4.2**, the fact that Children's Ground delivers its activities in communities regardless of the number of participants on a given day is a key enabler of the effectiveness of the Children's Ground approach
- Children's Ground's approach to employing local community-based First Nations people (discussed in **section 5.3**) requires renumeration of first cultural expertise at the same level of equivalent 'Western' expertise and providing extensive support for people to achieve work-readiness, and
- as discussed in **sections 5.2, 5.4, and 5.5** adequate investment in Children's Ground's community decision-making and cultural governance processes is fundamental to the effectiveness of the Children's Ground approach.

However, as discussed in **section 4.2**, inadequate funding currently introduces inefficiencies into Children's Ground's delivery of activities. For example, Children's Ground's expenditure on centralised shared services personnel and operating costs is effectively a fixed cost, as the level of investment in the shared services function is substantially the same regardless of the level of investment in regional service delivery. That is, increases to Children's Ground's overall funding will reduce the proportion of costs incurred in relation to the shared services function. Further, the unavailability of longitudinal indicator data required to measure progress towards outcomes, also discussed in **section 4.2**, reduces Children's Ground's ability to understand community needs and adapt its activities accordingly. This means that there is potential for greater cost-effectiveness to be achieved, if adequate funding and data are made available.



KEQ 2

How effective is the Children's Ground approach?

5 KEQ 2 - How effective is the Children's Ground approach?

This section assesses the effectiveness of the Children's Ground's approach, focusing on its alignment with best practices for community-led design, its capability in First Nations system leadership, and the quality of partnerships with local services. It analyses how well the approach empowers First Nations people through local employment, decision-making, and cultural governance.

5.1 Children's Ground's alignment with leading practice

This sub-section responds to KEQ 2.1: To what extent does the Children's Ground approach align with leading practice for prevention and responsiveness to complex disadvantage through holistic, place-based community and First Nations-led design?

Children's Ground demonstrates strong development and implementation of holistic, place-based, community, and First Nations-led design.

A range of Australian and state and territory government departments have recognised that holistic, place-placed, community-led, and First Nations-led approaches to service delivery represent leading practice for prevention and responsiveness to complex disadvantage. This section of the evaluation report provides an overview of the Australian Government's definitions of holistic and place-based service delivery and First Nations-led design. It then assesses the alignment of the Children's Ground approach with these definitions, enabling conclusions as to the extent of alignment between the Children's Ground approach and leading practice for prevention and responsiveness to complex disadvantage.

Children's Ground aligns with leading practice for holistic design

Defining holistic design

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031 (Australian Department of Health, 2021) outlines that providing holistic services involves:

- recognising the interconnectedness of physical, mental, cultural, environmental, and spiritual health at both individual and community levels
- breaking down silos to ensure comprehensive and collaborative efforts across cultural and social determinants of health
- prioritising trauma-informed, culturally safe, and strengths-based approaches to service delivery.

Similarly, the *Early Years Strategy* (Australian Department of Social Services, 2024) outlines a vision for a holistic, whole-of-child approach to improving outcomes through:

- integrated and coordinated policies, funding, and programs that break down silos in service delivery, and
- ensuring a collaborative approach that considers the broader social and environmental factors influencing children's development and wellbeing.

Children's Ground's alignment with definition of holistic design

The Children's Ground approach demonstrates strong alignment with definitions of holistic design outlined above by:

- providing activities that address the five domains of health at both individual and community levels
- deploying multi-disciplinary teams that can deliver services across a range of 'silos' (e.g., health, education, culture, economic development)
- establishing and maintaining the organisational systems required to identify and respond cohesively and promptly to the needs of individuals and the community
- establishing and maintaining the organisational systems required to ensure trauma-informed service delivery (i.e., services that demonstrate the principles of safety, trustworthiness and transparency, choice, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, and cultural consideration), and
- recognising, valuing, and utilising the strengths of community members as both the deliverers of activities and participants.

Children's Ground aligns with leading practice for place-based design

Defining place-based design

The Place-based evaluation framework: A national guide for evaluation of place-based approaches (Australian Department of Social Services and Queensland Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors, 2018), defines a place-based approach as:

A collaborative, long-term approach to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location. This approach is ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts.

The Place-based evaluation framework provides that the common characteristics of place-based approaches include:

- responding to complex, interrelated or challenging issues, including social issues impacting those experiencing, or at risk of, disadvantage, or for natural disasters
- strength-based delivery approach that focuses on prevention not just intervention
- identifying and working on community priorities, valuing local knowledge, and building on and from social and cultural relationships



- a commitment to strategic learning and using data and evidence to collectively adapt in real time
- ongoing building of capacity and capability amongst all stakeholders involved in the work
- focus on collective and collaborative action, active engagement, and partnership with communities so that all stakeholders see themselves as active participants, and
- an underpinning value of creating greater equity.

Children's Ground's alignment with place-based design

As discussed in **section 3**, the Children's Ground approach is delivered in defined geographic locations, in specific communities or on-country in surrounding areas of cultural significance to the people who live in those communities.

The Children's Ground approach also has all the common characteristics set out in the *Place based evaluation framework*. For example, Children's Ground:

- responds to the complex, interrelated and challenging issues experienced by individuals and communities discussed in **section 3**
- focuses on preventative activities, such as health promotion and early years education, as discussed in **section 3**
- implements the community decision-making processes (including community-led evaluation) discussed in **section 5.4** to determine the nature of activities delivered in communities, and
- implements an effective employment pathway for local community-based First Nations people that builds capacity in the community, discussed in **section 5.3**.

The Children's Ground approach therefore demonstrates very strong alignment with place-based design and service delivery.

As discussed in **section 4**, in Darwin, Children's Ground has also established a permanent physical presence in two communities. This delivers clear benefits, including that:

- the visibility and accessibility of activities delivered are enhanced
- the accessibility of Children's Ground community decision-making processes are increased for community members, and
- activities are delivered more efficiently, as many of the necessary resources for conducting activities can be stored on-site, reducing the need for separate transportation and storage facilities.

Children's Ground has a clear ambition to establish a permanent presence in all the communities it works with. However, the lack of existing essential infrastructure and, in some cases, consenting issues, prevents this from occurring.

Children's Ground aligns with leading practice for First Nations led design

Defining leading practice for First Nations-led design

While Children's Ground is not a party to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, as an agreement between the Coalition of the Peaks and all Australian Governments, analysis of the National Agreement does enable the identification of key elements of the Commonwealth's expectations regarding leading practice for First Nations led design. These are:

- shared decision-making and partnership
- community controlled design and delivery
- cultural safety and institutional transformation
- access to data and evidence-based decision-making, and
- accountability and transparency.

Children's Ground's alignment with First Nations led design

Children's Ground demonstrates strong alignment with the key elements of leading practice for First Nations-led design listed above. Key attributes include:

- **Shared decision-making and partnership:** Children's Ground Cultural Governance Committees represent an effective decision-making partnership between communities and Children's Ground Board and management (see **section 5.5**).
- **Community-controlled design and delivery:** Children's Ground develops and implements effective processes to enable First Nations leadership and effective community decision-making in relation to the design and delivery of Children's Ground activities (see **section 5.4**).
- **Cultural safety and institutional transformation:** Children's Ground develops and implements effective processes to consistently create culturally safe environments within Children's Ground (see **section 5.4**).
- **Access to data and evidence-based decision-making:** Children's Ground implements effective processes to collect, record, and report data and evidence so that community members can make informed decisions (see **section 5.4**).
- **Accountability and transparency:** Children's Ground is accountable to its communities through community-led evaluation (see **section 5.4**). Children's Ground provides communities with the rationale for decisions made by the organisation through the Cultural Governance Committees, enabling transparency (see **section 5.5**).

5.2 Children's Ground's capability to lead solutions

This sub-section responds to KEQ 2.2: What capability does Children's Ground bring to leading whole of community and First Nations system design and solutions?

Through the development and implementation of the processes and structures discussed in **sections 5.3 to 5.5**, Children's Ground demonstrates significant capability at leading whole of community and First Nations system design and solutions.

As discussed in **sections 5.3 to 5.5**, these processes support communities to identify their needs and then support those communities to develop and implement pathways to meet those needs. Children's Ground also empowers individual members of communities, providing them with the support required for them to lead initiatives that they are passionate about.

Further, Children's Ground's consistent adherence to its principles, developed by First Nations leaders and aligned with the communities it worked with, is intended to cause the organisations and systems it interacts with to change the way they work. This means that Children's Ground's capability to lead First Nations system design and solutions extends beyond the systems operating within Children's Ground itself.

5.3 Children's Ground's employment of community members

This sub-section responds to KEQ 2.3: To what extent is Children's Ground achieving employment of local community-based First Nations peoples? What is the impact of this on individuals, children, and families?

Children's Ground has established a demonstrably effective employment pathway for local community-based First Nations people. This enables Children's Ground to achieve extensive employment of local community-based people through supporting these people to overcome significant barriers to employment.

This section of the evaluation report describes how the employment pathway functions, describes the extent to which Children's Ground is achieving employment of local community-based First Nations people, and provides a brief overview of the impact of employment on individuals, children, and families. Further detail on the impact of employment is provided in the employment contribution case in **section 5**.

Children's Ground has developed an effective employment pathway for local community-based people

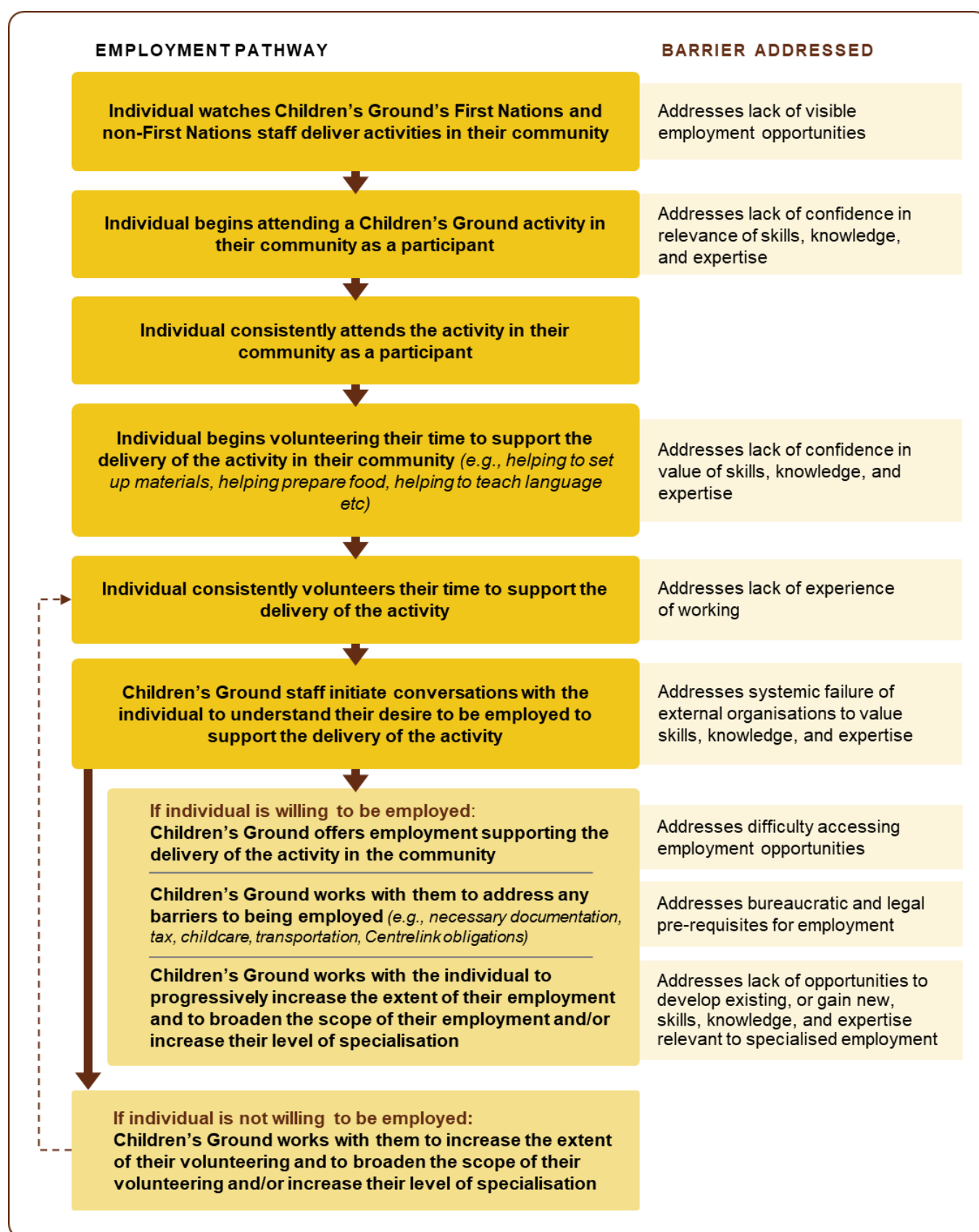
Children's Ground has developed an employment pathway for local community-based First Nations people that directly addresses key barriers to employment faced by people living in the communities in which Children's Ground works. These barriers include:



- lack of visibility of employment opportunities
- difficulty accessing employment opportunities
- lack of work experience
- an individual's lack of confidence in the relevance of their own skills, knowledge, and expertise
- an individual's lack of confidence in the value of their own skills, knowledge, and expertise
- systemic failure of external organisations to value the individual's skills, knowledge, and expertise
- lack of opportunities to develop existing, or gain new, skills, knowledge, and expertise relevant to specialised employment, and
- bureaucratic and legal pre-requisites to employment.

Children's Ground's employment pathway for local community-based First Nations is summarised in **Figure 10**, overleaf.

Figure 10: Children's Ground's employment pathway



Children's Ground has achieved extensive employment of local community based First Nations people

Please refer to the contribution case in **Appendix C:** for data relating to the extent of employment of local community-based First Nations people.

Children's Ground's employment of community-based people has a significant impact on individuals, children, and families

As well as direct impact of employment of local community-based First Nations people on individuals, children, and families (discussed in the contribution case), significant indirect benefits arise because of the employment of community members to deliver activities. These benefits include:

- improved effectiveness of the activities by utilising community and cultural knowledge and relationships to understand and respond to individuals' circumstances
- improved effectiveness of Children's Ground's community decision-making and cultural governance by incentivising broader participation in these processes, and
- improved effectiveness of the employment pathway itself by increasing visibility of employment opportunities and reinforcing the value of the skills, knowledge, and expertise of community members.

Further, Children's Ground remunerates first cultural and equivalent Western expertise at the same level, which reinforces the value of the skills, knowledge, expertise, and relationships held by community members. This contributes to a range of the outcomes sought from the Children's Ground approach.

5.4 Children's Ground's achievement of community decision-making and leadership

This sub-section responds to KEQ 2.4: To what extent is Children's Ground achieving local community decision-making and leadership of First Nations people? What is the impact of this on the effective delivery of activities?

Children's Ground has established demonstrably effective processes to enable local community decision-making and leadership of First Nations people. These processes result in extensive involvement of community members in decision-making and extensive leadership by First Nations people. This has the effect of improving the effectiveness of activities in several ways.

This section of the evaluation report describes how Children's Ground supports leadership by First Nations people, achieves effective local community decision-making, and explains the effects of these factors on the effectiveness of activities.

Children's Ground supports First Nations people to exercise leadership in several ways

Children's Ground consistently creates culturally and physically safe environments where individuals and communities are provided the conditions and resources necessary to use their own strengths, skills, knowledge, and relationships to improve their communities. Importantly, Children's Ground also creates multiple pathways into these environments, ensuring that First Nations people can consistently access them.

Significant organisational effort is applied to maintaining the safety and accessibility of these environments. For instance, Children's Ground's non-First Nations staff undergo deliberate training and education to ensure that they do not reduce the level of cultural safety through their conduct when delivering activities or working with First Nations staff. Through actions like this, Children's Ground systematically privileges First Nations strengths, skills, knowledge, and relationships. Importantly, this occurs consistently over time, which builds individuals' and communities' trust in Children's Ground and its non-First Nations staff. In the contexts of the communities that Children's Ground operated in, this was an essential pre-condition to supporting First Nations people to exercise leadership.

Having created this necessary pre-condition, Children's Ground continually supported First Nations people to exercise leadership through:

- recognising and supporting the development of the strengths, skills, expertise, and knowledge of community members through volunteering, employment, or participation in Cultural Governance Committees
- creating opportunities for First Nations people to implement their visions for their communities, and
- creating opportunities for First Nations people to role model strengths, skills, expertise and knowledge across multiple generations, families, and communities.

Children's Ground achieves extensive leadership by First Nations people

A significant proportion of community members involved in Children's Ground activities exercise leadership. For instance:

- Children's Ground's community-based staff facilitate ongoing decision-making regarding activity design and delivery in their communities, often outside of their working hours, and
- community members take ownership of Children's Ground's activities and adapt them to better suit the circumstances and needs of their communities, often by taking responsibility for expanding the scope or extent of existing activities or by having Children's Ground commence delivery of additional activities.

Leadership of First Nations people increases the effectiveness of Children's Ground's activities

Leadership by First Nations people is fundamental to the effectiveness of the Children's Ground approach and Children's Ground's activities.

Children's Ground's systematic privileging of First Nations people's strengths, skills, expertise, and knowledge builds their confidence and trust in Children's Ground, which increases the extent to which community members support the design and delivery of activities and the extent to which community members participate in activities. This is particularly important given many of the First Nations people that Children's Ground worked with do not consistently engage with other organisations or services due to a lack of trust and confidence. Children's Ground's support for First Nations people to exercise leadership therefore increases the effectiveness of activity delivery by:

- enabling the development of strong, equal relationships between First Nations people and non-First Nations people
- utilising the strengths, skills, expertise, knowledge, and vision of community members to design and implement fit-for-purpose activity delivery
- increasing the level of participation in activities, particularly amongst people who do not consistently engage with other organisations or services
- creating a culture of continuous personal, community, and organisational improvement and achievement, and
- enabling First Nations leaders to demonstrate the value of participation in Children's Ground activities, providing tangible evidence to communities of the positive outcomes that can be achieved.

Children's Ground has implemented several processes to achieve effective local-community decision-making

Community level decision-making

Table 5 below, provides a simplified overview of the community-level processes that Children's Ground implements to achieve local community decision-making. It briefly describes each process, their function, and how they contribute to Children's Ground's facilitation of local community decision-making. These processes individually and collectively emphasise community self-determination.

Table 5: Children's Ground's community decision-making processes

Process	Form	Function	Contribution
Community governance (including Walk, Talk, and Act)	Ongoing mixture of regular and ad hoc discussions amongst members of the communities that Children's Ground works with.	Enables identification of community needs, aspirations, and development of pathways to meet needs and aspirations.	Determines and adapts the scope and terms of Children's Ground's involvement in a community.



Process	Form	Function	Contribution
Community Plans	Visual and/or written planning documents produced by community members (with support from Children's Ground staff).	Formally records the nature and extent of the activities that the community wants delivered and the outcomes expected from those activities.	Determines the activities that will be delivered in a community and provides a framework for community-led evaluation of their effectiveness in meeting needs and aspirations.
Community 'black books'	Visual and/or written data collection tool, produced, held, and populated by community members (with support from Children's Ground staff).	Formally records the activities that are delivered in the community and the outcomes that are achieved from that delivery.	Collects output and outcome data to enable evaluation of Children's Ground activities. Enables ongoing transparency for communities of Children's Ground's activities and impacts.
Community-led evaluation	Regular, formalised meetings of community members, facilitated by Children's Ground staff.	Community-led evaluation of Children's Ground's delivery of activities and the extent to which the activities are achieving the outcomes sought by communities.	Measures the effectiveness of Children's Ground and activities in meeting community needs and aspirations. Provides a robust basis for subsequent community decision-making.

Regional-level Cultural Governance

Children's Ground also implements regional Cultural Governance Committees. The Cultural Governance Committees are deliberative and decision-making bodies that complement the community-level decision-making processes described above. Their role, function, and contribution to community decision-making are discussed in **section 5.5**.

In relation to the community decision-making processes, Children's Ground in effect provides secretariat support for communities and the Cultural Governance Committees. This includes Children's Ground staff providing briefings to communities and Cultural Governance Committees to inform their decision-making, transporting people to and from community meetings and Cultural Governance Committees, arranging the attendance of external organisations at community meetings and Cultural Governance Committee meetings where necessary and implementing the decisions made by the community governance and Cultural Governance Committees.

Significant numbers of community members participated in community decision-making

The extent to which Children's Ground achieves local community decision-making differs between communities. In 2023, 184 community members engaged in governance (Children's Ground, 2024a). However, quantitative data was not available regarding the proportion of community members in individual communities who participate in each of the processes described above. Regardless, qualitative and observational data strongly support a conclusion

that in several communities, significant proportions of the population participate in each process.

Community decision-making is fundamental to the effectiveness of Children's Ground activities

The processes described above are fundamental elements of the Children's Ground approach. If they were not operating, it is uncertain whether Children's Ground would be able to deliver activities in several of the communities it works with, much less deliver activities effectively.

The processes enable the delivery of activities by creating community 'ownership' of Children's Ground, which:

- enables Children's Ground to enter and deliver activities in certain communities, demonstrated by Children's Ground staff calling community leaders involved in community governance and requesting permission to enter communities every morning
- engenders trust in Children's Ground, leading community members to participate in activities, and
- facilitates community members volunteering their time to support the delivery of activities.

The processes increase the effectiveness of activity delivery by:

- ensuring delivery responds directly to community needs and aspirations
- collecting performance data relevant to communities, and
- enabling adaption based on informed decisions made by communities.

5.5 Children's Ground's effectiveness at empowering communities

This sub-section responds to KEQ 2.5: How effective are the Cultural Governance Committees and other mechanisms in empowering communities through genuine partnerships?

Children's Ground Regional Cultural Governance Committees have a central, foundational role within Children's Ground's decision-making processes. They effectively empower communities, facilitating a genuine partnership. Another mechanism that empowers communities through facilitating a genuine partnership are the roles of Children's Ground's Community Leads and Community Coordinators and the relationship between these roles.

This section of the report describes the form of the Cultural Governance Committees, their role in Children's Ground's decision-making processes, and how they empower communities. This section then describes the roles of the Community Leads and Community Coordinators and assesses how they empower communities.

Cultural Governance Committees are important institutions within Children's Ground's decision-making process

Form of Cultural Governance Committees

The Cultural Governance Committees are institutions that operate within Children's Ground's decision-making process. Children's Ground has three Cultural Governance Committees: one for Central Australia, one for Darwin, and one for Marlkawo. The committees generally meet weekly.

The remainder of this section relates only to the Cultural Governance Committees for Central Australia and Darwin. The evaluation was not able to collect sufficient evidence to enable comment on the operation of the Marlkawo Cultural Governance Committee.

Any person who is a member of the communities in which Children's Ground operates is invited to attend the Committee for their region. They are able to participate fully in Cultural Governance Committee meetings and the decision-making that occurs during those meetings.

The rules that guide the operation of the Cultural Governance Committees are customary in that they are based on usual practice within the organisation in Central Australia and Darwin, as opposed to being formally defined and recorded in writing. The memberships of the Cultural Governance Committees are not fixed or defined. The committees have 100% First Nations membership, reflecting the populations of the communities Children's Ground works with.

Role of Cultural Governance Committees

Within Children's Ground's decision-making process, the Cultural Governance Committees exercise cultural authority, which guides, but is subject to, the exercise of legal authority by Children's Ground managers, executives, and the Board. Similarly, the legal authority exercised by Children's Ground's managers, executives, and Board is, in practice, subject to the exercise of cultural authority by the Cultural Governance Committees. The evaluation was advised that it was rare that a decision made by a Cultural Governance Committee is not supported by the Board.

The Cultural Governance Committees make administrative, operational, and strategic decisions. In effect, Children's Ground provides secretariat support to the Cultural Governance Committees to support them to fulfil their decision-making role. This involves Children's Ground supporting the operation of the Cultural Governance Committees through meeting management, document preparation, information dissemination, record keeping, logistics coordination, and liaison and communication.

Children's Ground non-community staff and staff from external organisations attend Cultural Governance Committee meetings to brief the Committees on various matters and to seek decisions and guidance.

The Cultural Governance Committees also act as a reasonably formal interface between Children's Ground at a community level and Children's Ground at a non-community level.

Cultural Governance Committees empower communities

The operation of the Cultural Governance Committees empowered communities in three main ways. These are set out below.

Providing a culturally safe forum for community members to meet regularly

Cultural Governance Committees provided a culturally safe forum for community members to meet regularly. This empowered communities by:

- acting as an institution within Children's Ground where community members feel secure expressing their cultural identities and culturally informed views without fear of challenge or denial by non-community members, and
- operating as a leadership pipeline, enabling established leaders to identify and mentor emerging leaders.

Providing an opportunity for community members to be briefed by staff and external individuals and organisations

Cultural Governance Committees provide an opportunity for community members to be briefed by Children's Ground staff and staff from external organisations. This empowers communities by:

- ensuring community members are informed about activities, policies, or decisions that may affect them, enabling informed decision-making, and
- enabling knowledge transfer and capacity building by providing exposure and access to expertise and resources that may not be normally available to them.

Operating as a locus of community authority for non-community staff to seek approval for, or decisions on, various matters

Cultural Governance Committees operated as a locus of community authority for non-community staff to seek approval for, or decisions on, various matters. This empowered communities by:

- validating and reinforcing the existing authority and autonomy held by community members
- enabling community members to exercise a degree of control over Children's Ground's activities
- ensuring Children's Ground as an organization and its non-community staff are accountable to communities, fostering a respectful partnership between Children's Ground at a corporate level and Children's Ground at a community level, and
- ensuring that local cultural norms, values, traditions, and knowledge guide Children's Ground's decision-making process.

Children's Ground's Community Leads and Coordinators empower communities

In Darwin, Children's Ground has implemented a structure where, for each community, Children's Ground employs a community member as Community Lead and a non-community member as Community Coordinator. Both positions are based in-community (where the infrastructure to do so is available). These two individuals work in partnership, fulfilling distinct but complementary roles to empower communities.

Role of Community Lead

The Community Lead is responsible for seeking and collating the needs, aspirations, and decisions of the community, communicating these to Children's Ground at the non-community level (including through the Community Coordinator), and communicating decisions made at the non-community level to the community.

Role of Community Coordinator

The Community Coordinator is responsible for understanding the needs and aspirations of the community and facilitating access to the resources necessary to meet those needs and aspirations. Those resources might be held by Children's Ground, or they might be held by other organisations. The Community Coordinators play a significant role in liaising with other organisations to ensure community members are able to access services provided by other organisations and that those services are provided in a culturally appropriate way.

Benefits of structure

The benefits of this structure include:

- providing transparent communication channels between Children's Ground and each community
- creating clear two-way accountability in relation to communication and resource flows between Children's Ground at a community level and Children's Ground at a non-community level, and
- creating a clear interface for external organisations to engage with individual communities.

5.6 Quality of Children's Ground's relationships with other organisations

This sub-section responds to KEQ 2.6: What is the quality of Children's Ground's partnerships with health, education, and youth services that operate in Central Australia and the Top End?

Children's Ground has entered into formal partnerships with several organisations in Central Australia and the Top End, including health, education, and youth services. It also relies on informal relationships, either directly with organisations or between Children's Ground staff and service delivery staff at those organisations.

This section of the report describes the nature of the partnerships and relationships that Children's Ground has entered into, the quality and effect of those partnerships and relationships, and barriers to increasing the number and quality of partnerships and relationships.

Children's Ground utilises formal partnerships and informal relationships

Compared to the potential for formal partnership (where a written agreement exists between Children's Ground and another organisation), the number and coverage of formal partnerships is low in Central Australia and moderate in the Top End. Children's Ground has established formal partnerships with an independent school, sport and recreation organisations, a major food charity, and a tertiary educational institution.

Children's Ground also utilises informal relationships between Children's Ground staff and staff at non-partner organisations to improve the suitability and quality of the services those organisations provide. These informal relationships were also utilised to either create or increase access to, and uptake of, those services. Children's Ground utilises these informal relationships primarily in relation to ACCHOs, resource services/management organisations, and state schools.

The quality and effectiveness of Children's Ground's partnerships and relationships varies

Where Children's Ground has entered into formal partnerships, it collaborates closely with services to either create or improve access to, and utilisation of, those services for members of the communities that Children's Ground works with.

The effectiveness of informal relationships would be increased by establishing formal relationships between Children's Ground and the relevant organisations, as this would enable enhanced information and data sharing and joint planning (see recommendation 6).

In both formal and informal relationships, Children's Ground demonstrates an ability to increase the effectiveness of other services by utilising in-depth knowledge of the needs and circumstances of individual service users, their families, and their communities. Examples include Children's Ground staff prompting and supporting community members to engage with ACCHOs and Children's Ground transporting community members to appointments with other service providers.

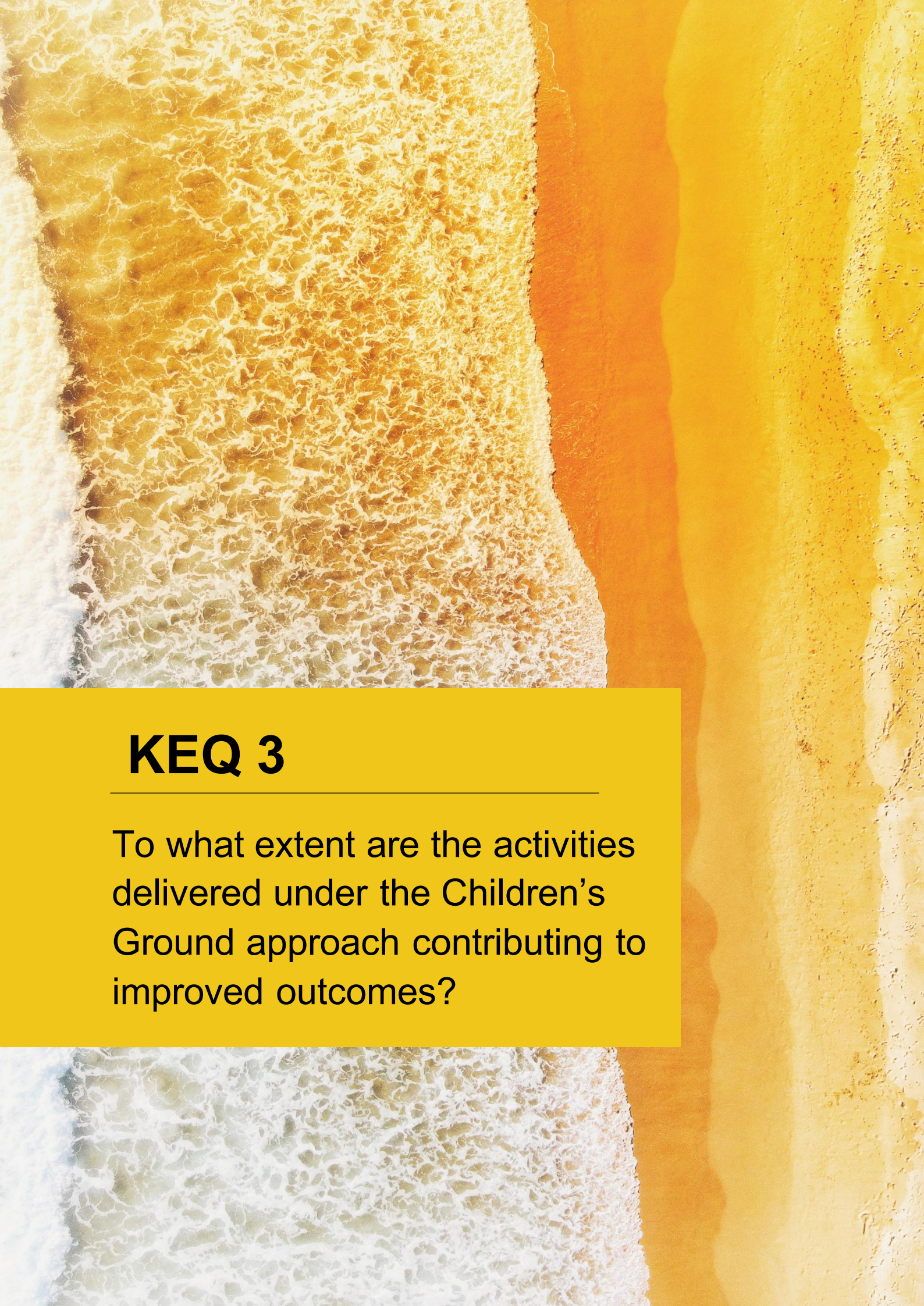
There are several barriers to increasing the number and coverage of formal partnerships

Children's Ground is working to develop formal partnerships with several key services in both Central Australia and the Top End. The development of these formal partnerships is inhibited by:

- senior staff within Children's Ground having inadequate time to devote to establishing them



- turnover of leadership at some service providers
- being unable to reach agreement in relation to data sharing arrangements, and
- in at least two instances, pre-existing local organisational politics, potentially exacerbated by government funding decisions, are likely significantly complicating the establishment of a formal partnership.



KEQ 3

To what extent are the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach contributing to improved outcomes?

6 KEQ 3 - To what extent are the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach contributing to improved outcomes?

A comprehensive answer to KEQ 3 requires data on outcomes of interest to the Children's Ground approach and evidence of an association between these outcomes and the activities Children's Ground delivers. This is complicated by:

- indicator data for the specific populations that Children's Ground works with required to measure progress towards outcomes being unavailable – sourcing this data was not feasible in the timeframe of this evaluation
- the outcomes of interest to the Children's Ground approach (e.g., morbidity, literacy and numeracy data) are influenced by multiple other service providers.

As a result, this section reports on the findings of a contribution analysis process that brought together observable data and evidence with a focus on short-term access and engagement outcomes, with evidence about the activities delivered by Children's Ground.

In terms of the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach, it is important to recognise that the approach has been implemented under a growth model as opposed to what was intended – the 'full' Children's Ground approach. The growth model saw the greatest contributions to early years learning, health promotion, and employment.

6.1 Contribution cases

KEQ 3 has a specific focus on the *contribution* of the Children's Ground approach to improved outcomes. Several other evaluation questions have a focus on the extent to which Children's Ground is achieving change and the impact of these (e.g. KEQ 2.3: To what extent is Children's Ground achieving employment of local community-based First Nations people? What is the impact of this on individuals, children and families?).

The evaluation drew on contribution analysis (Mayne, 2008) to establish credible associations between the Children's Ground approach and observed outcomes. Contribution analysis aims to reduce uncertainty about the contribution an intervention is making to observed results through an increased understanding of why results occurred (or did not occur), and the role played by the intervention and other influencing factors. The method addresses cause and effect by demonstrating contribution rather than proving causality.

The contribution cases started with the overall question: To what extent are the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach contributing to improved outcomes? The outcomes of interest were informed by the program logic model. Where an association was established between the Children's Ground approach and an outcome, a contribution case was developed to identify key elements of the outcome, the contribution case or claim, the supporting evidence, the alignment of the contribution to Closing the Gap priorities, factors that may inhibit wider contribution, and potential rival explanations for the observed outcomes.

Cases were developed on the contribution of the Children's Ground approach to:

- increased engagement in early years learning
- increased engagement in health promotion and support
- increased engagement in employment opportunities and support.

The subjects of the contribution cases reflect some of the shorter-term outcomes in the program logic. The contribution cases are included in **Appendix A:** to **Appendix C** and are summarised below.

Children's Ground makes a direct contribution to First Nations children engaging in early years, cultural, and on-country learning

The Children's Ground approach makes a *direct contribution*¹³ to First Nations children engaging in early years, cultural and on-country learning. This contribution is critical given poor access and engagement in early years learning in the communities where Children's Ground works. Evidence of this contribution follows.

Early years learning sessions were embedded in the Children's Ground approach

Children's Ground administrative data indicates that around 400 children (0-8 years) engaged in early learning activities in 2023. In Central Australia, around 68% of children (0-8 years) in the communities where it operates engaged in early learning. Participation rates were climbing towards the Closing the Gap attendance measure of 15 hours or more per week with regular delivery of in-community and on-country sessions becoming the norm.

Early years sessions provided for integrated learning opportunities

Early years sessions took a holistic approach to learning integrating First Language and English, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge systems, and health promotion activities and healthy routines. Children were taught by cultural educators and western trained educators.

Learning sessions occurred in community and on-country

Children in most communities where Children's Ground works could engage in regular sessions in the community and on-country around a weekly schedule. On country sessions extended to primary age children and one community held a weekly in-community session for primary children as well. Families valued their children being able to engage in learning opportunities in community and on-country – sessions were easy to access and enabled the integration of cultural knowledge and connections to country and people.

¹³ I.e., the Children's Ground approach makes an unequivocal contribution to an observed positive outcome.

Families engaged in learning alongside their children

There was active participation of parents, grandparents and other family in learning sessions. It was evident that as well as learning new skills themselves, parents and family were role-modelling learning and building connections with children/family.

Children's Ground provided access to resources and transport

Access to resources such as play equipment, books and art supplies, and to transport for pick-ups and drop-offs were critical to improving engagement in early years learning. Children's Ground also provided food for meals and snacks to support learning sessions.

Children's Ground facilitated access to local primary school education

There was evidence of Children's Ground removing barriers to access to primary education. For example, in one community Children's Ground drove children to and from school as the school bus altered its route; in another community, Children's Ground facilitated the enrolment of a group of children in primary school who were not in school.

The quality of learning was supported by the development of learning models and assessment methods

Children's Ground collaborated with local knowledge holders to develop a Cultural Learning Curriculum Framework and has developed methods for the assessment of learning and measurement of childhood development. These frameworks were developed to address concerns around the cultural appropriateness of existing frameworks and methods.

Children's Ground makes a direct contribution to First Nations people engaging in health promotion and support

The Children's Ground approach makes a *direct contribution*¹⁴ to First Nations people engaging in health promotion and support. This contribution is critical given the high health needs in remote Aboriginal communities and the challenges facing the health system in delivering consistent health promotion initiatives to these communities.

Health promotion and support were embedded in learning activities and delivered through targeted interventions

Children's Ground administrative data indicates that around 450 children (0-8 years) engaged in health promotion and/or learning activities in 2023, while more than 1,300 children and their family members engaged in targeted and universal health promotion and support.

Children's Ground supported better nutrition

The evaluation observed several ways that Children's Ground supported improved nutrition, including the direct provision of food (especially alongside learning sessions), supporting families to shop for and prepare meals, providing guidance, role modelling

¹⁴ I.e., the Children's Ground approach makes an unequivocal contribution to an observed positive outcome.

and skills during early learning sessions, and removing specific barriers to food such as in accessing foodbanks.

Healthy routines were embedded in the implementation of the Children's Ground approach

In addition to healthy eating, practices such as hand and face washing and teeth brushing were integrated into the delivery of learning sessions. There was evidence that these routines were becoming habitual. Health prevention and education was provided in parallel to healthy routines so people could make the links between health behaviours and outcomes (e.g., face washing and eye health).

The Children's Ground approach integrated key determinants of social and emotional wellbeing

There is evidence that practices to promote social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) were integrated into learning sessions, such as emotional regulating activities. Moreover, practices observed such as promoting identity and connection to family, kinship, community, culture and country, are important determinants of Aboriginal SEWB. The way Children's Ground works with communities also promotes SEWB, including taking a positive strengths-based approach and standing beside communities at times of heightened trauma and distress.

Children's Ground supported people to connect and engage with health services

Children's Ground facilitated access and engagement in other services that support people's health and wellbeing in three ways: they partnered with other organisations to directly provide services in the communities they work in, such as the Orange Sky laundry service; they held strong relationships with communities enabling visiting health services to leverage off these when conducting mobile clinics; and they supported people to access emergency care and health service appointments by providing transport and attending appointments alongside community members. This support was highly valued by community members and ACCHOs also reported benefits from this support.

Children's Ground makes a direct contribution to First Nations' employment

The Children's Ground approach makes a *direct contribution*¹⁵ to First Nations people, in the communities it works in, gaining employment and to supporting people once in employment. This contribution is critical given the lack of economic and employment opportunities within these communities, high unemployment, an absence of recent work experience, and a lack of role models.

Children's Ground employed a majority First Nation's workforce

Children's Ground employed 112 First Nations people in 2023. The number of First Nations' employees has grown steadily over time. In Central Australia, First Nations people represented 71% of the Children's Ground workforce and had a retention rate of 78%.

¹⁵ I.e., the Children's Ground approach makes an unequivocal contribution to an observed positive outcome.

Children's Ground supported pathways into employment

First Nations community members were supported along a pathway into employment which commonly involved engaging in early learning and health promotion sessions alongside their children, volunteering to help run these sessions, then moving into a paid role with Children's Ground when they felt ready for employment. Children's Ground also provided practical support to get people ready for employment, such as assistance with documentation and other requirements. Children's Ground's approach to employing First Nations people was described as an 'open-door'.

Children's Ground provided a safe and supportive workplace

Children's Ground provided a culturally safe and supportive workplace for employees, with people valuing the comfort at being able to work alongside other family and community members, and in being able to work in their own community. Children's Ground also offered specific supports for employees, such as in financial literacy and money management support, mentoring, counselling, and support with employment literacy. These supports, reportedly, contributed to employee retention.

Children's Ground provided flexible working arrangements

The ability of Children's Ground to be able to provide flexible working arrangements was commonly reported as the main determinant of successful employment and retention outcomes. Community members worked in casual, variable, part-time and full-time contract arrangements to fit their individual circumstances. On average, First Nations regular employees in Central Australia worked between 15-20 hours per week. This flexibility, along with other supports, enabled people to fulfil cultural responsibilities.

The employment outcomes are significant

People described the impact of work as a game-changer. In Central Australia, 31% of Children's Ground First Nations staff had never worked in paid employment, 71% were unemployed and 83% of those who had worked before had not worked in the past 12 months before starting at Children's Ground (Children's Ground, 2024b). This underlies the significance of the employment outcomes.

The benefits of employment included feeling valued and empowered, improved confidence and wellbeing, acting as role models for others (including across generations), and having more income to make ends meet. Children's Ground reported that the employment of local community members provided a stable workforce and helped to build connections and source community 'intelligence' (e.g. know what was going on in a community) because its employees were in/of the families Children's Ground works with.

6.2 Progress towards longer term outcomes

The evaluation, as demonstrated in the contribution cases, found strong evidence of the Children's Ground approach making significant progress on its shorter-term outcomes, which largely related to increased access, participation and engagement in activities. The evaluation did not find evidence of progress towards longer term outcomes relating to, for example, children's educational achievement or health and wellbeing. There are several explanations for this:

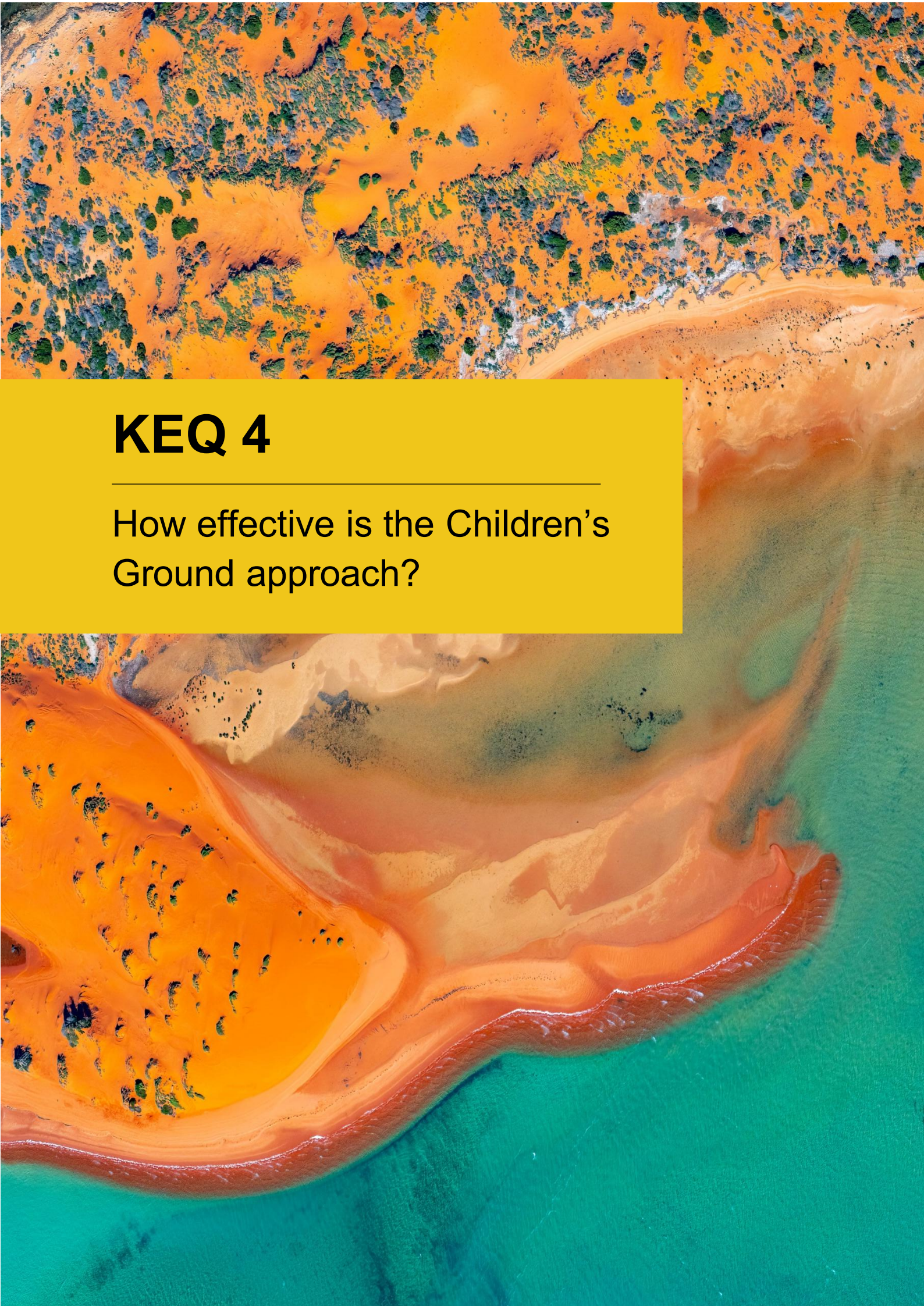
- Many longer-term outcomes would not be expected at this stage of the implementation of the Children's Ground approach – measurable changes in outcomes such as education achievement and health and wellbeing take time, and the 25-year



Children's Ground approach is still in its infancy in all communities. The impact of COVID-19 on implementation progress also needs to be considered.

- Coupled with this, the full Children's Ground approach has not yet been implemented in any current community. The approach is being implemented under a growth model that incrementally evolves in response to the availability of resources. Resources have not yet reached the level to implement the full Children's Ground approach.
- There is a lack of data available to measure progress towards longer term outcomes for the specific populations that Children's Ground works with. Data availability is limited by the level of disaggregation possible within relevant datasets while avoiding the ability to identify individuals. Children's Ground does, however, collect self-reported outcome data, such as on families/staff (n≈25) perceptions of changes in children's health and learning outcomes and reports on this in its evaluation reports (for example, Children's Ground, 2024b).

While it is not evidenced in this evaluation, based on the Children's Ground approach's theory of change and logic model and on the quality of the progress on shorter term outcomes, it is reasonable to assume that there has been progress made towards the longer-term outcomes sought from the Children's Ground approach. Many of the activities and practices implemented under the Children's Ground approach have a well-established evidence-base that would support this conclusion. For example, the benefits of establishing healthy routines, access to healthy food, regular engagement in early years learning, etc, are well evidenced. The evaluation recommends the need to build the evidence base on the longer-term outcomes of the Children's Ground approach (see recommendation 6).



KEQ 4

How effective is the Children's Ground approach?

7 KEQ 4 - How well do the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach align with government priorities?

The activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach align closely with government priorities, as set out in departmental and inter-departmental plans and strategies, and in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

This section of the report describes a selection of relevant sources of government priorities and assesses the alignment of the Children's Ground approach and activities delivered under the approach to those priorities. To evaluate 'alignment', the evaluation assessed whether the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach were consistent with government priorities, including the achievement of outcomes.

This is distinct from an assessment of whether the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach were meeting the government's outcomes. For example, the evaluation concludes that the Children's Ground approach is directly aligned to *basic needs are met*, Outcome 6 in the Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 (Australian Department of Social Services, 2024). However, while Children's Ground was able to support access to children's basic needs, such as food and nutrition, it was not, for example, always able to directly control having access to basic needs such as housing and safe environments (these are some of the dimensions of *basic needs* covered in the strategy).

7.1 Children's Ground activities align with National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap is an agreement aimed at reducing disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Closing the Gap was launched in 2008 and revised in 2020. It emphasises partnership with Indigenous communities to action four priority reforms and achieving measurable targets for improving socio-economic outcomes and addressing systemic inequalities.

The Closing the Gap outcomes are defined under the National Agreement as 17 socio-economic areas with corresponding targets aimed at improving life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The priority reforms are defined as four reforms that change the way governments work to accelerate improvements in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Alignment of Children's Ground approach and activities to Closing the Gap outcomes

Alignment with Closing the Gap outcomes was assessed by considering whether or not activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach support governments to achieve each outcome, and if they do support that, whether they do so directly or indirectly.



Figure 11, overleaf, provides an assessment of the alignment of the Children's Ground approach and activities to each of the 17 Closing the Gap outcomes. The delivery of activities under the Children's Ground approach directly aligns with 10 Closing the Gap outcomes (shown in green) and indirectly aligns with 7 Closing the Gap outcomes (shown in orange).

Figure 11: Alignment of Children's Ground approach with Closing the Gap outcomes

CTG Outcome	Alignment Assessment	CTG Outcome	Alignment Assessment
1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives	✓	10. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system	✓
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong	✓	11. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system	✓
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high-quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education	✓	12. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in out-of-home care	✓
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years	✓	13. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe	✓
5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential	✓	14. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing	✓
6. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways	✓	15. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, and economic relationship with their land and waters	✓
7. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are engaged in employment or education	✓	16. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported, and flourishing	✓
8. Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities	✓	17. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives	✓
9. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and needs	✓		

Alignment of Children's Ground approach and activities to Closing the Gap priority reform areas

Alignment with the Closing the Gap priority reforms was assessed by considering the potential to give effect to the reforms through partnering with Children's Ground. This assessment is summarised in **Table 6**. Most notably, providing funding to Children's Ground supports governments' commitments to increase the proportion of services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations (Clause 55, Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations & Australian Government, 2020).

Table 6. Alignment between the Children's Ground approach and Closing the Gap priority reforms

Priority reform	Children's Ground approach alignment
1. Formal partnerships and shared decision-making	The Children's Ground approach includes processes to achieve effective local-community decision-making as a step towards self-determination. However, Children's Ground does not participate in any formal policy or place-based partnership arrangements with governments. The evaluation has not identified whether Children's Ground or the communities it works with would choose to pursue a formal partnership arrangement.
2. Building the community-controlled sector	While the fact that Children's Ground is not registered under the <i>Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006</i> complicates the application of some government agencies' policies and procedures, Children's Ground meets the definition of an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation provided under Priority Reform Two. Despite this, Children's Ground was established and is valued by Aboriginal people for many of the same reasons as ACCOs that are registered under the <i>Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006</i>. Its decision not to register can be seen, in itself, as an act of self-determination. The governments' commitments to implement measures to increase the proportion of services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations include a particular focus on ACCOs but preference is also to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. Therefore, governments' support for Children's Ground aligns with this priority reform area.
3. Transforming government organisations	This priority reform area primarily requires transformations within government organisations. In meeting its commitments, government actions need to be inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, like Children's Ground, that sit outside of the community-control and Coalition of Peaks architecture.

Priority reform	Children's Ground approach alignment
4. Shared access to data and information at a regional level	Access to disaggregated data and information could be hugely beneficial to Children's Ground, informing evidence-based decision-making and demonstrating impact. The level of disaggregation that would be useful for Children's Ground, down to the level of the communities it works with, may not always be feasible while upholding privacy requirements and data integrity. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity for data and information sharing at a local level between Children's Ground and local services such as schools and health services.

7.2 Children's Ground's activities align with the Health Plan

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031 (Australian Department of Health, 2021) is a 10-year policy framework designed to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It emphasises culturally safe, equitable, and prevention-focused care, aligning with the Closing the Gap priorities, addressing social and cultural determinants of health across the life course.

The Health Plan identifies 12 priority areas aimed at improving health outcomes for First Nations peoples. Each priority is underpinned by culturally safe, prevention-focused, and community-led approaches to address social determinants of health while aligning with the broader goals of Closing the Gap.

Alignment of Children's Ground approach and activities to the Health Plan priorities

Alignment with the Health Plan priorities was assessed by considering whether or not activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach support the Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing to achieve the outcome sought under each priority, and if they do support the Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing to achieve the outcome, whether they do so directly or indirectly.

Figure 12, overleaf, provides an assessment of the alignment of the Children's Ground approach and activities to each of the 12 Health Plan priorities. The delivery of activities under the Children's Ground approach directly aligns with 10 Health Plan priorities (shown in green) and indirectly aligns with 2 priorities (shown in orange).

Figure 12: Alignment of Children's Ground approach with the Health Plan priorities

Health Plan Priority	Alignment Assessment	Health Plan Priority	Alignment Assessment
1. Genuine shared decision making and partnerships	✓	7. Healthy environments, sustainability and preparedness	✓
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled comprehensive primary health care	✓	8. Identify and eliminate racism	✓
3. Workforce	✓	9. Access to person-centred and family-centred care	✓
4. Health promotion	✓	10. Mental health and suicide prevention	✓
5. Early intervention	✓	11. Culturally informed and evidence-based evaluation, research and practice	✓
6. Social and emotional wellbeing and trauma-aware, healing-informed approaches	✓	12. Strengthening culturally appropriate data and evidence systems	✓

7.3 Children's Ground activities align with Early Years Strategy

The Early Years Strategy 2024–2034 (Australian Department of Social Services, 2024) is a 10-year framework to improve outcomes for children aged 0–5 years and their families by prioritising early childhood development and wellbeing. The strategy focuses on valuing the early years, empowering families, supporting communities, and enhancing government coordination to ensure all children have the best start in life, regardless of their circumstances.

The Early Years Strategy outlines eight key interconnected outcomes aimed at ensuring all children in Australia thrive during their early years. The outcomes reflect a vision for a holistic approach to early childhood development, emphasising safety, health, education, cultural identity, and family and community support.

Alignment of Children's Ground approach and activities to Early Years Strategy outcomes

Alignment with Early Years Strategy outcomes was assessed by considering whether or not activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach support the Australian Government to achieve each outcome, and if they do support the Australian Government to achieve the outcome, whether they do so directly or indirectly.

Figure 13, provides an assessment of the alignment of the Children's Ground approach and activities to each of the eight Early Years Strategy outcomes. The delivery of activities under the Children's Ground approach directly aligns with all eight outcomes.

Figure 13: Alignment of Children's Ground approach with Early Years Strategy outcomes

Early Years Strategy Outcome	Alignment Assessment
1. Children are nurtured and safe	✓
2. Children are socially, emotionally, physically and mentally healthy	✓
3. Children are learning	✓
4. Children have strong identities and connections to culture	✓
5. Children have opportunities to play and imagine	✓
6. Basic needs are met	✓
7. Families are empowered, connected and supported	✓
8. Communities are strong and inclusive places for children and their parents or caregivers	✓

7.4 Children's Ground activities align with National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy provides a long-term framework for governments, non-government sectors and communities to collaborate in improving early childhood outcomes, with a focus on cultural connections, health, safety, education, and empowering families as primary carers.

The strategy outlines five key goals to improve outcomes for First Nations children during their critical early years.

Alignment of Children's Ground approach and activities to Early Childhood Strategy

Alignment with Early Childhood Strategy goals was assessed by considering whether or not activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach support the Australian Government to achieve each goal, and if they do support the Australian Government to achieve the goal, whether they do so directly or indirectly.

Figure 14, provides an assessment of the alignment of the Children's Ground approach and activities to each of the five Early Childhood Strategy goals. The delivery of activities under the Children's Ground approach directly aligns with all five goals.

Figure 14: Alignment of Children's Ground approach with Early Childhood Strategy goals

Early Childhood Strategy goal	Alignment Assessment
1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and remain strong	
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to thrive in their early years	
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to establish and maintain strong connections to culture, Country, and language	
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up in safe, nurturing homes, supported by strong families and communities	
5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities are active partners in building a better service system	

7.5 Children's Ground activities align with National Justice Reinvestment Program

The National Justice Reinvestment Program is a long-term, community-led initiative aimed at reducing contact with the criminal justice system and incarceration rates, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The program focuses on place-based solutions, empowering communities to design and implement preventative and rehabilitative strategies that address the root causes of crime, improve community safety, and strengthen local capacity.

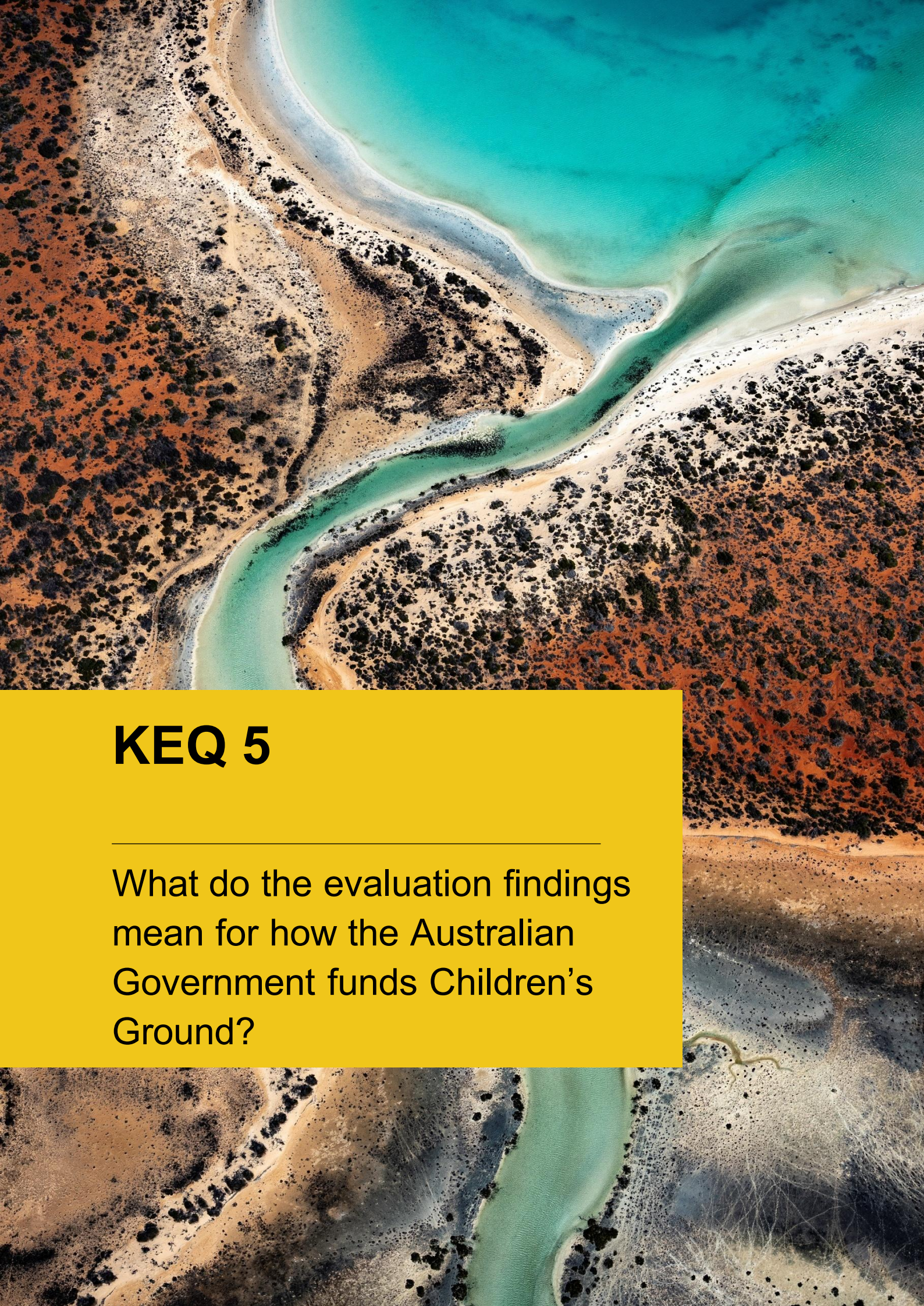
The Justice Reinvestment Design Discussion paper (Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, 2023) sets out four principles that the program will support. These principles ensure that justice reinvestment initiatives are culturally appropriate, community-driven, and focused on creating long-term, sustainable change to reduce incarceration rates and improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Alignment of Children's Ground approach and activities to National Justice Reinvestment Program principles

Figure 15, below, provides an assessment of the alignment of the Children's Ground approach and activities to each of the four National Justice Reinvestment Program principles. The evaluation team considers that the delivery of activities under the Children's Ground approach directly aligns with all four principles.

Figure 15: Alignment of Children's Ground approach and Justice Reinvestment Design principles

Justice Reinvestment Design principles	Alignment Assessment
1. Place based	
2. Strong local leadership	
3. Data informed	
4. Addressing the drivers of incarceration	



KEQ 5

What do the evaluation findings mean for how the Australian Government funds Children's Ground?

8 KEQ 5 - What do the evaluation findings mean for how the Australian Government funds Children's Ground?

8.1 Best-placed Australian Government Departments to fund Children's Ground

This sub-section responds to KEQ 5.1: Which Australian Government departments are best placed to fund which activities under the Children's Ground approach?

The evaluation found that Children's Ground delivers a wide range of mutually supporting activities and that these activities align directly or indirectly with a similarly wide range of departmental and inter-departmental goals, objectives, and priorities.

This section of the report provides general considerations that should apply to any funding that Children's Ground is provided by Australian Government departments and identifies the Australian Government departments that are best placed to fund Children's Ground's activities. The costs associated with any Australian Government funding for the delivery of Children's Ground's activities could be shared with the Northern Territory Government.

Any government funding should meet certain criteria

Funding should:

- be long-term and consistent with notifications of the outcome of funding processes being well in advance of the end of existing agreements¹⁶
- be flexible and scalable to support Children's Ground's responsiveness
- avoid imposing onerous reporting obligations
- recognise and enable key elements of the Children's Ground approach, and
- recognise and respond to the contextual factors affecting the communities that Children's Ground works with.

All government funding should reflect the full costs of providing services, including a 20% administrative / operations component to enable Children's Ground to meet necessary management, administrative, capital, and human resources costs.

Funding that does not align with these considerations will perpetuate barriers to the effective delivery of Children's Ground's activities, and therefore to achieving outcomes for the individuals, families, and communities who Children's Ground works with.

¹⁶ In its report on Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory, the Productivity Commission recommended default contract lengths of 7 years (Recommendation 8.1, Productivity Commission, 2020).

Importantly, any funding agreements should recognise that, as discussed in **section 2.2**, a fundamental aspect of the Children's Ground approach is that activities are delivered in communities regardless of the number of participants on a given day. It is to be expected that participation may occasionally be very low and fluctuate significantly, particularly before Children's Ground achieves critical mass in a particular community. However, benefits arise from the fact that activities are delivered, regardless of the level of participation.

Certain Australian Government departments are best placed to fund certain activities

Children's Ground delivers a range of activities that achieve mutually reinforcing short-term outcomes for individuals and communities experiencing complex disadvantage. The activities delivered by Children's Ground and the short-term outcomes that have been achieved are expected to lead to further longer-term outcomes throughout a 25-year period and beyond. These outcomes, and the way that they are achieved, align with the responsibilities and priorities of several Australian Government departments, as set out in **section 7**.

Given Children's Ground applies holistic service design and delivery, activities that deliver outcomes under any one service area also deliver outcomes under other service areas. This complicates drawing direct lines of responsibility between specific activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach and individual Australian Government departments. However, given KEQ 5.1 required assessing which Australian Government departments are best placed to fund which activities, a single department has been identified as best placed to fund each activity, based on the alignment of the activity and its outcomes to the departmental and inter-departmental priorities set out in **section 7**.

A further complication arises in relation to whether or to what extent Northern Territory Government departments should fund activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach. The Australian and Northern Territory governments are partners to a 10 Year Generational Strategy for Children and Families in the Northern Territory (Commonwealth of Australia, Northern Territory Government, Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT, North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency and Northern Territory Council of Social Service, 2021) and its associated Coordinated Investment Framework that sets out agreements for targeting and coordinating investments. This indicates that the Australian and Northern Territory governments should share the costs of any funding for the delivery of Children's Ground activities. In particular, the Australian and Northern Territory governments should consider the most appropriate mechanisms for funding any capital investment, including on improving the social determinants of health in the communities that Children's Ground works with.

Best placed Australian Government departments to fund activities.

Table 7 to **Table 10**, overleaf, show the positions under each service area that Children's Ground considers are required to deliver the full Children's Ground approach to four communities in one region and the Commonwealth Department that is best placed to fund them. The "Creative and Cultural Development" service area is not shown separately, as Children's Ground advised that these positions should be recorded as part of the "Learning and Wellbeing" service area, given Children's Ground's view that creative and cultural development is a core aspect of learning. **Table 11**, shows the positions that Children's

Ground considers are necessary to implement and maintain the monitoring, evaluation, and research that is necessary for the effective delivery of the Children's Ground approach. Children's Ground's shared services and regional management and administration positions are not shown here, as these positions would best be funded via apportionment of the administration components of grants for service delivery.

Table 7: Positions for Learning and Wellbeing

Position	FTE	Department
Director, Children's Ground Approach - Apmerengentyele	1.00	Department of Education
Head of Learning and Wellbeing - Western	1.00	
Early years		
Head of Early Years	1.00	Department of Social Services
Early Years Education Specialists	4.30	
First Culture Specialists/Teachers	3.10	
Early Years Workers	7.00	
Child and Family Engagement Education Workers	3.50	
Early Childhood Trainees	1.00	
Creative Arts Educator	1.00	
Resource development officer	1.00	
Age 6+		
Head of Learning and Wellbeing (school aged)	1.00	Department of Education
Deputy Head (0.8 teaching load)	1.00	
Cultural educators (Snr)	4.00	
Cultural educators (Jnr)	2.50	
Teaching staff (estimated Snr)	4.00	
Teaching staff (estimated Jnr)	1.00	
Administration and data	0.50	
Literacy Centre officer	1.00	

Resource development officer	1.00	
Learning support officers		
TESOL trained educator	1.00	Department of Education
Child and Family Education workers	1.00	Department of Social Services
Specialist program officers		
Computer and IT educator	1.00	Department of Education
Music educator	1.00	
Creative arts educator	1.00	
Health and sports educator	1.00	
Creative and Cultural Development and Wellbeing (creative learning)		
Creative arts coordinator	1.00	Department of Education
Creative arts worker	1.00	
Extended school hours and holiday program		
Extended Hours Director	1.00	Attorney-General’s Department
Extended hours admin	0.40	
Extended Hours Co-ordinator - community based	2.00	
Extended Hours Co-ordinator - young people	1.00	
Afterschool program workers	4.00	
Extended Hours Learning and Support officers	2.00	
Extended Hours Learning and Support tutors - young people	1.00	

Table 8: Positions for Family Health and Wellbeing

Position	FTE	Department
Family Health and Wellbeing Head	1.00	Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing
Allied Health Professional	1.00	

Medical Professional	0.50	
Clinical Specialist - nurse practitioner	1.00	
First Cultural Health specialists	1.00	
Health Promotion specialists	4.00	
Health Promotion Specialist (focus Maternal & Family Health)	1.00	
First Culture Health practitioners	1.00	
Social and Emotional Wellbeing counsellor	2.00	
Family and Individual counsellor	1.00	
Aboriginal Health promotion workers	4.00	
Food Security (incl. local food production)	0.50	
Nutritionist	1.00	
Nutrition workers/cooks (centre based)	4.00	
Environmental Health Officer	1.00	
Elders Support officer	0.80	

Table 9: Positions for Community Development and Wellbeing

Position	FTE	Department		
Director, Practice and Community Development	1.00	National Agency	Indigenous	Australians
Cultural and Community Development Coordinator	1.00			
Community Development Coordinators	4.00			
Men's Community Development Coordinator	1.00			
Adult Programs Coordinator	0.80			
Integrated Services and Referral Officer	2.00			
Transport/Bus Driver	2.00			
Community development workers	3.00			

Community development and environmental health workers	3.00	
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Table 10: Positions for Economic Development and Wellbeing

Position	FTE	Department
Head of Enterprise Development	1.00	Indigenous Business Australia
Enterprise Development Coordinator	1.00	
Enterprise training and development officer	1.00	
Enterprise Development workers	1.00	
Financial and Consumer literacy Officer	1.00	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
Training and workforce officer	1.00	

Table 11: Regional Monitoring and Evaluation

Position	FTE	Department
Monitoring and Evaluation Director	0.50	<i>See recommendation 1.</i>
Head of Research and Evaluation	1.00	
Evaluation, Monitoring, and Research Co-ordinator	1.00	
First Nations Community Evaluation and Research Officer	1.00	
Data and Family Information Systems Officer	1.00	

8.2 Role of Philanthropic funding in supporting Children's Ground

This sub-section addresses KEQ 5.2: What is the potential for an increased role of philanthropic funding in supporting Children's Ground?

Current role of philanthropic funding in supporting Children's Ground

Children's Ground has demonstrated significant success securing and applying philanthropic funding, alongside government funding, to deliver effective activities. Around half of Children's Ground's revenue is from philanthropic sources. In 2023, this reached 61%, with 35% from government grants (Children's Ground, 2024a).

Philanthropic funding has fewer conditions restricting its flexibility than government funding. However, it is rarely recurrent and is therefore less consistent and reliable. This makes philanthropic funding more suitable for enabling 'one-off' investments by Children's Ground (e.g., infrastructure, plant and materials) than for meeting ongoing costs (e.g., FTE, utilities).

As philanthropic funding is highly competitive, securing philanthropic funding also imposes costs on Children's Ground and the communities it works with. For instance, Children's Ground employs staff whose roles related, in large part, to developing and maintaining relationships with philanthropists and philanthropic organisations. Securing philanthropic funding also requires Children's Ground's communications tools to target this audience, which likely contributes to a lack of clarity in certain respects in Children's Ground's evaluation and annual reports. Children's Ground's communities are also required to regularly host philanthropists to convince them that investing in supporting their communities is a worthy cause. For some community members, this was undesirable and burdensome, even though they recognised that it was necessary to enable Children's Ground to continue working with their community.

Future role of philanthropic funding in supporting Children's Ground

As discussed in **section 4.3**, the largest proportion of Children's Ground's costs is FTE; ongoing costs that philanthropic funding is not well suited to meet. However, there was clear potential for Children's Ground to make large investments in infrastructure, plant, and materials to greatly increase the effectiveness of its activities in several communities; costs that philanthropic funding is well suited to meet.

Therefore, there is a clear future role for philanthropic funding to be used by Children's Ground as an enabler for increased effectiveness of activities delivered using consistent government funding. For example, philanthropic funding could be used to pay for the costs associated with constructing and maintaining a fit-for-purpose permanent facility within a community, while government funding could be used to meet ongoing costs associated with delivering activities in that facility. This would generate significant benefits beyond what could be achieved through either funding source alone.

It is important to note that this is unlikely to require an increase in the proportion of philanthropic as opposed to government funding that Children's Ground receives. Instead,

with adequate government funding, the proportion of Children's Ground's revenue from philanthropic sources relative to government funding may decrease, even if the total amount of philanthropic funding increases. Overall, reducing Children's Ground's reliance on philanthropic funding to meet ongoing costs would reduce the burden of securing this funding on both Children's Ground and the communities that Children's Ground works with.

8.3 Viability of Children's Ground as a Justice Reinvestment option

This sub-section responds to KEQ 5.3: To what extent do Children's Ground's service areas provide a viable justice reinvestment option for government?

Defining justice reinvestment

Social justice reinvestment is the redirection of money from 'downstream' costs (e.g., policing, incarceration) to addressing 'upstream' factors resulting in those costs being incurred (e.g., family breakdown, poverty, mental illness, drug and alcohol dependency).

Social justice reinvestment focuses on preventative approaches. It may be linked with a place-based community-focused approach that prioritises the importance of front-end holistic support, which has the capacity to prevent criminalisation in the first instance.

Extent to which Children's Ground's service areas provide a viable justice reinvestment option for government

As a preventative, place-based, and holistic approach, the Children's Ground approach may be a viable social justice reinvestment option for government. Increasing the involvement and employment of men in the delivery of activities under the Children's Ground approach and increasing the proportion of activities targeted at men and young people would likely increase the viability of Children's Ground's service areas as justice reinvestment options.

Recommendations



9 Recommendations

The evaluation found (see **section 6**) there is strong evidence that Children's Ground is achieving the shorter-term access and engagement outcomes specified in the program logic through delivering the activities described in **section 3**. Given Children's Ground's achievement of the shorter-term (1 – 6 year) outcomes and the evaluation findings regarding the effectiveness of the Children's Ground approach in **sections 4 to 5.6**, it is reasonable to extrapolate that full implementation of the Children's Ground approach in a community could, based on the program logic, achieve the longer term (7 – 20 and 20+ year) outcomes sought from the Children's Ground approach.

Successful implementation of the full Children's Ground approach will require comprehensive and long-term investment by the Australian Government, including consideration of how the costs of funding the delivery of Children's Ground's activities could be shared with the Northern Territory Government. It will also require Children's Ground to have access to the individual, family, and community level longitudinal indicator data required to measure and report progress towards the outcomes specified in the program logic. This will enable Children's Ground to measure and report change in outcomes over time for these populations and to refine the design and delivery of activities to more effectively achieve outcomes. Better access to data will also allow Australian and Northern Territory government agencies to make informed decisions regarding funding and contract management of Children's Ground.

In view of the findings, the following recommendations are made.

9.1 Recommendation 1

R1

The Australian Government should consider committing to a comprehensive multi-departmental, long-term funding approach for Children's Ground. The funding approach should include an initial period of seven years to enable Children's Ground to demonstrate progress towards longer-term outcomes in the communities currently supported in Central Australia and Darwin. Specifically, the Australian Government agencies listed in Table 12 should consider committing to fully fund the delivery of activities under specific service areas to enable long-term delivery of activities by Children's Ground. The Australian and Northern Territory governments should consider sharing the costs of any funding for Children's Ground.

The evaluation found that Children's Ground fills a service provision niche in each of the discrete communities it works with by delivering a comprehensive set of mutually supporting activities to individuals, families, and communities that are experiencing complex disadvantage. The evaluation also found that the activities delivered under the Children's

Ground approach align with Closing the Gap outcomes and the priorities of various government departments.

Partial implementation of the Children's Ground approach is achieving the shorter-term outcomes specified in the program logic. Adequate and comprehensive long-term funding would enable conclusive demonstration of whether or to what extent this is the case.

The evaluation found that, as a holistic service delivery model, outcomes achieved in the delivery of activities in one service area will support the achievement of outcomes from activities delivered in the other service areas. Coordinated government funding will therefore increase the overall effectiveness of the Children's Ground approach, delivering better value for money for each individual agency's investment. Sharing the costs of funding the delivery of Children's Ground's activities between the Australian and Northern Territory governments should be considered.

Table 12 shows the Australian Government agencies and the service areas (or parts of service areas) they should consider funding. **Table 12** should be read in conjunction with **Table 7** to **Table 10**. As noted in **section 5.1** and discussed further in **section 5.4**, Children's Ground's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research function is a key enabler for the effectiveness of the Children's Ground approach. As part of a comprehensive, multi-departmental long term funding approach for Children's Ground, the agencies listed in **Table 12** should also consider how best to fund the positions listed in **Table 11**.

Table 12: Recommended funding by Australian Government agencies

Australian Government agency	Service area
Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing	Family Health and Wellbeing
Department of Social Services	Learning and Wellbeing (including activities primarily targeted at children aged 0-6 and their families)
Department of Education	Learning and Wellbeing (including activities primarily targeted at children aged 6+ and their families)
National Indigenous Australians Agency	Community Development and Wellbeing
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations; and Indigenous Business Australia	Economic Development and Wellbeing.
Attorney-General's Department	Learning and Development (activities categorised as extended hours and school holiday program).

9.2 Recommendation 2

R2

The Australian Government should establish an inter-agency Governance Group to support the implementation of any funding agreements.

The evaluation found that there are particular considerations that should apply to any government funding for Children's Ground to ensure that funding enables rather than inhibits the ways of working that Children's Ground has developed. Further, because the Children's Ground approach is a holistic service delivery approach, it is to be expected that government funding aimed primarily at achieving outcomes in one domain (e.g., health) will also achieve outcomes in other domains.

A collaborative funding approach by government agencies will ensure that all government funding consistently enables Children's Ground's ways of working. It will also enable a given agency to track whether and to what extent funding provided by other agencies is supporting the outcomes that it is primarily interested in or responsible for. Shared visibility will support all funding agencies to agree, with Children's Ground and each other, the outcomes expected from the Children's Ground approach, the time periods for particular outcomes, and how outcomes should be measured and reported. Importantly, the government agencies could also agree what longitudinal indicator data they each hold or exercise control over that could be relevant to Children's Ground measuring and reporting against any of the outcomes specified in its funding agreements with any department.

This collaborative approach by government agencies is likely to be more successful if embedded inside a governance arrangement that is focused on improving both the efficiency and effectiveness of any investment by individual agencies. The Governance Group could also consider the appropriateness of, and mechanism for, making significant capital investments to improve the social determinants of health in the communities Children's Ground works with.

It would also be beneficial for the government agencies to agree a lead government representative for engagement with Children's Ground, to further embed a collaborative approach to funding.

9.3 Recommendation 3

R3

Children's Ground should increase engagement from under-represented groups, with a particular view towards strengthening the viability of Children's Ground as a justice reinvestment option.

The evaluation found men were less engaged than women in activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach, including in cultural governance, as staff, and as participants alongside their children and families. Teenagers and young adults were also less engaged across these areas.

Increasing participation from these groups would bring additional knowledge and expertise into the planning and delivery of activities, provide more diverse role models for children, and boost confidence and social and emotional wellbeing among participants from these groups. It may also contribute to more diverse activities that strengthen engagement from, for example, young boys. While Children's Ground already demonstrates viability as a justice reinvestment option, increased engagement by men, teenagers, and young boys in Children's Ground's activities would likely increase the viability of Children's Ground as a justice reinvestment option.

9.4 Recommendation 4

R4

Children's Ground should consider enhancements to its already effective cultural governance processes.

The evaluation found that cultural governance is a key enabler of the Children's Ground approach. Cultural governance committees advise and make decisions on operational, administrative and strategic matters. The committees are heavily involved in operational and administrative matters, and comparatively less engaged in strategic decision-making and strategic monitoring. While community control over operational and administrative matters is a significant enabler of the Children's Ground approach, alternate processes or forums might enable this to occur without compromising the regularity or level of strategic engagement the cultural governance committees are involved in. For clarity, strategic engagement should be read broadly, to include cultural governance committees participating in capacity building, supporting Children's Ground staff to develop and refine medium- and long-term plans for activities, and making decisions that will have medium- and long-term effects. This is already occurring, however there was concern that short-term considerations were often prioritised over strategic longer-term considerations.

The evaluation also found that Children's Ground staff and community members were not always clear on the decisions or rationale for decisions made in cultural governance committee meetings. Without over-formalising cultural governance, there would be value in ensuring committee decisions and their rationale are clearly communicated back to Children's Ground staff and community members. Adaptation of the Community Lead and Community Coordinator roles to also act as interfaces between Cultural Governance and Children's Ground's non-community staff could be a way to ensure that this occurs.

9.5 Recommendation 5

R5**Children's Ground should strengthen and formalise relationships with other service providers in Central Australia and Darwin.**

The evaluation found that, where they existed, strong, formal partnerships with other service providers contributed to the Children's Ground approach's ability to achieve outcomes. Partners brought additional expertise and resources, and collaboration enabled service delivery to be coordinated. The evaluation also found that Children's Ground relies on informal relationships with staff from external service providers, which, while demonstrably beneficial, were vulnerable to staff turnover and did not enable consistent collaboration, for example on data sharing.

Forming and strengthening partnerships with schools and with health services, including ACCHOs, will be particularly important given the centrality of learning, health and wellbeing outcomes to the Children's Ground approach. Formalising relationships with the organisations where Children's Ground currently relies on informal relationships with staff would improve the effectiveness of these relationships, primarily through enabling data sharing and coordinated service planning or delivery.

9.6 Recommendation 6

R6

The Australian Government and Children's Ground should establish processes to enable access to and generation of data to indicate progress towards outcomes (beyond access and engagement) of the Children's Ground approach.

The longitudinal research and evaluation framework (Children's Ground, 2023) is a fundamental component of the Children's Ground approach, required to build up the evidence base for the approach and to guide system reform. Children's Ground has completed several regional evaluations, a cost-benefit analysis and research studies. It regularly draws on data and evidence to report to funders and to communities.

The evaluation was unable to source sufficient evidence from these evaluations to determine the progress of the Children's Ground approach towards its longer-term outcomes. Outcomes data was largely limited to shorter-term access and engagement indicators. Children's Ground has previously reported on the limitations of publicly available data to measure progress against its longer-term outcome indicators (p.123, Children's Ground, 2021). As discussed in **section 2.2**, it is not possible for Children's Ground to collect the robust indicator data required to measure progress towards many outcomes. This data is already collected and held by government agencies and government-funded service providers. Access to this data would enable Children's Ground to demonstrate the extent of progress it has already made towards outcomes and to measure and report progress in a timely manner.

If the government continues to fund Children's Ground, Children's Ground will need to demonstrate progress against its longer-term outcomes. Government may need to support Children's Ground to access relevant data and information, in line with commitments under Priority Reform 4 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (for example through the inter-agency Governance Group at recommendation two). Potential solutions may involve establishing formal partnerships with schools, NT Health (hospital data), and ACCHOs to share data on educational attendance and achievement, childhood development (Australian Early Development Census, AEDC), and health service activity and outcomes for the populations of interest to Children's Ground. This will require working through privacy and confidentiality requirements. Children's Ground's Research Advisory Group would be well-placed to advise on a process.

9.7 Recommendation 7

R7

Children's Ground should improve communications with government stakeholders.

The evaluation found that Children's Ground is a complex organisation, working in complex circumstances and that the Children's Ground approach is a necessarily complex service delivery model. Children's Ground produces various evaluation reports, annual reports, and reporting to the Department. This material very effectively communicates that Children's Ground does a lot of work across several domains, that communities are engaged, and that community members value Children's Ground. For some stakeholders, this will be sufficient.

However, government departments require detailed yet concise assurance, targeted at their specific areas of responsibility, of what Children's Ground does, how it is progressing towards outcomes, how Children's Ground works, and the effectiveness and relevance of the range of systems and processes that Children's Ground has developed to enable it to work effectively in the context of the communities it works with. Funding departments also require Children's Ground to be clear about what it cannot evidence quantitatively at a given point in time and why.

There is an opportunity to improve how Children's Ground communicates these factors to government departments, particularly in relation to communicating exactly what happens during activities. Clear and concise reporting of who does exactly what during, for example, a health promotion or early years session would provide much-needed clarity to government on what their funding is being used to achieve. It is important to reiterate that Children's Ground will require access to data collected and held by government agencies and government-funded service providers to measure and communicate progress towards outcomes in the fashion that is likely to be expected by government.

Improving communication with government will require government and Children's Ground to work in good-faith partnership to agree and follow reporting processes that enable government to fulfil its governance, performance, and accountability obligations, but that do not place unrealistic or onerous reporting obligations on Children's Ground.

9.8 Recommendation 8

R8

Children's Ground should continue to work to expand the amount and maximise the effectiveness of philanthropic funding.

The evaluation found that more than half of Children's Ground's revenue is from philanthropic sources. Philanthropic funding has fewer conditions restricting its flexibility than government funding, however it is rarely recurrent, and is therefore less consistent and reliable. This makes philanthropic funding more suitable for enabling 'one-off' investments rather than meeting ongoing costs. As philanthropic funding is highly competitive, securing philanthropic funding does impose costs on Children's Ground and Children's Ground's communities.

Children's Ground already effectively secures philanthropic funding and applies this to costs that it is suitable to meet. There is however potential for Children's Ground to make large investments in infrastructure, plant, and materials to greatly increase the effectiveness of its activities in several communities, which would act as value multipliers for recurrent and secure government funding applied to meeting ongoing costs.

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Appendices





Appendix A

Contribution of the Children's Ground approach to increased engagement in early years learning

Increased engagement in first cultural years learning and high quality early years learning are expected outcomes of the Children's Ground approach.

These outcomes are expected to contribute to improved knowledge and skills, increased number of children meeting educational and developmental benchmarks, and children knowing their history and being confident in their cultures.

This paper examines the contribution of the Children's Ground approach to these outcomes primarily through Children's Ground's delivery of early years, cultural and on country learning sessions, and support for children to access mainstream education¹. This analysis informs evaluation questions on:

- What activities are delivered, to whom and how? (KEQ 1.1)
- What are the main barriers and enablers to the effective implementation of activities? (KEQ 1.2)
- To what extent are the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach contributing to improved outcomes? (KEQ 3)

The evidence in this contribution case is from interviews and yarns with Children's Ground staff (current and previous), community members, service providers and government agencies, and from data reported by Children's Ground. There was significant evidence of Children's Ground's contribution to access and engagement in early years, cultural and on country learning. There was less evidence of the impact of this on children's knowledge, skills and confidence. This aligns with what might be expected at this stage of implementation of the Children's Ground approach.

¹ Currently excludes after hours activities delivered to children after school.

Further details of Children's Ground's contribution to early learning are summarised below.

Providing integrated learning opportunities

The early years sessions delivered by Children's Ground provided integrated learning opportunities. This included:

- Integrating First Language and English in learning sessions, particularly in Central Australia where the majority of children and their families speak their First Language and English is a second or third language.
- Integrating cultural learning into sessions, including about flora and fauna, cultural sites, knowledge and skills associated with bush tucker and bush medicine, and stories, song and dance. The integration of language and culture into sessions was led by Children's Ground cultural educators and was supported by parents and families. The incorporation of cultural learning, reportedly, attracts a lot of families to Children's Ground's early years learning.
- Integrating Western learning, including pre-literacy and numeracy, Western numeracy and school readiness.
- Integrating health promotion activities alongside learning.⁴ This included integrating healthy routines such as hand and face washing into the learning sessions (e.g. before morning tea and lunch), preparing healthy snacks and meals, and building in regulating activities such as breathing exercises into sessions to help people transition to learning. Some of these health promotion activities involved direct teaching and knowledge sharing, whereas others focused on role modelling and normalising healthy practices.

The integrated learning opportunities provided a holistic approach to learning and was meeting family and community expectations that their children learn in both First Nations and Western ways. The sessions were led by cultural educators (First Nations staff) and western trained educators (First Nations and non-Indigenous staff), each leading according to their knowledge and expertise and supporting one another.

Providing learning in community and on country

The evaluation team observed learning sessions in three communities and attended one on country learning session. The sessions in community targeted pre-school learning and either took place in community centres or temporary shelters (e.g. under shade cloths). In one outstation community, there was a separate learning session for primary school children, held twice a week in a building used as a classroom. The on country session targeted early years (0-8 years) and involved children from a town camp. All these learning sessions were part of a weekly schedule, organised by Children's Ground in partnership with the communities.

⁴ See separate contribution case on health promotion.



Holding sessions in community addressed access barriers associated with transport. However it did mean that, in the communities where Children's Ground did not have a permanent presence and storage, they had to pack resources (e.g. educational resources and food) and travel to each community. Critically, in community sessions were considered more accessible as families felt safe and comfortable.

On country sessions provided a practical opportunity to integrate cultural learning into sessions, with children learning about the land, connections to country and people, as well as practical skills in hunting and gathering bush medicines. This occurred alongside, for example, reading and counting sessions that took place on a mat under the trees. Parents and families valued the opportunity for their children to learn on country, noting that some children found it hard to learn in the classroom and it provided some balance. The evaluation team observed the value of Children's Ground being able to take a group of children away from their community to an on country session at a time where there was tension in the community, providing both respite for the children and space for the adults.

In addition to regular on country learning sessions, Children's Ground provides opportunities for families to camp on country and provides trips to the bush with adults, such as groups of women.

Families are engaging alongside their children

Holding learning sessions in community and on country provided parents and families the opportunity to engage in learning sessions alongside their children. The evaluation team observed active participation of parents, grandparents and other family in learning sessions, for example, in cultural learning, play, cooking, and art classes. It was evident that as well as learning new skills themselves, parents and family were role modelling learning and building connections with children, not all of whom lived in the same community.

Providing resources and transport

Children's Ground provided resources to support learning sessions, such as play equipment, art supplies, writing supplies, cooking equipment, and children's books, some of which they had published in language. Critically, Children's Ground also provided food for breakfast, snacks, and/or lunch.

Children's Ground also provided transport pick-ups and drop-offs enabling people to travel to the learning sessions. This included vans or buses to enable groups to travel to on country sessions, as well as pick-up and drop-offs for individuals needing to travel from where they live to an in community session where it was in another community. Transport was reported as a key enabler of access to learning sessions.

Facilitating enrolment and attendance in local primary schools

There was evidence of Children's Ground supporting access to primary education in local schools. In one community, this included transporting children to and from school in a van as the school bus route had changed and the bus stop required children to cross a major highway. Children's Ground were also advocating authorities for a long term solution to this barrier. In another community, Children's Ground facilitated a process to enrol a group of children in primary school. The children had moved to the community and Children's Ground were aware that they had not yet enrolled in school, despite some of them being there for 6 months.

Developing relevant curriculum and assessment

Children's Ground has invested considerable effort in developing an early learning First Nations learning model and culturally appropriate assessment methods. In Central Australia, Children's Ground has also worked with Arrernte knowledge holders to develop a Cultural Learning Curriculum Framework and coordinates an Australian-wide First Nations Educators' Network to lead reform in education. Children's Ground learning staff indicated that it was straightforward to align what they were delivering with the Early Years Learning Framework.

Assessment occurs in the background. Each child has a report or portfolio which identifies their strengths and the areas they have grown in, including in both their Western and cultural learning. The portfolio also serves as a record of a child's engagement in learning and is discussed with parents. Parents are able to share these reports with schools; although this did not appear to be happening.

Children's Ground has also developed a culturally safe and appropriate, strengths-based summative measurement tool to monitor children's learning, development and wellbeing. The tool has been culturally and statistically validated and piloted, and is being incorporated into the Children's Ground approach.

Alignment to Closing the Gap priorities

There is strong alignment between the contribution that Children's Ground makes to increased engagement in early years learning and the following Closing the Gap outcomes:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years (Outcome 3).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years (Outcome 4).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing (Outcome 14).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing (Outcome 16).

There is alignment to other Closing the Gap outcomes too, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintaining a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their lands and waters (Outcome 15).



Factors that may inhibit wider contribution

Evaluation participants discussed barriers and opportunities with respect to ways that early years learning outcomes could be enhanced. These include:

- The lack of community-based infrastructure, including infrastructure appropriate for the climatic conditions in Central Australia and the Top End, is a barrier to delivering learning sessions in many communities. The benefits of existing infrastructure such as community centres, food and resource storage areas, and play facilities were evident.
- Children's Ground educators build deep relationships with community members and can become go-to people. Some educators spend considerable time providing wider support to communities, including in social and emotional wellbeing. This aligns with the holistic nature of the Children's Ground approach and enables wraparound support for children and their families. However, educators are stretched and have experienced being pulled off their core work, and often more strategic work, in order to respond to immediate community needs. One educator spoke about the need to invest more time in curriculum development and in building relationships with schools. This would enable them to work to their full scope of practice, rather than being diverted to, for example, having to do a school drop-off or support a family through a crisis. Ultimately, this reflects a workforce shortage.
- Although the evaluation team engaged with few stakeholders within schools, there would appear to be benefits from better communication and flow of information between schools and Children's Ground. This would have practical benefits – for example, schools would know what learning new entrants had engaged in and what their students were doing while attending in community or on country sessions with Children's Ground. Conversely, schools may be able to provide Children's Ground with school attendance and assessment results for the families they work with (with permissions) and child development results (AEDC) for their school community.
- There is an opportunity to engage men more in learning sessions. For example, people reported specific opportunities for men to share cultural knowledge in areas such as hunting, dance, art and carving, and to support transporting people and resources

Potential rival explanations for observed outcomes

Children's Ground's contributions to access to early years learning are clear. In most cases, they are providing access to learning sessions where no alternative service exists. Other programs, such as Families as First Teachers and Connected Beginnings, are working with different populations.

Some children and families that Children's Ground works with have received support for early years learning from some other services, such as the Larapinta Child and Family Learning Centre in Alice Springs, and from primary schools. Some children may also be involved in on country learning through their school that is not delivered by Children's Ground.



Appendix B

Contribution of the Children's Ground approach to increased engagement in health promotion and support

Increased engagement in health promotion is an expected outcome of the Children's Ground approach. This outcome is expected to contribute to improved child and family health and wellbeing.

This paper examines the contribution of the Children's Ground approach to this outcome primarily through Children's Ground's delivery of health promotion activities and support, including supporting people to connect with health services. This analysis informs evaluation questions on:

- What activities are delivered, to whom and how? (KEQ 1.1)
- What are the main barriers and enablers to the effective implementation of activities? (KEQ 1.2)
- To what extent are the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach contributing to improved outcomes? (KEQ 3)

The evidence in this contribution case is from interviews and yarns with Children's Ground staff (current and previous), community members, service providers and government agencies, and from data reported by Children's Ground. There was significant evidence of Children's Ground's contribution to access and engagement in health promotion. There was less evidence of the impact of this on child and family health and wellbeing. This aligns with what might be expected at this stage of implementation of the Children's Ground approach. It also reflects a lack of data on evidence of impact.



Key elements of engagement in health promotion and support

Children's Ground staff and community members discussed elements of health promotion and support that they considered important. These included:

- health promotion being integrated with other activities, such as early years learning and employment
- the importance of normalising healthy routines and conversations into daily life and for consistent support
- the value of delivering health promotion within communities, where people live, and establishing strong connections with the community
- the need for support in accessing health services.



Case

The Children's Ground approach makes a *direct contribution*² to First Nations people engaging in health promotion and support. This contribution is critical given the high health needs in remote Aboriginal communities and the challenges facing the health system in delivering consistent health promotion initiatives to these communities. Evidence of this contribution follows.

Evidence of contribution

In 2023, 456 children (0-8 years) engaged in health promotion and/or learning activities and 1,354 children and their family members engaged in targeted and universal health promotion and support (Children's Ground, 2024a).

In Central Australia, from 2020–2022, for children aged 0-8 years (Children's Ground, 2024b):

- 452 engaged in nutrition, including education, food security and healthy meals
- 442 engaged in health routines and education, including teeth cleaning, hand and face washing
- 335 engaged in social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) promotion
- 398 engaged in physical activity and health promotion
- 385 engaged in health check-ins and promotion conversations
- 368 engaged in targeted preventative health, including skin, eyes, ears, dental, weight and immunisation
- 374 engaged in cultural health promotion and wellbeing.

Over the same period (2020–2022) in Central Australia, family members (9+ years) also engaged in health promotion and support activities:

- 799 engaged in nutrition
- 655 engaged in activities to promote SEWB
- 666 engaged in cultural health promotion and wellbeing
- 218 engaged in environmental health initiatives
- 282 were supported to access clinical health services

Further details of Children's Ground's contribution to early learning are summarised below.

Supporting better nutrition

Children's Ground supported better nutrition in the communities where it works in several ways. The evaluation observed, for example:

- The provision of nutritious food, such as for breakfasts, snacks and lunches alongside the delivery of learning sessions. Excess food was often left in community facilities, such as fridges (where these existed), for the community to use. This was, reportedly, sometimes the only access to healthy food for families for the entire week. In the very remote community of Markawo in West Arnhem, Children's Ground partnered with other organisations, such as OzHarvest, who donated food and supported distribution.
- Supporting families to prepare food, including taking parents to the shop to purchase affordable and healthy food, and cooking alongside family members to prepare breakfasts and lunches for learning sessions.
- Providing guidance, role modelling, and skills and nutrition literacy to support healthy eating, including on specific issues such as when children have iron deficiency.
- Removing barriers to access to health eating, for example by helping people to access foodbanks or to purchase basic equipment such as large cooking pots.

² CG approach makes an unequivocal contribution to an observed positive outcome.



Activities to support better nutrition were strongly integrated into learning sessions with nutrition seen as a necessary input into effective learning. In some communities, Children's Ground also supported parents to prepare packed lunches for school children, while the sharing of knowledge and practice around gathering bush tucker took place during on country learning sessions.

Normalising healthy routines

Alongside health eating, establishing other healthy routines was embedded in the implementation of the Children's Ground approach. This commonly involved supporting children to practice regular hand and face washing and teeth brushing during the delivery of learning sessions, and talking about the importance of these routines in preventing infections. By targeting children, Children's Ground are hoping to habitualise these behaviours from a young age. The evaluation team observed this, with children routinely washing their hands before eating or entering a classroom and checking adults were also complying.

Normalising healthy behaviours is supported by health prevention and education. For example, the health promotion staff discussed the links between oral health and broader health impacts, and between hand and face washing and eye health and infectious diseases.

Promoting social and emotional wellbeing

Routines to promote SEWB were also integrated into learning sessions, such as physical activity and regulating activities such as breathing exercises when sessions transitioned into learning activities. More broadly, but critically, many of the practices observed under the Children's Ground approach – such as promoting identity and connection to family, kinship, community, culture and country – are important determinants of Aboriginal SEWB.

The evaluation team heard and observed other evidence of how the Children's Ground approach supported SEWB, including:

- the employment of dedicated SEWB counsellors for First Nations staff and families
- Children's Ground staff engaged with children, families and communities in a very positive, strengths-based way
- the joy and excitement children got from engaging in sessions was clearly apparent
- the ability of Children's Ground to take children on country and away from their community at a time of heightened distress and disruption
- the way Children's Ground stood behind several communities over a prolonged period of emotional trauma, loss and disorder where many other organisations and services would have backed away entirely
- support for women's group, including dedicated on country visits.

Facilitating connection and engagement in other services

There was significant evidence of Children's Ground helping communities connect and engage with other services, including preventive and clinical treatment. In one case, Children's Ground had recently picked up the delivery of a mobile laundry service supported by the Orange Sky Laundry charity. Children's Ground staffed the vehicle, which contained three washing machines and three dryers, driving it to the communities it works in, setting it up and supporting community members to do their laundry. The service was new in 2024, was highly used, and Children's Ground planned to upskill local community members in its operation. Children's Ground and ACCHO staff reported very positively on the potential benefits of the service from a hygiene health perspective, and also from



bringing the community together for a weekly routine.

Children's Ground's connections with community and routine community learning sessions provided a platform for visiting health services to piggyback on. This was observed in one community, where a visiting dental service was able to leverage off the community coming together for a learning session to discuss teeth and mouth hygiene and provide dental check-ups. An ACCHO reported that its mobile clinic visited town camps where Children's Ground operated and, while they were able to provide the primary care people needed, they benefited from the relationships and trust that Children's Ground had built up with local community members. This supported people's motivation to attend the clinic, their safe engagement with clinicians, and provided health literacy and navigational support to attend follow-up care. The ACCHO described Children's Ground as helping to 'break down barriers' to healthcare and commented that the role it plays is not the sort of thing that is immediately apparent in funding agreements or Closing the Gap targets.

There was also evidence of Children's Ground helping people to access and engage with health services for both routine and emergency care. This occurred, for example, through providing transport to appointments, attending appointments alongside community members, and through recognising and identifying the need for healthcare through their frequent engagement with community members. Community members valued being able to attend appointments with Children's Ground staff who were able to help with translation, health literacy and contributed to them feeling comfortable and safe. It was noted that there was often not a high level of consistency in health service practitioners which contributed to community members' anxiety in attending appointments. Support for transport and access/delivery of medicines was critical in Marikawo which was several hours drive from the nearest health

service.

ACCHOs commented on challenges in meeting the demand for their services, partly driven by workforce gaps, and the benefits in people being supported to engage in the comprehensive health care services provided by ACCHOs. One ACCHO commented that Children's Ground had relationships with some very vulnerable families which helped to ensure these people were engaged in the health service and not lost to follow up services.

Alignment to Closing the Gap priorities

There is strong alignment between the contribution that Children's Ground makes to First Nations people engaging in health promotion and support and the following Closing the Gap outcomes:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives (Outcome 1).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong (Outcome 2).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing (Outcome 14).

There is alignment to other Closing the Gap outcomes too, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing (Outcome 16)

Factors that may inhibit wider contribution

Evaluation participants discussed barriers and opportunities with respect to ways that health promotion and support outcomes could be enhanced. These included:



- The lack of consistent and long-term funding limits Children's Ground's ability to deliver a full scope of health promotion activities regularly in all communities. For example, in Central Australia, Children's Ground reported the serious levels of health burden require dedicated health promotion staff in each community – both specialist and local staff. The lack of secure funding impacted SEWB and maternal health.
- The burden of disease and complex health needs require dedicated support to navigate complex health systems where specialist services are siloed and people live with multiple morbidities. Children's Ground reported that integrated individualised health plans were critical to health outcomes and that there were insufficient resources to meet demand.
- More staff focused on delivery in community would enable other staff to work more strategically and to their scope of practice. Health staff reported being frequently required to focus on delivering the foundations of health, such as access to food, shelter and hygiene, as opposed to helping community members through working with more complex needs.
- The lack of community infrastructure, such as access to community centres and storage facilities for cooking equipment and food, limited the ability to establish more permanent delivery, such as the setup of a community kitchen. This also contributed to Children's Ground staff having to spend significant time packing up/down and transporting equipment and supplies.

- Stronger relationships between Children's Ground and health services could enhance the flow of information between organisations, strengthening understanding of what services are being delivered and, potentially, data sharing to better understand the impact of Children's Ground's health promotion and support activities.

Potential rival explanations for observed outcomes

Other organisations, notably ACCHOs, provide comprehensive Primary Healthcare services that include many of the types of health promotion activity and support provided by Children's Ground as well as support in accessing and navigating services, including patient transport. However, the demand for these services often outstrips the capacity of ACCHOs to provide these services and ACCHOs frequently have to focus on the delivery of clinical services to meet acute needs. In addition, other health services, including ACCHOs, do not have the equivalent 'reach' into the communities where Children's Ground operates and there is an absence of community-based health services and 'in community' models of care in these communities. That said, many of the town camp communities are within close proximity to an ACCHO and regularly attend these services for their primary care.

We conclude that the Children's Ground approach is enhancing access to health promotion and support in the communities where it works, but it is not doing so in isolation. Working with other services, including those that provide clinical services, to improve the effectiveness of the health system is part of the Children's Ground approach.



Appendix C

Contribution of the Children's Ground approach to increased engagement in employment opportunities and supports

Increased engagement in economic and employment opportunities and supports are expected outcomes of the Children's Ground approach. These outcomes are expected to contribute to families being economically strong and financially independent, and communities enjoying employment and economic opportunities.

This paper examines the contribution of the Children's Ground approach to this outcome primarily through the Children's Ground's employment of a local community-based First Nations workforce⁶. This analysis informs evaluation questions on:

- To what extent is Children's Ground achieving employment of local community-based First Nations people? What is the impact of this on individuals, children and families? (KEQ 2.3)
- To what extent are the activities delivered under the Children's Ground approach contributing to improved outcomes? (KEQ 3)

The evidence in this contribution case is from interviews and yarns with Children's Ground staff (current and previous) and community members, and from data reported by Children's Ground. There was significant evidence of Children's Ground's contribution to engagement in employment and benefits from this such as increased confidence. There was less evidence of the impact of this on families becoming economically strong and financially independent. This aligns with what might be expected at this stage of implementation of the Children's Ground approach.

⁶ Children's Ground also supports First Nations people to access employment elsewhere through, for example, helping people to access documentation and to understand the role of employment services providers.



Key elements of access to employment opportunities and supports

The interviews and yarns identified several intertwined elements that people considered integral to employment access and support. These included:

- being aware of employment opportunities
- being ready/prepared to take up employment
- having cultural skills and experiences valued by employers
- feeling safe and supported once in employment
- having flexible working arrangements that were responsive to people's other needs and priorities.

Case

The Children's Ground approach makes a *direct contribution*⁷ to First Nations people, in the communities Children's Ground works in, gaining employment and to supporting people once in employment. This contribution is critical given the lack of economic and employment opportunities within these communities, high unemployment, an absence of recent work experience, and a lack of role models. Evidence of this contribution follows.

Evidence of contribution

In 2023, 112 First Nations people were employed at Children's Ground (Children's Ground, 2024a). This number has grown over time. For example, in Central Australia the number of First Nations employees grew from 59 over 2017–2019 to 83 over 2020–2022. Over 2020–2022, First Nations people represented 71% of the Children's Ground workforce in Central Australia and had a retention rate of 78% (Children's Ground, 2024b).

Further details of Children's Ground's contribution to employment are summarised below.

Pre-employment engagement

People in local communities gain familiarity and experience with Children's Ground, often following a pathway of firstly engaging alongside their children in early years learning and health promotion sessions, then volunteering their time to support Children's Ground staff with preparing for or running these sessions, then becoming involved in being approached by Children's Ground to undertake paid work aligned that suits what Children's Ground assessed to be their individual strengths. Through this awareness and engagement, Children's Ground makes people aware of employment opportunities. Some people take up these opportunities, while others who do not feel ready for employment and opt to continue to work with Children's Ground in a voluntary capacity before taking up employment.

Children's Ground also provided practical support to get people ready for employment, such as assistance with documentation and other requirements. This included helping people source

⁷ CG approach makes an unequivocal contribution to an observed positive outcome.

identification documentation, apply for police checks, obtain drivers licenses, and sort out tax and Centrelink obligations.

Children's Ground's approach to employing First Nations people was described as an 'open-door policy' – Children's Ground met people wherever they are at and make it work.

Creating a safe and supportive workplace

In addition to supporting people into employment, Children's Ground provided a culturally safe and supportive workplace for employees. People expressed comfort at being able to work alongside other family and community members, and in being able to work in their own community. Children's Ground also offered specific supports for employees, such as in financial literacy and money management support, mentoring and counselling, and supported employees with employment literacy (for example, understanding time sheets and pay slips) and to understand their rights (for example, in their arrangements with housing providers, child protection and Centrelink). These supports, reportedly, help employment retention.

Enabling flexible working arrangements

One of the main ways Children's Ground supports its employees is by enabling people to engage in and adapt their employment arrangements to fit their individual situations. This includes casual, variable, part-time and full-time contract arrangements. The range of contract types enables flexibility for engagement in cultural responsibilities and when people do engage in these, Children's Ground has a non-punitive approach.

In Central Australia, the majority of First Nations employees are engaged through casual and variable contracts (Children's Ground, 2024b). On average, First Nations employees in Central Australia work between 15-20 hours per week (Children's Ground, 2024b). People reported valuing the flexibility in these arrangements and this was frequently mentioned as a key driver to successful employment and retention outcomes.

Children's Ground reported that it provides practical and logistical support for periods of sorry business and for funerals, and that this support maintains a connection with families during these periods and encourages them to return to work and education sooner (Children's Ground, 2024b).

Benefit and impact of these contributions

People reported various benefits from Children's Ground's contribution to employing a First Nations workforce. It is important to consider these benefits and impacts within the context of people's previous work experience. In Central Australia, over 2017–2022 (Children's Ground, 2024b):

- 31% of First Nations staff employed at Children's Ground had never worked in paid employment





- 71% were not employed when they started working with Children's Ground
- of those who had worked before, 83% had not worked in the past 12 months.

People described the impact of work as a game-changer. For example, they talked about having never worked before and being in a very difficult space when they were offered work at Children's Ground. Children's Ground enabled them to work alongside family, connect with their country through on-country learning sessions and build their confidence. The experience at Children's Ground helped some people to secure other work, outside of Children's Ground. They felt that no one else was able to provide this pathway, successfully, from no work experience to a secure job.

Other benefits reported included:

- employment at Children's Ground made people feel valued and empowered through their time and effort being recognised
- people felt pride in the work and in their responsibilities – this has boosted confidence and social and emotional wellbeing
- employment of local community members flowed on to building ownership and trust in Children's Ground in the wider community, and to Children's Ground gaining access to local 'intelligence' – this is because employees are in/of the families Children's Ground works with
- the employment of a local First Nations workforce has provided more stability than employing a non-Indigenous workforce, where workers are often more transient
- employees served as a role model for others, including intergenerational role modelling for children and young people who are seeing their family work as well as for other adults in communities
- people reported having more income and ability to make ends meet.

Alignment to Closing the Gap priorities

Evaluation participants discussed barriers and opportunities with respect to ways that early years learning. There is strong alignment between the contribution that Children's Ground makes to First Nations people gaining employment and support and the following Closing the Gap outcome:

- Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities (Outcome 8).

There is alignment to other Closing the Gap outcomes too, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintaining a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their lands and waters (Outcome 15), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing (Outcome 16).

Factors that may inhibit wider contribution

Evaluation participants discussed barriers and opportunities about ways that employment outcomes could be enhanced. These included:

- The ability of Children's Ground to employ more people is limited by funding, both for wages and for the support required once in employment.
- There has been less success in engaging First Nations men in employment and some men may require different or more intensive support to build self-esteem, confidence and motivation to work, and more diverse work opportunities. This is expected to change as boys who grew up with Children's Ground in their community become working age.
- There has also been less success in engaging young people in the workforce which is recognised as an area for improvement. Again, this may change as children who grew up with Children's Ground in their community become working age.
- As the workforce grows and develops, there is an opportunity to allocate roles and responsibilities more specifically, or to be more targeted, so that specialists are able to develop in and work to their full scope of practice, whether that be as a cultural educator, health promotion officer or driver, etc. This may help with retention and create progression pathways for existing staff, either within Children's Ground or within external organisations.

Potential rival explanations for observed outcomes

Children's Ground's approach to employment of First Nations people appears fundamentally different to most other organisations. It's open-door approach, ability to offer place-based (in community)^a flexible work, and provide a wrap-around, caring and supportive environment explains its success in employing and retaining people with limited or no previous work experience, many of whom experience complex needs. We have not identified any alternative explanations for why these outcomes have been observed.

^a In the majority of communities where Children's Ground works, there are no other workplaces or employers offering work in the community.



Appendix D: Children's Ground 2024 funding

Funding Department	Grant	Shared Services	Research and Evaluation	Top End	Central Australia	Total
Department of Health	Health Grant	280,960	68,000	320,403	930,637	1,600,000
	% by Location	18%	4%	20%	58%	100%
Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet	NIAA Schooling Grant CA	156,000	50,000		490,516	696,516
	NIAA Schooling Grant - supplementary and Indexation payment				161,048.43	161,048.43
	% by Location	18%	6%	0%	76%	100%
Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet	Women in Leadership	17,420			119,730	137,150
	% by Location	13%	0%	0%	87%	100%
Department of Employment and Workforce Relations	DEWR Local Jobs	52,292	27,624	58,813	321,183	459,911
	% by Location	11%	6%	13%	70%	100%
Department of Social Services	DSS Community Led Prevention	9,485			35,515	45,000
	% by Location	21%	0%	0%	79%	100%
Department of Industry Science and Resources	Under 25GO			34,500	20,500	55,000
	% by Location	0%	0%	63%	37%	100%
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, comms and the Arts	IVAIS				11,375	11,375
	% by Location	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, comms and the Arts	ILA	15,000			88,322	103,322
	% by Location	15%	0%	0%	85%	100%
Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet	NIAA - NAIDOC event funding				15,323	15,323
					100%	100%
Northern Territory Government care of its	Palmerston Youth Activities			10,000		10,000

agency Territory Families, Housing and Communities				100%	100%
Northern Territory Government	Ampe-mape Alyelheme (Kids Sing!)			12,000	12,000
				100%	100%
Northern Territory Government care of its agency Territory Families, Housing and Communities	Youth Grant 2023/24			40,000	40,000
				80,000	80,000
		0%	0%	13%	13%
				27%	27%
Northern Territory Government Territory Families, Housing and Communities	Family Support Services	42,000		257,527	299,527
		14%	0%	86%	0%
				100%	100%
Northern Territory Government care of its agency NT Health	Laundry Project	2,628		18,041	20,670
		13%	0%	87%	0%
				100%	100%
Northern Territory Government care of its agency Territory Families, Housing and Communities	Intergenerational Early learning program	8,825	2,915	48,792	60,532
		15%	5%	81%	0%
				100%	100%
Northern Territory Government care of its agency Territory Families, Housing and Communities	Darwin After Hours Youth Activities			25,000	25,000
		0%	0%	100%	0%
				100%	100%
	Total	584,610.35	148,538.67	813,075.78	2,085,100.38
	% of Total funding applied by Location	16%	4%	22%	57%
				100%	100%

Note: Children's Ground uses calendar years for its fiscal years. The data shown in the table above is funding taken to account in calendar year 2024 (i.e., recorded in the calendar year used as Children's Ground's fiscal period). Where agencies use financial years as their fiscal periods, it is therefore expected that funding recorded in the table above for the calendar year will differ from funding committed by agencies for financial years. The data in this table was provided by Children's Ground for inclusion to provide an indication of the nature, source, and attribution of Children's Ground's government funding. It should not be used to assess Children's Ground's compliance with any contractual or grant requirements.



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