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The Treasury

UNICEF Australia submission on a national approach to worker screening in the care and support economy

UNICEF Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Treasury on a national approach to worker screening in the care and support economy. Guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and informed by UNICEF's work in over 190 countries improving the lives of children, we bring a unique lens to care and support economy reform - one that is centred on equity, safety, and universal access for children and families.

Our submission responds to the Treasury's consultation on two proposed options for worker screening – mutual recognition of existing checks across jurisdictions, and a single national check – and their implications for children. While the broader care and support economy includes aged care and disability services, our submission focusses on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in accordance with our mandate and expertise. We believe that strong protections in ECEC can set a benchmark for other sectors and complement wider reforms across the care economy.

Support for a national approach to worker screening through a single check

UNICEF Australia strongly supports the objective underpinning a national approach to worker screening in the care and support economy, to prevent high-risk individuals from working with vulnerable populations and reduce the risk of harm and abuse. This is especially urgent for children in ECEC - recent reports have exposed unacceptable child safeguarding failures in parts of the sector, underscoring the need for child safety to be a paramount in reforms to the care and support economy.

We support a national approach to screening care and support workers where it lifts - and does not level down - protections for children in ECEC. In this regard, a single national check would offer the more effective solution by directly addressing the fragmentation between jurisdictions. Regulatory inconsistencies allow individuals posing a risk to children to move between jurisdictions undetected. Accordingly, UNICEF Australia has been advocating for a nationally unified approach to Working With Children Checks, to ensure all individuals working with children are subject to the same rigorous screening, regardless of location.

While mutual recognition offers a constructive step toward simplifying the current system and easing workforce mobility, it does not fully resolve the inconsistencies that can impact child safety. If a check in one jurisdiction is less stringent (for example, shorter exclusion list or longer renewal cycles), recognising it elsewhere could import those weaker standards into other states. In effect, children's protection might still depend on where a check was originally done. Conversely, a single national check would help to harmonise regulatory practice and ensure all children benefit from the same level of protection.

Upholding children's rights through a national check

Any worker screening approach must first and foremost safeguard children's rights to safety and wellbeing. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 19, children should be protected from all forms of

violence or abuse, and Article 3 requires that the best interests of the child be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. In practical terms for reforms to the care and support economy, this means:

1. Ensuring no child falls through regulatory gaps

Every educator or carer in ECEC should undergo rigorous screening, no matter which state or territory they work in. A national approach, with consideration of children's safety at the centre, will help to close jurisdictional loopholes so that children everywhere enjoy equal protection. This unified scheme should apply consistent eligibility criteria, vetting processes and disqualification standards nationwide, aligning with the highest current child-safety benchmarks. Importantly, a national approach to worker screening should not dilute the safeguards that have been built into WWCC processes for childcare – instead, it should apply those high standards uniformly to all care workers without exception.

2. Prioritising child safety over administrative convenience

Nationally consistent regulations that span all care settings and include explicit child-safety requirements are essential to not compromise on critical protections for children. While reducing red tape and increasing workforce mobility are important, these goals must be balanced with the overriding priority of child safety. Policies should never compromise on screening thoroughness or standards in the name of efficiency; any national system should adopt the highest child-safety standard in use, not a lowest common denominator.

3. Embedding accountability and oversight for children

A national approach to worker screening should include robust oversight on children's safety and wellbeing. UNICEF Australia has been advocating for the establishment of an Early Years Commission to monitor and enforce compliance with child safety requirements across the ECEC sector. While an Early Years Commission's remit would be specific to ECEC, it could play a complementary role alongside broader care sector-wide reforms and inject a strong child-focused lens into wider care economy changes. This would ensure that as regulations align across sectors, the unique needs of children are given focused attention and no safety issue is lost among broader care and support worker concerns.

Concluding remarks

UNICEF Australia appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this important consultation. Our vision is that Australia's early childhood settings become models of safety, where every child can learn and thrive without risk, and every adult working with children is supported to uphold the highest standards of care. We see the development of a national approach to worker screening as an important step toward strengthening child safety in early childhood education and care. The evidence from inquiries and our own experience working across Australia demonstrates that children, families, and providers all benefit when there are clear, uniform and robust safeguards underpinning ECEC services. UNICEF Australia is committed to working with the government to ensure the worker screening reform offers the highest possible protections for children, so they are supported to thrive in their earliest years.

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