

INTEGRATION IN EARLY YEARS SERVICES: LEARNING FOR IMPACT

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH **dandolo**partners

BRIEF

SEP 2024



Introduction



This brief provides a summary of the report commissioned by Social Ventures Australia (SVA) from dandolopartners released in September 2024.

SVA commissioned dandolopartners ('dandolo') to analyse a range of integration models being implemented in early years services across Australia, with the aim of growing the evidence around:

- **What's possible** – profiling diverse models of integration and examples of innovation; and
- **What's effective** – the design features and conditions that underpin or enable effective integration.

This report provides new information to deepen the understanding of integration at scale through learnings from diverse models. It connects insights from practitioners

working on the ground with knowledge around policy and funding settings to strengthen the evidence on accelerating and scaling integration. It also contributes to building the evidence around what is needed to support a national vision for universal access to high-quality, integrated services, as identified in the National Early Years Strategy 2024-2034. The report draws together the collective experience of dandolo and SVA, the research literature and findings from interviews with eight integration initiatives who participated in this research (see [figure 1](#) on page 4).

Context

There is a widespread understanding that the early childhood service system needs to be more responsive to child and family needs. This has been identified in various government strategies, including the National Early Years Strategy 2024 - 2034.

Despite this, the system remains complex and siloed, meaning that children and families, and in particular those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and hardship, are unable to access the supports they need to thrive. Many reasons for this have been identified, including:

- **fragmented service delivery** which makes it difficult for families to navigate the system,
- **bureaucratic hurdles** (such as the complexity of accessing Child Care Subsidy) which act as barriers to families accessing services,
- **an overemphasis on siloed service delivery** rather than looking at the holistic needs of children and families, and
- **children and families feeling excluded or discriminated against** by services.

Integration is a key mechanism intended to overcome these barriers. It aims to create a holistic, joined up approach that is able to support children and families to identify and access services that they need, receive

additional supports and build a stronger social and support network.

The National Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 includes access to high-quality, affordable integrated services as a key outcome. However, there is very little detail on what is needed nor practical steps to ensure the system is responsive to child and family need.


Social Ventures Australia (SVA) has extensively profiled evidence-based models of Early Childhood Hubs ([Moore, 2021a](#); [Moore, 2021b](#); [SVA, 2023](#); [Deloitte Access Economics 2023](#)), one of the most promising solutions to bringing services to families, in their communities, and wrapping holistic supports around them.

Yet while Early Childhood Hubs are absolutely critical, scaling them is a long-term endeavour and seamless access to services and supports for families requires integration in many forms, building on existing strengths and infrastructure within communities. This report seeks to better understand integration through the many initiatives currently working to join up services and support access for diverse groups of families in need. This report refers to these as “integration initiatives”.



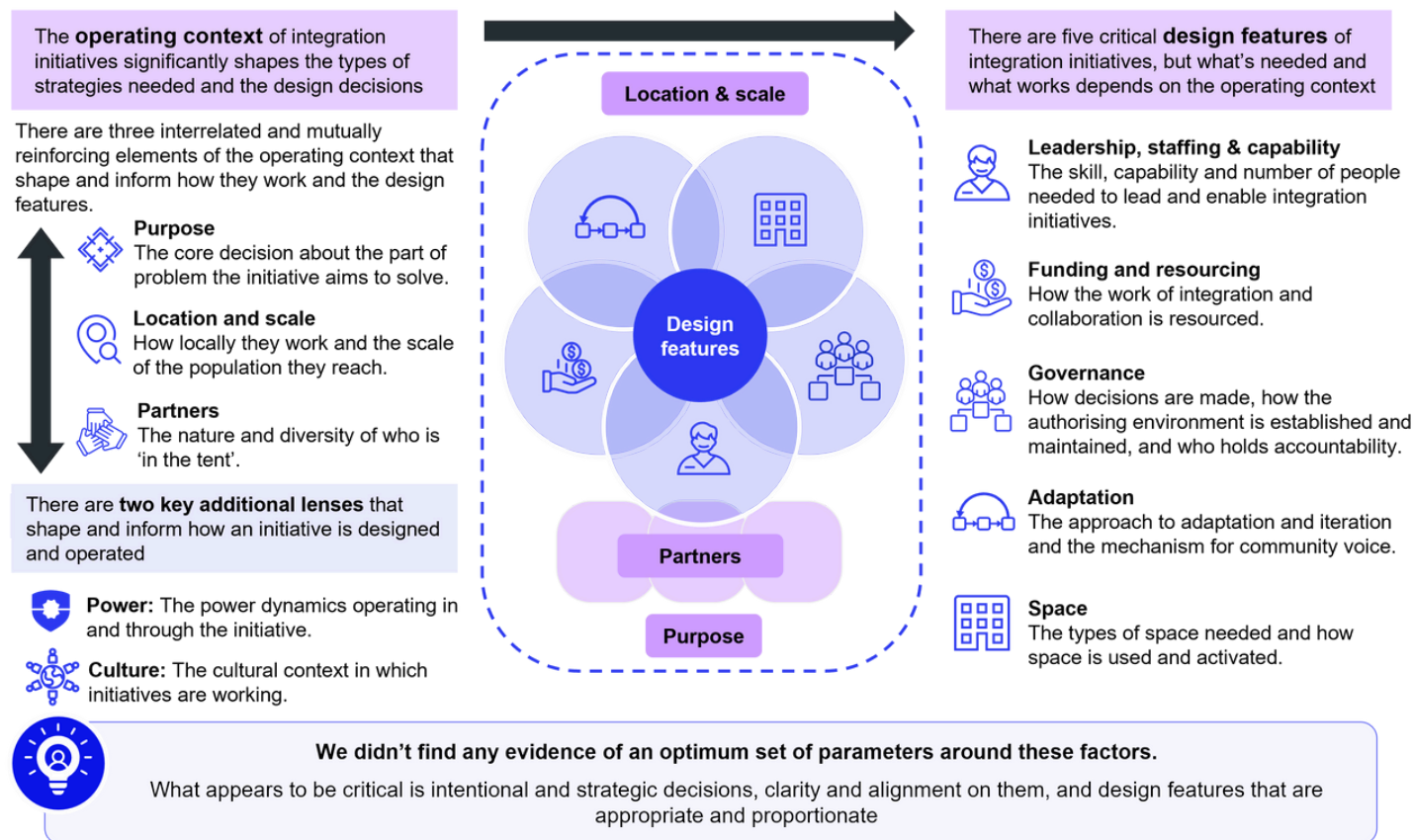
Case Study Sites

Figure 1: Eight integration initiatives who participated in this research

<p>The Brave Foundation  B R A V E</p> <p>The Brave Foundation supports young people who are expecting or parenting in Australia. Their unique Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) mentoring program equips participants to navigate parenting support, resources, and education or employment opportunities in their local community through personalised plans developed with mentors.</p>	<p>Goodstart's EChO </p> <p>Goodstart's Enhancing Children's Outcomes (EChO) program offered enhanced support through early childhood services across Australia. EChO centres provided additional support beyond core education and care, including child and family practitioners, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and social inclusion coordinators.</p>
<p>By Five </p> <p>By Five is a place-based community collaboration initiative in the Wimmera Southern Mallee region of Victoria, Australia. It works across five local government areas to ensure every child and family has access to consistent, quality early years services.</p>	<p>Brimbank City Council Early Years Network </p> <p>Brimbank, a local government area in Victoria, Australia, provides comprehensive services for children and families and convene a network of local services aiming to identify and address gaps in services.</p>
<p>Far North Early Childhood Network (FNECN) </p> <p>The Far North Early Childhood Network (FNECN) is a consultative forum that connects early childhood professionals across Far North Queensland, Australia. It aims to raise the profile of the early years and support every child in the region to enter school healthy and ready to learn.</p>	<p>Our Place  education is the key to the door</p> <p>Our Place is a backbone organisation that supports the education, health, and development of children and families in disadvantaged communities in Victoria, Australia. They use schools as a universal platform to support site partners to implement evidence-based strategies across five core elements.</p>
<p>The Hive </p> <p>The Hive is a place-based, collective impact initiative operating in Mt Drutt, NSW, Australia. As the backbone organisation, it works to ensure every child has the best possible start in life.</p>	<p>Uniting NSW </p> <p>Uniting NSW is a not-for-profit organisation that provides community services across New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. They offer a wide range of programs, including aged care, disability support, early learning, and family services.</p>

A framework for integration

We developed a framework for understanding how early years integration initiatives' operating context inform design decisions.



Source: Dandolo 2024

Key insights for funders and leaders

Funders and service leaders wanting to seed and scale integration initiatives may need to consider different approaches to designing, funding and managing programs and services. There's a need to strike a careful balance in terms of which components need to be tightly controlled and which need flexibility to evolve. It is important to be tight

on clarity of purpose and investing in the right team and the 'glue[1]', but loose on the what and how so there's space for initiatives to respond to different community priorities, mature over time, innovate and adapt. Key insights from this research are outlined further below.

[1] Glue refers to the leadership, administration and coordination required to operationalise and effectively manage an integration initiative. Glue describes many of the intangible elements needed for effective integration such as establishing and supporting networks and referrals with other relevant services, as well as the leadership and coordination with other services and across disciplines within the initiative, staff supports (practice frameworks, learning and development, professional supervision), outreach, and the business oversight, IT and office administration costs required for effective management of an integration initiative



Investment in the 'glue' is foundational

Funders need to invest in 'the glue' – especially the team of people who lead and drive the collaboration and undertake the relational work needed to make integration happen. Effective integration initiatives require leaders to drive a culture that values

collaborative ways of working and ensure staff have dedicated time to participate in integration activities. Integration cannot happen without dedicated funding and resourcing to support this work.



There needs to be clear, intentional boundaries for the work

Don't set up the integration initiatives to be all things to all people – ensure there are clear boundaries around the initiative aligned to purpose and reflective of place. The parameters around the work of an

integration initiative might change over time, so it's critical that the boundaries are intentional and the design is fit-for-purpose.



Build the right team and invest in their capability

Integration is driven by people with the skills and support to do the relational work that overcomes the complexity and fragmentation of services for families. It's not enough for funders to focus on infrastructure and assume integration will happen. Transdisciplinary work is

challenging and often very different to how people have worked previously. Ongoing investment in the capability and development of staff and leaders is central to success. This investment is as critical as building the infrastructure.



Readiness takes time and trust

The readiness and ability of organisations and people to work in an integrated way needs to be intentionally cultivated and time allowed for the development of trust. Funders and leaders need to understand the level of readiness within services and between services involved in an integration initiative, including the degree of values

alignment, whether there are established positive ways of working, and commitment to a shared agenda. This needs to be factored in to project workplans when funding an integration initiative. Funders and leaders need to build in mechanisms (across funding, governance and delivery plans) for ongoing learning, innovation and adaptation.



Be intentional about the design features

There aren't one-size-fits-all solutions, but rather a range of strategies and design decisions that can be effective in different contexts. Decisions about the design features should be strategic, responsive to local contexts and priorities, and fit-for-purpose. In different places and at different

stages of implementation, the optimal strategies for features like governance, funding and space may change. It is critical that the design ensures the community has a voice in shaping the what and the how of the integration initiative.



Be savvy about what success looks like

Balance the focus on purpose and outcomes – ensure the focus of the work is optimised for impact but be flexible and adapt as the initiative matures.



Invest proportionate to the ambition

The level and type of funding should consider the readiness of the integration initiative, the scope and scale of the operation, and the length and duration of the commitment.



Considerations for scale

A wide range of integration models have developed organically across Australia. Although there is real strength in learning from the different approaches, the diversity of models can be challenging when it comes to designing for scale. To accelerate and scale effective models in ways that are contextually appropriate, there is a real need to connect insights about what works 'from the ground' with policy and funding settings.



Recognise, grow and develop the workforce

Workforce is the first priority for scaling integration initiatives, and there is foundational work that funders and decision makers can progress to recognise, grow and develop the workforce.

There's a critical role for funders and policymakers in:

Recognising integration roles as distinct and valuable:

Helping create a language and profile for the 'boundary spanners', including by recognising or incentivising these roles in grant applications.

Growing the talent pool:

While integration leaders and practitioners are often considered rare and precious, they demonstrate a relatively consistent set of capabilities, skills and mindsets. Many of these capabilities can be taught and cultivated. This could include:

- Developing training programs and professional learning opportunities that focus on the core skills / competencies needed to move into integration work; and
- Working with core training providers in community services to adapt their programs to include / embed the core capabilities in existing professional training

Developing the workforce:

Enabling opportunities for learning and growth, including through:

- Creating / building on communities of practice for both leaders and practitioners;
- Designing and implementing advanced training, mentoring and professional development;
- Recognition / reward for exceptional practice (awards programs, profiling in communications, conference presentations);
- Specialist qualifications (including micro-credentials) and scholarships for intensive programs; and
- Creating the right scaffolding to recruit community members into these roles.



Build the conditions and deepen the evidence around effective integration

To support integration at scale, it is important that funders and policymakers consider the role they play in enabling or inhibiting integration, and how to strengthen the evidence around impact.

Build the authorising environment:

Funders – especially governments – play a critical role in setting expectations around ways of working that either enable or inhibit integration.

Funders can consider:

- How success is measured in funding agreements;
- Policy and practice frameworks that create clear boundaries and parameters but enable flexibility in implementation; and
- Internal governance arrangements that give middle-managers clarity about their scope of action and that explicitly authorise adaptation and innovation.

Investigate optimum settings:

The report found no clear evidence on the optimum purpose, location and scale, or partnership approach for integration initiatives. As funders move towards more large-scale investments, there's an opportunity to be more intentional about exploring where best to set the boundaries.

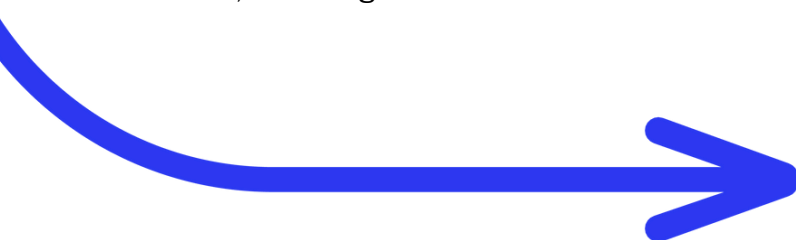
A more systematic investigation of the optimum scope and scale of integration initiatives would help chart the pathway towards scale.



Create the conditions for effective integration when leveraging universal services

Currently, there is increasing momentum around leveraging universal platforms – such as early learning services and schools – to drive more integration.

Many of the insights on principles important across diverse integration initiatives remain the same, including:



01 Leadership mindset, skills and time are critical

- The commitment, capability and capacity of the principal / centre director is a necessary precondition for impact.
- The skillset needed to be a highly effective principal or centre director is necessary but not sufficient for integration initiatives – they also need to be able to bring their team on the journey, foster an environment for intra-professional learning and ways of working, to navigate different service systems, and form partnerships with other organisations.

02 It's important to assess the readiness of the service

- Rather than 'gifting' greater integration capacity to a service, it's important to make sure the right foundations are in place and move at a pace that reflects readiness.
- This includes ensuring the key people at the service have the right mindsets, are aligned with the intent / purpose, and have already started building strong, respectful relationships with families and the community that they can build on.

03 Engagement needs to be resourced

- Investment in 'the glue' is foundational – especially the team of people who lead and drive the collaboration and undertake the relational work needed to make integration happen. Integration cannot happen without dedicated funding and resourcing to support this work.
- The 'day jobs' of principals and centre directors are already full – if they're expected to take on a wider role, be more engaged in community initiatives, and to spend time out of the service, they need additional internal leadership support.
- Resourcing participation in integration initiatives is important for everyone involved in integration activities, even if they're not the lead organisation. Participating in early years networks, in collaborative governance, or whole-of-community initiatives is challenging within the scope of their core roles.



Conclusion

Children in Australia continue to fall through the cracks of a complex, fragmented and inequitable early childhood system.

Integration of services is a key mechanism to overcome the barriers caused by siloed service delivery and funding. High-quality integrated services have the potential to wrap around children and families experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, supporting them through joined up service delivery, identification and provision of interventions for more complex needs and the building of trust in and increased uptake of services.

Early Childhood Hubs provide an effective mechanism to do this. When integrated services are delivered through an Early Childhood Hub, they also provide a safe place in the community where families can come with their children to spend time together and build their network with other families. Despite the benefit of Early Childhood Hubs for children and their families experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, the [research](#) SVA commissioned from Deloitte Access Economics found that at least 600 of the communities experiencing most disadvantage in Australia currently have no access to an Early Childhood Hub. SVA has a strategic focus on scaling Early Childhood

Hubs to ensure that more children and families are able to benefit from this model.

The level of need across Australia, as well as the complexity, diversity and scope of this need means we will always require multiple vehicles to support seamless access to services and supports for children and families experiencing disadvantage. While the sector works towards scaling Early Childhood Hubs, it is important to understand the range and potential of small-scale integration initiatives currently operating across the early childhood service landscape, and how they could be supported at greater scale.

These integration initiatives range in scale, reach and approach but all are focused on improving outcomes for the children and families that they service. This research identifies common components across integration initiatives that support effective integration and drive improved outcomes for children. Funders, service leaders and policymakers all have a role to play in the success of integration initiatives and in building the conditions for the delivery of more integration initiatives that are effective in seeing more children and families experiencing hardship benefit from seamless access to the supports needed to thrive.

