

In partnership with



## ACT Election Priorities

Dietitians Australia and Nutrition Australia ACT are calling on the newly elected ACT Government to ensure:

*Children across the ACT are afforded the best nutritional start to life with access to comprehensive dietetic services in early childhood education and care settings*

### Nutrition in early childhood

Dietitians Australia, in partnership with Nutrition Australia ACT, is calling on the ACT Government to **strengthen its implementation of the National Quality Standards in the provision of food in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services** to ensure all children accessing ECEC services are given the best possible nutrition foundation early in life. To achieve this, investment is urgently needed to fund nutrition support for the ECEC sector.

### Cost

**\$550,000 per annum**

This investment would provide:

**A dedicated nutritional support service** to provide a single contact point for centres' staff, educators, and cooks/chefs to access for specifically tailored and

evidence-based information and guidance from an Accredited Practising Dietitian, and to deliver

- **annual on-site menu assessments** conducted by an Accredited Practising Dietitian that can ensure infants and young children have access to nutritious meals and snacks that meet their needs
- **annual training** for educators to achieve optimal nutrition environments supporting children to develop a healthy relationship with food, aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Standards learning outcomes such as developing children's strong sense of wellbeing, with a focus on responsive feeding practices, positive food exposures through play-based learning, and building food literacy. Training to be facilitated on-site after hours by an Accredited Practising Dietitian

- **annual nutrition and food handling training** for centre educators, facilitated by an Accredited Practising Dietitian and delivered onsite at ECEC services
- **annual training for ECEC cooks/chefs** addressing nutrition and menu planning for ECEC services, facilitated by an Accredited Practising Dietitian, delivered in a community setting with opportunities to foster networking connections.

## Background

Nutrition is fundamental in the first 5 years of a child's life, particularly for growth and brain development. The food environment in ECEC settings plays a crucial role in shaping children's eating habits and overall health.

- There are approximately 200 centre-based early childhood education and care services in the ACT<sup>1</sup>
- In 2024, 57.2% of 0–5-year-old children in the ACT attended childcare services<sup>1</sup>
- On average children attending centre-based care in the ACT spend over 34 hours per week in an ECEC setting, making time spent in ECEC by children in the ACT the 3<sup>rd</sup> longest across the nation and above the national average<sup>1</sup>
- Over 90% of centre-based services in the ACT provide meals to children, where children will consume most of their weekly nutrition.

With over half of children 0-5 years of age engaged in ECEC services, the ECEC setting provides a unique environment in which to impact a significant proportion of ACT children of this age group, and to have a profound influence on the establishment of children's positive health behaviours that are carried forward throughout life. Establishing strong nutritional foundations will improve these children's mental and physical wellbeing, and thus their potential to learn and their educational outcomes. Strong nutritional foundations will also reduce their risk of disease in the short and long term, and it will increase their propensity to contribute to the economy later in life.

State and territory governments are responsible for the health, safety, wellbeing and educational outcomes of children in care. There are currently only 3 jurisdictions within Australia that provide free government funded state-wide healthy eating support services for ECEC settings: NSW, Victoria and Tasmania.

Investment is needed to help enable ECEC services to access nutrition support services.

## Reference

1. Australian Government Department of Education. Child care subsidy data report – March quarter 2024. 2024 (Available at: [Child Care Subsidy data report – March quarter 2024 - Department of Education, Australian Government](#))