



Hall & Partners

**Families qualitative
research project – Stage 2**
Final report

Prepared for the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority

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Executive summary

In 2012 the National Quality Framework (NQF) was introduced to improve the quality of education and care across long day care (LDC), family day care (FDC), preschool/kindergarten (PSK), and outside school hours care (OSHC) services. A key component of the NQF is the National Quality Standard (NQS) comprising of 7 quality areas on which education and care services are measured to determine an overall rating. The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) works with the Australian and state and territory governments to implement the NQF and support the education and care sector to improve quality outcomes for children.

Research objectives

ACECQA commissioned this research to understand awareness and use of the NQF among families, with a view to increasing the extent to which the NQS ratings and Starting Blocks are used by parents to make informed decisions about education and care services.

More specifically, the objective of the research was to understand parents' decision-making process when choosing an education and care service for their child, the information sources that influence this decision and the factors that families prioritise in making their choice, including the role of quality. The purpose of which was to explore opportunities to optimise existing communication collateral, such as Starting Blocks, and to inform and guide the development of future communications, messaging and strategic targeting opportunities to increase the awareness and use of the NQS ratings and Starting Blocks by Australian parents.

Research approach

This exploratory research consisted of three qualitative components – twelve (12) group discussions with parents with children currently in or intending to be in the four different types of education and care services (LDC, FDC, PSK, and OSHC services), an individual pre-discussion group journey mapping task, and a follow-up online discussion board. Four Australian states were covered, including metropolitan and regional areas.

Summary of findings

This research found that parents understood the importance of education and care in childhood as crucial for children's development. However, what this meant in practice differed depending on the child's age - parents of babies and toddlers were typically most concerned with their children's wellbeing and emotional development - cognitive development became more important as children got older. The high stakes, combined with the complex and dynamic education and care landscape, meant that selecting an education and care service was a stressful and highly emotive decision that could lead

parents to feel overwhelmed. This decision was not just a matter of choosing a service, but also involved deciding whether to seek care in the first place, and if so, what type of care.

Irrespective of the type of care, once the decision to seek care had been made, the first stage in the decision-making process was to create a list of relevant services, which might involve an initial listing building process, followed by a shortlisting process. The next stage involved parents having direct contact with education and care services, including visits to services, which were crucial to the final decision. The decision-making process culminated in putting the child's name on a list and securing a place. This final stage sometimes became protracted due to a long and uncertain waiting period.

Word of mouth played a crucial role in influencing the decision-making process, namely known sources such as family and friends as well as social media sources such as Facebook groups. Parents placed a high degree of trust in the perceptions of other parents and relied heavily on these subjective sources to inform their decision-making. Parents particularly valued information that was recent, based on insider knowledge and consistent. There was an underlying trust in government information sources, but these were mainly used in the initial fact-finding phases (rather than to help assess service quality), and few parents specifically sought out government information sources. Importantly parents' own judgement ultimately superseded all other influences.

In deciding on an education and care service, some parents faced limited choice because of supply or demand issues, but for all of the parents in this research, the quality of a service was important. Though few mentioned the word, 'quality' was crucial in their decisions and parents had their own methods of assessing quality. Parents' priorities for education and care service quality centred on their child's wellbeing, particularly support for their physical and emotional wellbeing and thereafter support for their growth or development.

Parents assumed all education and care services must meet minimum government standards to operate, but awareness of the NQF and use of NQS ratings was very low, reflecting previous research qualitative research conducted in 2014 and a quantitative survey conducted in 2017. The potential value of the NQF and the NQS ratings became clearer as parents learned more about them. They felt this information would be most useful during the initial navigation/list-building phase (particularly if there would be an ability to search for education and care services based on certain criteria, as some assumed).

However, as they learned more about the rating system some also began to consider and question what goes on 'behind the scenes' to ensure that education and care services in Australia attain the high standards they expect, suggesting that care needs to be taken when explaining the NQF/NQS to ensure it enhances (and does not inadvertently undermine) confidence in the overall child care system. A number of gaps

in understanding also need to be addressed. These relate to regulatory process (how services are rated), recency (how often services are assessed) and accountability (consequences for failing/under-performing services).

The language and presentation of the NQS Rating scale seemed to encourage parents to conflate the NQS with the minimum standards required for services to legally operate, rather than depicting it as distinct quality rating, which would help parents to differentiate between services. Specifically, participants tended to assume that services rated as 'Working towards NQS' were falling below the minimum standard for education and care services. As such they queried why these services would be allowed to operate and typically felt that they would not want to send their child to a service with this rating (although some became more open to considering a service with this rating after further consideration, discussion and review of the information provided). A number of factors influenced this largely negative interpretation of the 'Working towards NQS' rating, including the name itself and its location in the scale; below the 'Meeting NQS' rating and at the bottom of the 3-point version of the scale shown to participants.

Research conducted in 2014 found that parents did not always interpret the titles of the seven quality areas, nor the accompanying descriptions, as intended. Positively, this issue seems to have been resolved, as parents in this study praised the new plain English descriptions accompanying each of the quality areas and they were able to relate these to the factors they were looking for when choosing an education and care service. The language used throughout the Starting Blocks website was also considered parent-friendly. However, the 'Starting Blocks' name was not inherently meaningful to parents; in isolation it did not communicate its relationship to education and care services or signal the relevance of the content to parents. Similarly, some of the language used in the headings featured in the printed Starting Blocks materials failed to reference key words such as 'childcare' (referring only to 'services').

There was negligible awareness of the Starting Blocks materials or the Starting Blocks website among the parents in this research, even though they had been actively looking for information about education and care services. After exploring the website during the research process, parents considered the Starting Blocks search function, along with the provision of NQS ratings for identified services, an essential feature. The broad range of other content relating to children's education and development also increased its overall value. However, it was not immediately clear to parents that Starting Blocks is a government initiative, the key purpose of the website (i.e. to inform parents about the NQF and NQS) did not stand out from the other information on the site, the direct connection between Starting Blocks and the NQF was not obvious to parents and key gaps in understanding (as already described above) were not completely addressed.

There were many similarities in the views expressed by the parents who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in this research and those expressed by other

parents. There were also some key points of difference, most notably the service decision-making process appeared less confusing or overwhelming for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents who took part in the research; they placed greater emphasis on finding a service that would provide links with family and the community; and their decision was primarily influenced by immediate community members, rather than online sources. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents also tended to express less interest in the NQS ratings, presenting an additional communications challenge that will likely require a tailored approach.

Opportunities

These research findings point to several opportunities for ACECQA to progress towards its remit of improving families' and the wider community's access to and understanding of information about education and care service quality, and increasing the priority placed on this information, by becoming:

- **A trusted, independent source of parent support** - parents were open to receiving support from an independent, credible, trusted source of information about education and care services; specifically the NQS ratings and Starting Blocks website.
- **A leader in centralised, independent, service information** - as no single source dominates this space, there is an opportunity for ACECQA to fill this gap and become the leading source of information and advice in relation to education and care services consulted by parents.
- **A pioneer in developing quality literacy in the community** - parents felt that knowing about the NQS and NQS ratings could increase their confidence when interacting with service providers, so they would know what to expect from their service, particularly if they needed to raise concerns about aspects of service quality.

Recommendations

Recommendations to assist ACECQA in realising these opportunities follow below – these relate to four main areas: raising awareness, engaging parents (by focusing on their priorities), developing messaging that resonates with parents, and building trust.

Area 1. Raising awareness

Recommendation 1a: Raising awareness of the NQS ratings and the Starting blocks website (as the key source for listing services and finding out individual service ratings) will be critical to expand the impact of the NQF and NQS ratings among parents. A significant 'above the line' (ATL) campaign, supported by 'below the line' (BTL) strategies, is recommended to raise awareness of the NQS and Starting Blocks among a large proportion of the relatively broad target audience (essentially parents of children ages 0-12) as quickly as possible. 'Above the line' activities should ideally be expanded to include communications channels with a broad reach, including television and radio (in addition to digital and social media), as well as special interest media to target specific groups.

Recommendation 1b: The influence of 'insiders' could be harnessed by engaging a high profile and influential Champion and/or by establishing a peer ambassador program (which could include influential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members), and by encouraging educators, peak bodies and other key sector stakeholders to promote use of the NQS and Starting Blocks when interacting with parents, through articles in newsletters, and industry publications.

Recommendation 1c: The development of highly engaging and therefore sharable content would be particularly valuable to leverage the influence of word of mouth to spread the campaign messages (via social media).

Recommendation 1d: Though increasing quality information and literacy would be beneficial to all parents of children aged 12 and under, priority should be placed on raising awareness among parents as early as possible, before they begin navigating the system. This would provide the greatest benefit and would fit with their existing decision making process. In addition to a broad ATL campaign, expanding the range of partnerships to facilitate third party promotion is recommended to achieve this, with a particular focus on partners that could provide information to parents of young children at key touchpoints / milestones, such as after birth (along with the provision of each child's Personal Health Record for example), at developmental checks, or vaccinations.

Area 2. Engaging parents by focusing on their priorities

Recommendation 2a: Centre communications on alerting parents to the availability of an independent government rating system for childcare services and a comprehensive website that will allow them to search for and compile a list of suitable childcare services (ideally based on price, service type, and opening hours, as well as location), compare their ratings and find out more about the ratings process.

Recommendation 2b: Ensure the Find Childcare search function is the most prominent item on the Starting Blocks homepage, followed by information about the NQS and ratings. The NQS ratings should also be prominent in search results (including the rating for each quality area), along with accompanying information (particularly to explain the 'Working towards NQS' rating, as this raised concerns for some parents), via links if necessary.

Recommendation 2c: Enhance the Find Childcare search function by including a smaller search radius option, the ability to filter by care type and price. Investigate the possibility of including availability/wait list information and parent reviews in search results, as this information would be valued by parents (although these additions may be impractical/prohibitively time consuming to maintain).

Recommendation 2d: Highlight that the NQS ratings have been designed to assess the aspects of quality that matter to parents and demonstrate this alignment by mentioning specific factors that are fundamental to all parents (i.e. those relating to physical and emotional wellbeing). Where the seven quality areas are provided, present those that align with parents' most common priorities first – i.e. children's health and safety and relationships with children, followed by the physical environment, educational program and practice, family and community links, and finally staffing arrangements and governance.

Recommendation 2e: In future (after raising awareness more broadly), increased targeting may be beneficial, for example, tailoring messaging for parents of older children and/or by service type (e.g. OSHC more about fun, relaxation and peer relationships, PSK more about school readiness) and/or by cultural background/identity (e.g. for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents highlight standards that focus on community engagement, respect for children/parents culture, utilise more images of children who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and establish partnerships with community leaders).

Recommendation 2f: Assuming the Starting Blocks name must be retained, it should always be accompanied by supporting text to explain its relevance to parents seeking/using childcare services.

Recommendation 2g: Parent-friendly terminology should be used in communications wherever possible. Where formal language must be retained, ensure this is accompanied by plain-English explanations (as is already the case when presenting the seven quality areas). Ensure all headings clearly signpost the accompanying content, again reflecting the language used by parents wherever possible.

Area 3. Developing messaging that resonates with parents

Recommendation 3a: Communication messaging should be built around the need states experienced by parents at each stage in the decision-making journey, including: navigating the education and care system, list building, initial elimination/short-listing, validation of their choice and education (further details are provided in the Customer Value Proposition, below).

Recommendation 3b: Communication messaging and the creative concepts used to convey this should acknowledge and leverage the range of emotions that parents feel when choosing an education and care service for their child, to engage parents.

Recommendation 3c: The tone and content of communication messaging should acknowledge that parents understand their child's unique needs better than anyone and position the NQS rating and Starting Blocks as complimentary tools to support (rather than replace) them in making a final judgement.

Recommendation 3d: Key communication materials should be tested among the target audience(s) to evaluate their effectiveness (e.g. in terms of message comprehension, emotional resonance, perceived relevance, credibility, tone, 'look and feel', call to action etc.).

Area 4. Building trust in the NQS ratings

Recommendation 4a: Reinforce and confirm parents underlying belief that all operating childcare services must meet stringent quality standards in all communications. An infographic might assist with this, by summarising the relationship between education and care service accreditation and the NQS.

Recommendation 4b: Assuming it is not feasible to change the NQS rating scale labelling, the presentation of the scale should be adapted to clarify that all services with a rating above 'Significant improvement required' at least achieve the legislative requirements for operation in Australia, to enhance trust and confidence in the quality of the education and care system. A mock-up of this type of approach is provided below. Existing explanatory text should also be retained and the full scale should always be shown (i.e. including 'Significant improvement required'). An example of one potential approach is provided in **Appendix G**.

Recommendation 4c: Provide transparent information about the NQS ratings process on the Starting Blocks website. This information does not need to be overly prominent, but should be available to those who want it, for example this could be in a FAQs section. Where answers to questions may differ from parents expectations, reassurances should ideally be provided (for example, parents raised concerns about the depth of assessment that could be achieved by a single in-person visit, but some reassurance could be provided by explaining that historical evidence is also taken into account, through the examination of administrative records etc.)

Recommendation 4d: Ensure the link between the government, the NQS Ratings, and Starting Blocks and Government is made clear, via text and visual signals such as government crests/logos, and reiterated in messaging.

Value proposition

A potential 'value proposition' based on these findings and recommendations is proposed, along with creative messaging territories that could be utilised in communicating with the target audience, as outlined below.¹

Fundamental/underlying need: "Support me throughout the journey to ensure that I find the best childcare service for my child."

- Intended emotional shift – from overwhelm, confusion, disappointment and guilt to clarity, hopefulness, empowerment and confidence.
 - Example message – Starting Blocks and the National Quality Standards can support you in selecting the best childcare service for your child.

Core messaging territories:

1. **"Save me time and stress, by getting me started in my search for quality childcare."**
 - Example message – You can quickly and easily search for childcare services in your area and find the Government's National Quality Standard rating for each service by visiting the Starting Blocks website.
2. **"Help me to eliminate services that do not perform well in quality areas that are important to me."**
 - Example message – The Government's National Quality Standard ratings can help you to compare childcare services and focus your attention on services with high ratings in the areas that matter to you (www.startingblocks.gov.au).
3. **"Reduce the number of things I need to think about when I visit a service, so I can focus on how well it will suit my child."**
 - Example message - You know your child's unique needs better than anyone. Look up the Government's National Quality Standard ratings for a childcare service before you visit, so you can focus on judging how well your child will settle and thrive there (www.startingblocks.gov.au).
4. **"Give me confidence that I have made the right choice of childcare service for my child."**
 - Example message – By looking up the Government's National Quality Standard rating, you can be confident that you have found a childcare

¹ Please note that while this has been developed to align with the recommendations provided above (in terms of tone and content), the proposed proposition and messages are examples only and have not yet been tested with the target audience.

service that performs well in the quality areas that matter to you and your child (www.startingblocks.gov.au).

5. “Empower me to advocate for my child to receive high quality care.”

- Example message – All approved childcare services in Australia must provide a safe environment and good quality care and education for your child, visit the Starting Blocks website to find out more about what you should expect from a quality childcare service (www.startingblocks.gov.au).

Reinforcement need: confirm (rather than undermine) parents’ underlying belief that all operating childcare services must meet stringent quality standards.

Concept positioning for Starting Blocks: Starting Blocks is the only website you need, to search for childcare’ services, with independent government quality ratings for every approved childcare service in Australia, as well as information about types of childcare, early childhood development and education (visit www.startingblocks.gov.au).

Introduction

A guide to using this report

This document reports the outcomes of qualitative research commissioned by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). It first presents the context of the research, followed by the research findings. Finally, the opportunities and recommendations are detailed. Appendices containing all research instruments and stimulus materials used appear towards the end of this document.

Where verbatim quotations from participants are used, they are referenced with the location and the type of education and care service their child was using / intending to use.

For the purposes of brevity, acronyms are used throughout this document, according to the following table.

Table of acronyms

Acronym	Definition
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CSA	Community Service Announcement
DECD	Department of Education and Child Development
FDC	Family day care
LDC	Long day care
NQF	National Quality Framework
NQS	National Quality Standard
OSHC	Outside school hours care
PSK	Preschool / kindergarten
SES	Socio-economic status

Background/context

There has been a strong interest in the quality of education and care services in Australia, fuelled by an emerging body of research showing that investing in the early years of a child's development has a positive impact on both the later health, education and employment outcomes², and the longer term benefits to the community as a whole³. This thinking has led education and care to be a priority area for the Australian Government and the creation of an overarching vision that by 2020, 'all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation'⁴. Government led initiatives, such as the NQF, seek to raise the benchmark of quality standards in education and care services and establish measures to facilitate continued quality improvement of these services.

The NQF introduced new quality standards in 2012 to improve education and care across LDC, FDC, PSK, and OSHC services.⁵ A key component of the NQF is the NQS comprising of 7 quality areas on which education and care services are measured to determine an overall rating. ACECQA works with the Australian and state and territory governments to implement the NQF and support the education and care sector to improve quality outcomes for children⁶ and therefore has a strong interest in understanding how families are using the NQF to make informed decisions about education and care services.

As such, ACECQA has commissioned several pieces of research in recent years to understand what 'quality' means in the context of education and care services, how the NQF fits into parent's decision-making process, changes in awareness and adoption of the framework by families, as well as other factors (aside from quality) that are being considered by families looking into education and care service options for their child. These studies include the Families Research Project Pilot Study (2014, Hall & Partners) and ACECQA Families Research Stage 1 Quantitative Survey (2017). Most notably this body of research revealed that:

- ***There was only moderate awareness and use of the NQF and NQS ratings among parents.*** Research conducted in 2017 indicated that the NQF was achieving traction with providers (in terms of registering, rating and increased accountability for meeting standards). However, many families were not aware of the NQS rating system, and those that were aware placed relatively low weighting on the NQS ratings, when considering education and care services,

2 <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/families/what-the-nqf-means-for-your-child>

3 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/321201fc-ca0c-4c20-9582-7c3dc5c9d1b9/19438.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

4 Ibid.

5 <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework/explaining-the-national-quality-framework>

6 <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/families/what-the-nqf-means-for-your-child>

compared to other factors (such as location, accessibility, cost and affordability).⁷

- ***Awareness and use of the Starting Blocks website was also relatively low.*** Starting Blocks was established as ACECQA's free online resource to help raise awareness and use of the NQF and NQS Ratings and to provide information and advice to new families looking for education and care services for the first time. As of 2017, only a relatively small proportion (14%) of families reported having used the Starting Blocks website in their search for an education and care service.⁸
- ***Initial service selection for a first child appeared to be the most opportune time for promoting the use of the NQS ratings.*** Parents said the ratings would be most useful to them when first selecting a service, either for their first child or following a move to a new area (assuming where they had a choice of services).⁹
- ***Word of mouth recommendations were the most powerful source of information for families using or considering education and care services.*** Around seven-in-ten families reported that they relied on 'word of mouth' to help them find out more about a service they were considering.¹⁰ Parents did not generally access any external, objective indicators of quality or advice.¹¹
- ***Education and care service quality tended to be assessed intuitively by parents.*** Parents tended to rely to a large degree on their own subjective feeling about a service, with a key indicator of service quality being the observed happiness of their child. As such, they did not seem to be primed to seek out or accept the formal and objective idea of quality promoted under the NQF, meaning that communications would need to reach out to parents rather than relying on them engaging on their own.¹²
- ***Interpretation of quality was influenced by the age of the child and the service type.*** For the parents of younger children the emphasis was on care and nurturing and meeting developmental milestones. As their children approached school years parents begin to think about the skills and behaviours required to make a successful transition to a more formal schooling environment. The term 'education' could therefore be divisive when used in relation to children under three years of age; other terms or phrases were considered more engaging,

7 ACECQA Families Research Stage 1 Quantitative Survey (2017), cited in: Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2017) National Quality Agenda National Partnership Annual Performance Report, ACECQA, Sydney

8 Ibid.

9 Hall & Partners (2014), Families Research Project: Knowledge and Meaning of National Quality Standards Ratings Pilot Study, a report for ACECQA.

10 ACECQA Families Research Stage 1 Quantitative Survey (2017), cited in: Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2017) National Quality Agenda National Partnership Annual Performance Report, ACECQA, Sydney.

11 Hall & Partners (2014), Families Research Project: Knowledge and Meaning of National Quality Standards Ratings Pilot Study, a report for ACECQA.

12 Ibid.

including 'development, 'play-based learning', 'learning through play', and 'socialisation'.¹³

- ***There was an imbalance between supply of education and care services and demand for education and care services.*** In areas with limited choice of education and care services, families adopted a 'take what I can get' approach to decision-making. This drastically changed the priorities for these families who were often from low income or socially disadvantaged communities. This presented a barrier to ACECQA in terms of engaging these parents on the topic of quality and demonstrating the value of the NQF.¹⁴
- ***Parents did not relate to the NQF and NQS terminology and supporting descriptions.*** The description of the NQF suggested to parents an initiative to ensure that services meet the minimum standard rather than an initiative aiming to promote higher standards. In addition, parents did not always comprehend the true intent of the titles for the different quality areas nor the accompanying descriptions.¹⁵

The current research has built on this body of knowledge and is referred to as 'Stage 2' of ACECQA's broader families' research.

Research objectives

The overall aim of this research was to investigate the current role the NQF plays in parents' decision process when considering and choosing education and care services, in light of the fact that now the majority of education and care services have a NQS rating.

More specifically, the research objectives were to:

- Further understand the factors families consider when choosing an education and care service for their child.
- Understand the extent to which the NQF has contributed to community knowledge and understanding of quality in education and care services.
- Understand to what extent the NQF has led to increased priority being given to information about the quality of education and care services.
- Discover what other sources of information influenced decision-making.
- Explore how knowledge and understanding differs among specific community groups.
- Inform and help ACECQA better target future communications with families. Specifically, this research:

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

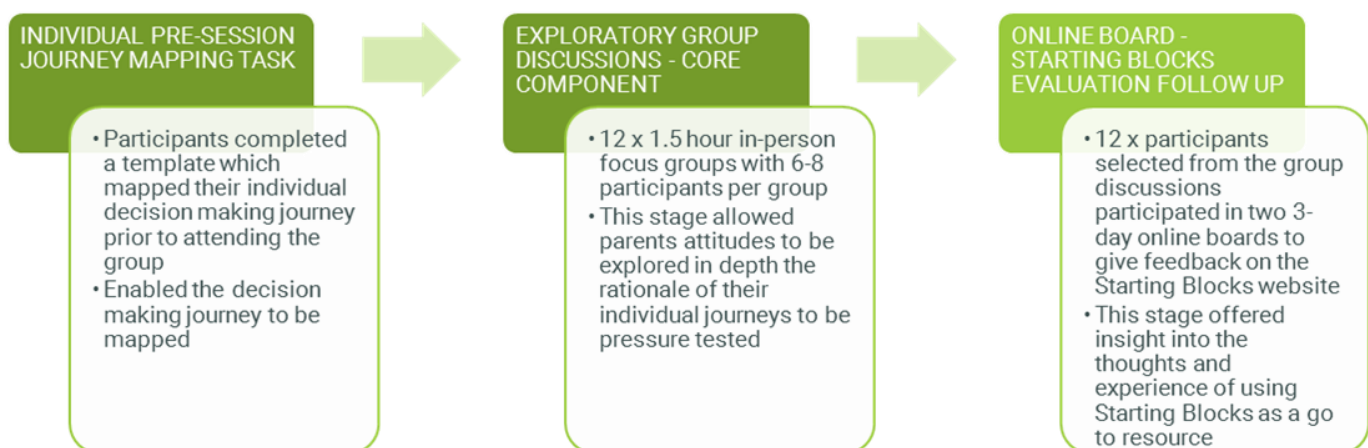
¹⁵ Ibid.

- analysed the success of Starting Blocks in using simplified language to communicate the purpose and importance of NQF to parents
 - explored optimisation opportunities for Starting Blocks to inform and guide development of future communications, messaging and strategic targeting opportunities
 - identified points in the decision-making journey to position Starting Blocks as a 'go-to' resource for parents, driving usage and awareness of the website and content.
- Contribute to the annual performance reporting to Ministers.

Research design

A qualitative research approach was adopted to ensure that the research was as in-depth, open-ended and participant-led as possible. This research consisted of 3 components:

1. Individual pre-discussion group journey mapping task
2. Exploratory group discussions
3. Follow up online discussion board



Fieldwork for this research was conducted between 3 April and 3 May, 2018.

Individual pre-discussion group journey mapping task

Parents recruited to participate in the exploratory group discussions completed a paper-based individual pre-task to map out the steps they took/ had taken to date in their education and care service decision-making journey. In addition to the steps involved, parents captured key moments, influences/ sources of information, and emotions/feelings they experienced on their journey maps. The completed journey maps were submitted via email to Hall and Partners prior to the group discussions and the original collected during the group discussion. The journey map template provided to participants is provided in **Appendix A**.

Exploratory group discussions

Twelve group discussions of 1.5 hour duration were conducted across Adelaide, Port Lincoln, Melbourne, Sydney and Cairns. Each group discussion comprised of 6-8 parents, and parents in this research were recruited to reflect families with a broad range of characteristics including: service type; location; socio-economic background; cultural/ethnic background; age of parents/ age of children and service use.

A mix of parents who currently use an education and care service (hereafter referred to in this report as the 'current' group), and those intending to use an education and care service in the following 12 months (hereafter referred to as the 'intend' group) were included in the sample:

- 7x group discussions with parents currently using an education and care service
- 5x group discussions with parents intending to use an education and care service in the next 12 months.

The exploratory group discussions explored parents':

- general attitudes and behaviours in relation to education and care
- service decision process in detail
- current knowledge and awareness of the NQF and NQS ratings
- comprehension and understanding of the NQS ratings
- response to Starting Blocks print materials.

The discussion guide for the group discussions is included in **Appendix B**.

A screening questionnaire, approved by ACECQA, was used by recruitment specialists to secure participants for this research. A copy can be found in **Appendix C**. The following table shows the structure of the discussion group sample.

Discussion group sample

Group	Care type	Service use status	SES*	Cultural/ ethnic background	Location
1	PSK	Intend	Low-Mid		Adelaide
2	OSHC/ Vacation Care	Current	Mid-High	Included CALD parents	Adelaide
3	LDC	Intend	Low-Mid		Port Lincoln
4	Mixed	Current	Included mix of SES	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents	Port Lincoln
5	FDC	Intend	Mid-High		Sydney CBD
6	PSK	Current	Mid-High	Included CALD parents	Sydney North
7	LDC	Current	Low-Mid	Included CALD parents	Sydney West
8	OSHC/ Vacation Care	Intend	Low-Mid	Included CALD parents	Melbourne
9	FDC	Current	Mid-High		Melbourne
10	Mixed	Current	Included mix of SES	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents	Melbourne
11	OSHC/ Vacation Care	Intend	Low-Mid		Cairns
12	LDC	Current	Mid-High		Cairns

Follow up online discussion board

Some participants from the group discussions were invited to participate in two separate 3-day online discussion boards in the fortnight following their group discussion session. These parents were selected to include a mix of characteristics including care type, location and service use (current/ intend). The researchers also ensured that CALD parents and first time parents were represented in these groups.

Twelve parents participated in the online discussion boards to explore:

- the role of online sources of information in identifying and selecting education and care services
- the Starting Blocks website and parents' perceptions of its design, layout, content, language and navigation
- opportunities to enhance the Starting Blocks website and content.

The online board discussion guide is included in **Appendix B**. The following table shows the spread of parents who participated in the online discussion board sample.

Online board sample

Care type	Current	Intending	Locations
LDC	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sydney • Port Lincoln • Cairns
FDC	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sydney • Melbourne
PSK	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adelaide • Sydney
OSHC	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adelaide • Melbourne

Limitations

This research included participants in both metropolitan and regional areas, mainly across the eastern seaboard of Australia. If there are particular issues that pertain to parents living in other states or regions, or rural or remote parents, then these groups may warrant further investigation.

While this research included all education and care service types approved under the NQF, there were only two group discussions with parents whose children using or intending to use FDC. Only two of these participants went on to participate in the online boards. As a result, some of the issues particular to FDC, such as the perceptions of NQS ratings, may warrant further investigation. This is because, unlike other care types, individual FDC residences are not rated, rather the umbrella FDC scheme is rated. Parents are therefore unable to obtain ratings for a particular carer.

A number of Starting Blocks materials were reviewed as part of the research process and analysis of participant responses to these is included in this report. However, testing these materials was not the key focus – further research would be required to fully assess these materials (e.g. in terms of message comprehension, personal relevance, credibility, tone, ‘look and feel’, call to action etc.).

Quotas were set to ensure that CALD parents (who speak a language other than English at home) were represented in the research sample. However, as it was beyond the scope of this study to conduct in-language focus groups/interviews, all participants also needed to speak fluent English. Further research would be required to understand the perspectives of CALD parents who cannot communicate fluently in English.

Research Findings

The education and care landscape

Section summary

- Parents understood that the early years are crucial for children's development
- Selecting an education and care service was a stressful and highly emotive decision
- The complex and constantly evolving education and care landscape felt overwhelming

Parents understood that the early years are crucial for children's development

The parents participating in this research implicitly understood that children's experiences in their early years are crucial for their cognitive, physical and emotional development and that the education and care service attended by their child would therefore have an impact on their child's development, as well as their immediate wellbeing. Parents of babies and toddlers were typically most concerned with their children's wellbeing and emotional development – they primarily wanted them to feel loved and secure in their new environment. For the parents of older children, other aspects of their child's development became more important.

Selecting an education and care service was a stressful and highly emotive decision

Given its likely impact on their child, the selection of an education and care service typically felt like a momentous and stressful decision. Parents felt a huge responsibility to find a service that would meet all of their child's developmental and emotional needs, as well as their own pragmatic requirements (such as opening hours, location, accessibility, fees etc.). Parents worried whether any education and care service would be able to adequately replicate the care they provided at home, leading to feelings of guilt about their decision to place them in a service at all and anxiety about their choice of service. Beyond concerns about their children's wellbeing, some parents were also grappling with their own feelings about the prospect of being separated from their child.

"I want someone to look after her like I would. Basically, someone who is caring like I would be, with my child." Parent, Sydney, FDC Intend

Choosing a service was therefore an extremely emotive process for many parents, especially if it was the first time that they would entrust their child's care to people outside of their immediate family and friends and particularly if their child was relatively young (i.e. a baby or toddler). Parents who were engaging with education and care services for the first time also found the experience of selecting a suitable service even more stressful, in comparison to parents who had already been through the process with older children and therefore seen first-hand that they were able to settle into a service, even if it took some time.

The complex and constantly evolving education and care landscape felt overwhelming

There was a feeling among parents that the education and care landscape was complex and frequently changing. Understanding and navigating this system and finding a service that would meet their needs was overwhelming for many parents. This was particularly acute for parents entering the system for the first time who often found it hard to know where to start.

"I felt overwhelmed and confused because I am a first time mother. I had no idea where to begin. So I didn't know when or how or what, so [I was] very much a rookie right at the beginning. I had so many burning questions, like how do I even enrol my child, when they can actually go into care (from what age)?" Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

Some parents with older children already using education and care services believed the system had become increasingly complex since they first engaged with it.

"It's changed so much now, there are so many things you have to look at, so many options" Parent, Melbourne, OSHC Current

Factors contributing to this sense of complexity included:

- large numbers of services (both government and private sector managed) and a variety of service types (in metropolitan areas)
- lack of availability and long wait lists (in some areas)
- increases in fees
- changes to regulatory requirements, such as child to educator ratios
- upcoming changes to the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate (to be replaced by the Child Care Subsidy from 2 July 2018)
- new research findings relating to children's education and development.

Latent demand for a centralised, comprehensive and impartial information source

Parents in this study described spending many hours compiling information and seeking advice about education and care services from multiple sources, before calling and visiting numerous individual services. This frustrating and time-consuming process

exacerbated the stress and anxiety felt by many of these parents when choosing an education and care service.

Again, this process seemed to be most taxing for parents engaging with education and care services for the first time as they typically began the process with very little understanding of the system/processes, plus they were having to think about what they and their child would require from a service for the first time. In contrast, parents with an older child already attending a service only needed to update their understanding of the system (e.g. in light of any changes) and already had a benchmark against which to assess prospective services.

There was clearly an underlying need for a centralised, comprehensive and trustworthy source of information and advice relating to education and care services, to reduce the cognitive and emotional burden experienced by parents when selecting an education and care service.

The findings relating to parents' service choice decision-making process are described in the following section.

Service choice - decision-making process

Section summary

- Some parents faced limited choice when selecting options for their child
- There were three layers of choice for parents to make in choosing an education and care service
- LDC and FDC service - decision process
- PSK service – decision process
- OSHC service - decision process

Improved public knowledge and access to information about the quality of education and care services is one of the intended objectives of the NQF. Amongst other things, the NQF aims for families and the wider community to access and understand information about education and care service quality and to use NQS ratings to help make service choice decisions.

Analysis of the service decision processes described by participants in this research has enabled the mapping of parents' decision-making journeys when choosing care for their child. The resulting maps of these journeys are reported in this section, by type of care chosen. Application of these maps will highlight opportunities for increasing the use of the NQS ratings by identifying how, when and where the information contained in the NQS ratings can fit with families' existing decision-making journeys.

Prior to explaining the ways in which care choices are made, it is important to examine the notion of choice in relation to formal education and care services.

Some parents faced limited choice when selecting options for their child

For some parents, the choice of services was very limited and this was impacted by a number of factors, including:

- living in an area of low population density (and therefore few education and care services)
- seeking a type of care that is oversubscribed (so no places available)
- parameters of care that is required (needed urgently, particular number of days, hours, or days of the week required, need for flexibility)
- particular child needs that are less readily accommodated (e.g. twins, children with additional needs)
- type of service (typically fewer choices of OSHC services than for other service types).

This meant that some parents reported having little choice in the education and care service their child was currently in or was going to attend.

“Based on geography... it is the closest by about 20kms, and so long as all that [feeling] stacked up it was always going to be a decision like this.” Parent, Adelaide, PSK Intend

“I agree, it’s not about what you like, it’s what has a space when I need it.” Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

For parents in this circumstance, the potential of the NQF to inform decision-making would be low.

There were three layers of choice for parents to make in choosing an education and care service

In this research, rather than just one decision, parents described a series of decisions that led to their child starting in a child care service. These decisions, which did not always progress in a predictable or linear way, included deciding:

1. whether or not to seek formal education and care for their child
2. what type of education and care was suitable (LDC, FDC, PSK, OSHC)
3. which service to use.

Among parents in this research, the limitations on choice discussed earlier sometimes applied to parts of the overall choice, but not to other parts. For example, parents returning to working long hours may have had no choice but to seek care and limited choice in terms of type of care (to suit their hours), but did have a choice of service. Other parents had limited choice about whether to seek care and choice between the different types of care, but no choice about which service had a place available when it was needed.

As a result, how parents navigated the decision-making journey (including how long it took and how challenging, emotional or straightforward they found it) was in part impacted by their level of autonomy in moving through these three layers of choice. Further, the extent to which the NQF could have helped their service decisions, depended upon when and how they moved through these decision layers. Opportunities for the NQF to inform service decision processes are detailed in the section, ‘Opportunities and Recommendations’.

Commonalities were observed across the education and care service types in terms of parents’ decision process. However differences were observed, and are reflected in the journey maps in Figures 1-3 on the following pages. In terms of interpreting the maps, each one displays the following information:

1. The starting point on the extreme left (‘Decide to seek care’), and the end point on the extreme right (‘Start care’)

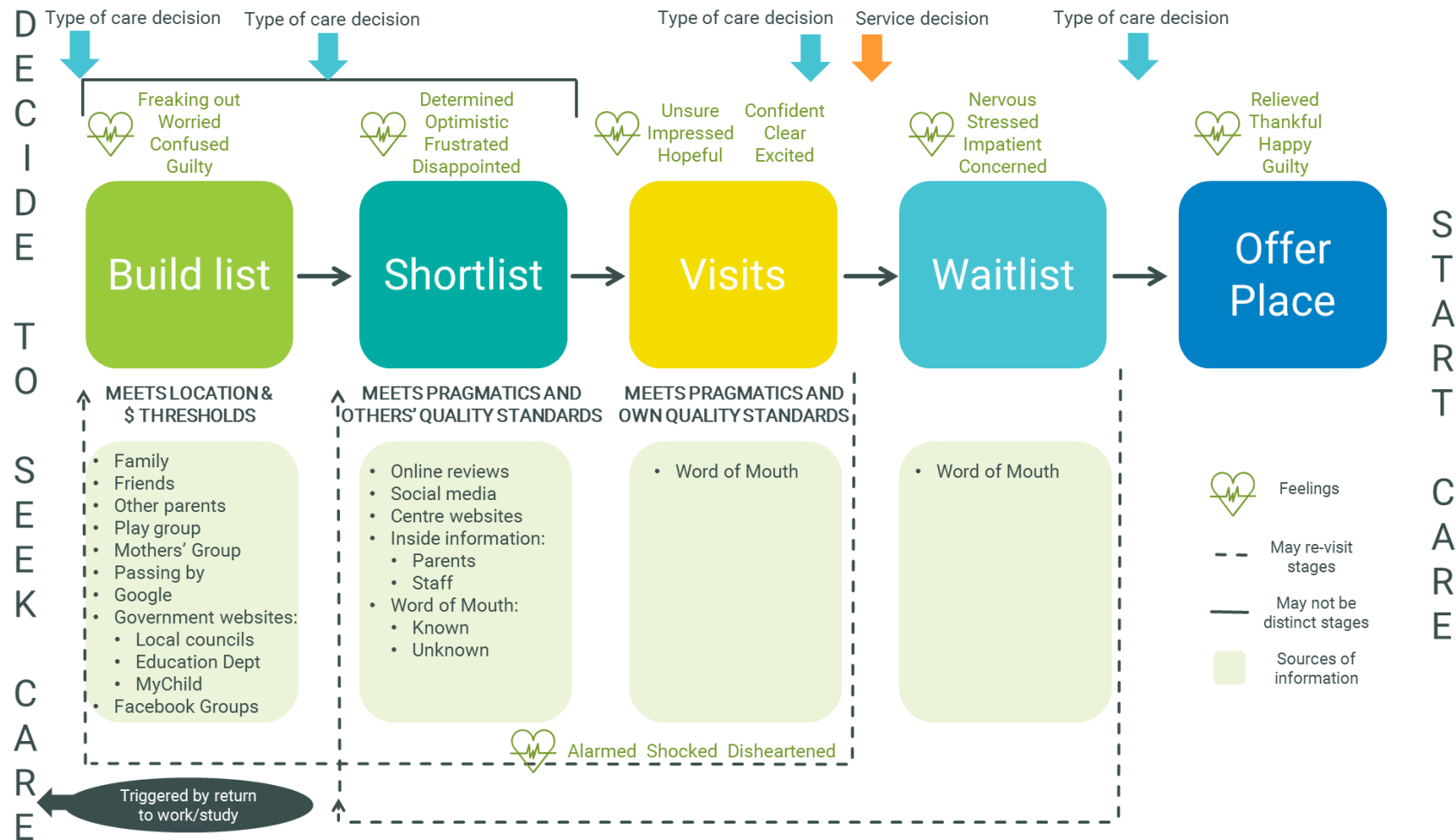
2. The overall stages in the journey ('Build a list', etc.)
3. The timing (symbolised by arrows) of the decision on which type of care to seek ('Type of care decision') and the decision on which actual service to choose ('Service decision')
4. The feelings parents experience at each stage in the journey
5. The point at which parents may need to go back to an earlier stage of the journey (dotted lines)
6. The information sources that influence parents' at each stage
7. The circumstance that typically prompted parent's decision to seek care

LDC and FDC service - decision process

In this research, the choice of LDC and FDC was typically made to accommodate one parent recommencing paid work. Both service types provided longer days and earlier ages of entry than PSK services and for some parents, they were both seen as viable options. In some cases, the decision between these care types was not made until well into the decision-making journey. For these reasons, the map of both types of care is conceptualised as a single journey, in **Figure 1** overleaf.

Regardless of whether the type of care they chose was LDC or FDC, for the parents in this study, the decision process was emotionally charged, with extremes of feeling evident throughout the process. For some this was exacerbated by the young age of their child, and that this was often the first time someone other than family or close friends had looked after them. For these parents, it was a difficult experience determining who was going to look after their baby or toddler and feelings of guilt and fear about how the separation would go were expressed.

Figure 1 – LDC and FDC service decision-making journey map



Some parents who took part in this research did have a clear preference for either LDC or FDC, and did not consider the other type at any stage of the process. Reasons for this varied but largely stemmed from pre-existing beliefs about the qualities of one type that were not perceived to be available at the other, such as:

- the convenience of picking up casual days
- hygiene concerns about large child care centres
- attachment benefits with one consistent carer
- lack of management supervision (of carer) in FDC services.

“I’m an attachment parenter and needed someone who followed the same principles” Parent, Melbourne, FDC Current

Once the decision to seek care had been made, the first step in the process was compiling a list of possible services. At this point it was typically important that the services listed were located within a feasible geographical radius of home or work and that they were not completely outside of the family budget. Both subjective (e.g. word of mouth) and objective (e.g. government websites) sources of information were used to compile this list.

From this stage, if there were enough services in the area to warrant it, there was usually a short list process, where the larger list was condensed to those services that met a more nuanced set of criteria, relating both to pragmatic and quality issues. At this point, word of mouth or the views of other people (both known and not known to the parent) were most valued as sources of information. This included online reviews, chatrooms and forums, insider information (current or ex staff or parents) and social media groups and pages.

No matter what information was sourced before this point, the next stage – an in-person visit to the shortlisted centres – was crucial in the decision-making process. This was where parents themselves assessed a centre directly for its suitability. More nuanced pragmatic concerns were explored (e.g. what kind of sunscreen is used, where the food is prepared), and parents were on alert taking in all of the sensory cues available to make a quality assessment.

Though individual sensitivities varied, through the in-person visit, all parents were in essence trying to determine if the service would support the wellbeing of their child. Safety measures were detected; relationships between children, between adults and between adults and children were closely observed; evidence of children’s creative play were sought and the level of organisation or chaos was noted. Parents also inspected the physical space for cleanliness, hygiene, comfort and stimulation (abundance and quality of play materials/equipment). It is after this point that parents described making a decision about where to apply for a place.

Given limits to the availability of places, parents reported placing their child's name on the list for at least 2-3 services and sometimes more. One would typically be their first choice, others tended to be pragmatically acceptable but not ideal. This was followed by a period of nervous waiting for a place to arise. (Some parents mentioned placing their child's name on more than one service on their list long before making visits, to give them a better chance of securing a place by the time it was needed.)

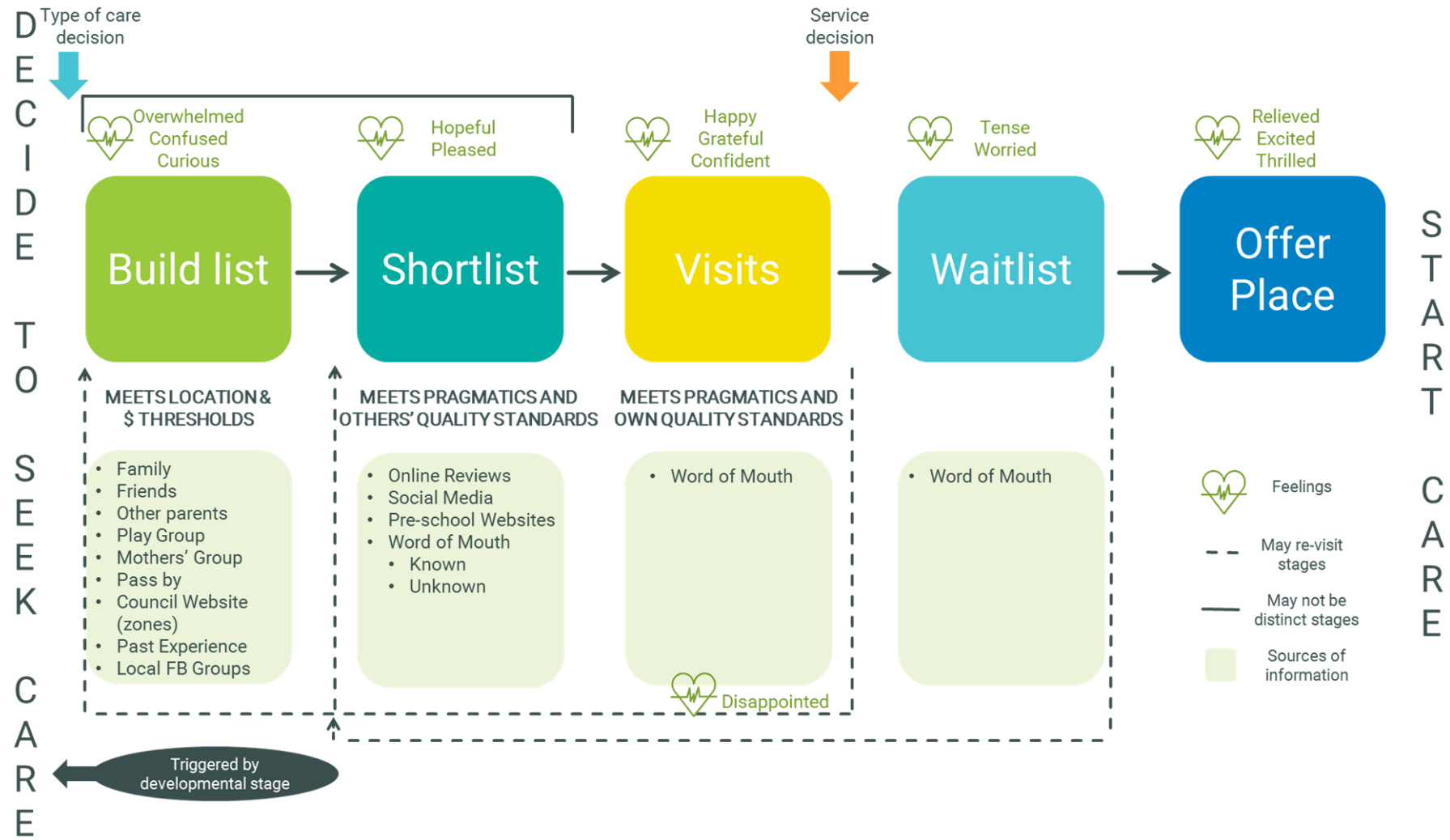
At the visit and wait list stages, some parents were prompted either by alarm at the state of the centres they visited, or by urgency in needing a place, to revisit their service decision and return to their short list (or even to expand their original long list), to broaden out the possibilities and increase their chance of securing a place at a centre acceptable to them. In this context, a few parents who had earlier decided not to seek LDC or FDC revisited this decision.

PSK service - decision process

For parents choosing PSKs, the need for care was typically prompted by recognition that being in an environment away from home and with other children was likely to be beneficial to their child's development. This does not mean to say that work commitments played no role in the decision to seek PSK, just that for those working, these were important considerations alongside the perceived benefits for their child of this type of care.

The PSK environment was seen by these parents as an important precursor to primary school, and parents commonly used the words 'school-readiness' to describe this process. Unlike LDC or FDC, the parents' process for choosing a PSK (**Figure 2**) included consideration of the primary schools children leaving the preschools moved on to. This reflected some parents' concern that their child enter school with an existing peer group (an issue which also came up for selection of OSHC services).

Figure 2 – PSK service decision-making journey map



Like FDC and LDC, the first stage of the PSK decision-making process involved creating a list of possible services from both word-of-mouth and other sources. If sufficient choices were available, the list of services was then narrowed based on meeting pragmatic needs or based on the views of others, primarily sought through online sources. In person visits were then arranged with this short list of services.

The in-person service visit was crucial as a way of personalising the online views, observations and experiences of others. As for LDC and FDC, parents' focus at this time was on safety measures, relationships between children and other children and between children and staff and the physical space; however greater attention was paid to the way children's developmental progress and skill development was supported, in view of the perceived need for school readiness.

Though there may have been favourites beforehand, the in-person visit was vital to support decision-making for these parents. If at this stage they were happy with at least one of the visited options, then they confirmed their child's name on the list and began waiting. For the few who were disappointed with all options visited, this had the potential to prompt a revisit of their original list.

Confidence with their choice at this point gave way to apprehension for those parents whose child did not immediately get offered a place. For parents who had completed the decision-making journey, the offer of a place was met by a feeling of elation and relief.

OSHC service - decision process

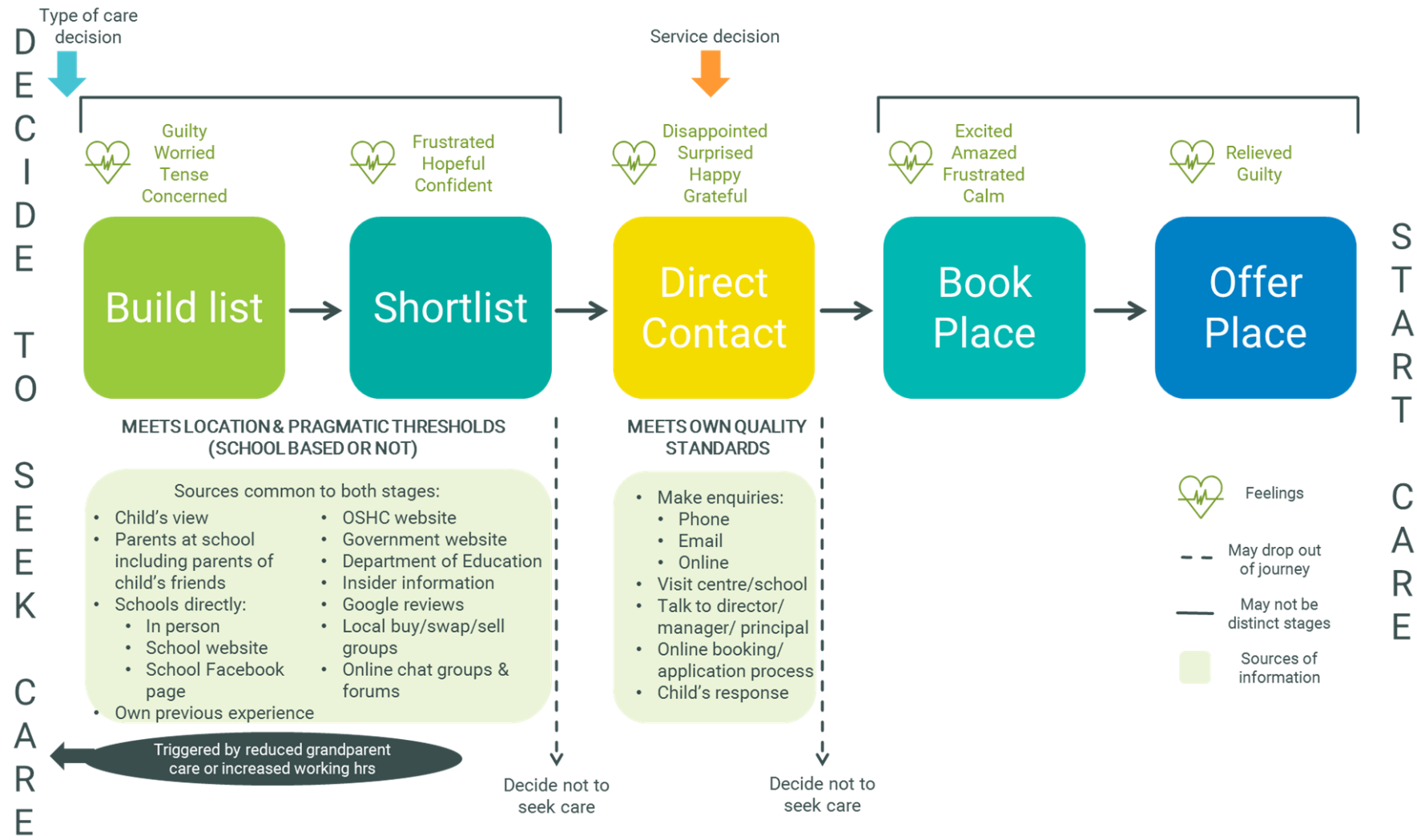
In terms of the decision to seek care for school aged children, for these parents it was typically triggered by the reduced availability of extended family to care for children, and/or a desired or necessary increase to parents' working hours. This research indicated some important differences between the service choice process for OSHC and either LDC, FDC or PSK:

- The choice of OSHC service (particularly before and after school care, as opposed to vacation/holiday care) was limited in both urban and regional areas, primarily to school-based programs. Many of the parents in this study simply used the OSHC service at their child's current school. In some instances, other school's programs, FDC or LDC options were also available, pending the availability of transfer transport between the service and school.
- Children's stated preferences and the attendance by friends and familiar peers, played an important role in the service decision.
- The in-person visit was sometimes replaced by other forms of direct contact with the service, such as inquiries made by telephone or online (through email).

- Having successfully navigated the transition to a school environment, parents became focused on whether OSHC was going to be a fun and enjoyable experience for their child. Feelings of guilt about having to send their child to OSHC were also expressed by some parents.
- Given the relative independence of primary school aged children and the shorter period of care needed before and after school, parents who were frustrated or disappointed by the options available to them in OSHC sometimes re-evaluated whether to send their children at all, and in some cases this happened when they were far along the process. In these cases, parents' flexible working arrangements and privately run holiday programs were sometimes used instead.

The decision to seek care for school aged children is represented in the map in **Figure 3**.

Figure 3 – OSHC service decision-making journey map



Like other forms of care, for OSHC the creation of a list began the process, but given the limited range of services, a shortlisting process was not always necessary. A critical factor in the decision was whether or not the service was school based. In most parents' view, this was by far the most convenient (and safest) option as it did not involve travel between a service and school for before or after school care.

Options not based at the child's school were usually only considered if parents had determined the school-based care experience would not be enjoyable for their child. This was evaluated based on word of mouth from the school community, including through social media and face-to-face interactions with other parents; and from insiders, such as teachers; as well as from websites, (including government websites).

Direct contact with the service was an important part of the decision process (even if the child already attends the school in which the service is provided, as OSHC is typically run separately). However, this did not always constitute an in-person visit. Particularly if it was school-based care, the choice was sometimes influenced by making direct inquiries by phone and email. This may have involved contact with the service director or manager, or the school's principal.

In some instances, the act of booking an OSHC place was not separate from the offer of a place (i.e. there was no wait list). Some parents in this research commented that in their experience, OSHC places were markedly more available than service places for children aged 0-5.

This report now details the information sources that parents in this research most often described as having been influential in their decision-making process.

Influences on the decision-making process

Section summary

- Parents relied heavily on subjective sources to inform their decision making
- Word of mouth was influential throughout the journey
- Parents generally placed a high degree of trust in the perceptions of other parents
- Family members' perceptions were also influential, especially when deciding on service type
- Parents particularly valued information that was recent, based on insider knowledge and consistent
- There was an underlying trust in government sources, but these were mainly used in the initial fact-finding phases
- Few parents specifically sought out government information sources
- Parents' own judgement ultimately superseded other influences

Parents relied heavily on subjective sources to inform their decision-making

Parents in this research often felt that they were making decisions based on a combination of objective/factual and emotional/subjective factors, but it became clear throughout the research process that they were primarily reliant on subjective sources. Parents could objectively establish whether or not education and care services provided particular facilities or services, but their assessment of the quality of these services and facilities was based almost entirely on subjective sources, including:

- feedback from other parents, both known (e.g. via mothers groups, community groups, playground/school gate conversations) and unknown to them (e.g. via reviews, blogs and forums)
- feedback from 'industry' insiders (e.g. educators, teachers in receiver schools)
- their own perceptions of a service, based on telephone calls, face-to-face visits and/or service websites.

Feedback from other parents was gathered from face-to-face and online sources. The former included interactions with family, friends and acquaintances at social events, playgrounds, and the school gate. Consulting online sources allowed parents to collect feedback from a broader group of influencers, for example via Facebook communities

(e.g. mothers' groups and place-based community groups) and sites containing more formal user reviews (such as *MyChild* and *CareforKids*).

"I took to the Facebook group and put out a note saying 'this is what I need, this is my sons qualities and his personality traits, where would be my best place?' And I visited 14 childcare centres and 3 day care centres and interviewed 9 au pairs before making that decision" Parent, Melbourne, FDC Current

Word of mouth was influential throughout the journey

Word-of-mouth sources informed parents' choices throughout the decision-making journey, from which type of service to use, to compiling lists of services to visit, to discussing the strengths and weaknesses of specific services. On occasion, these influences were powerful enough to cause parents to return to the start of their journey, or to skip anticipated stages altogether. For example, one parent recounted visiting a service that had not featured on their original list of potential options, based on the recommendation of a fellow parent during a casual playground conversation. This recommendation, combined with their own visit, culminated in them selecting that service for their child.

Parents generally placed a high degree of trust in the perceptions of other parents

The parents who took part in this research typically placed a high degree of trust in feedback from other parents who had first-hand experience of using particular education and care services.

"One of the ladies there, this is her fourth child that has gone through... For her, it has been 8 years that she has had a child in that kindy so you get a gage of what the place is like and her relationship with other parents there. It shows me it's a place worth sending my child to." Parent, Adelaide, PSK, Intend

The views of people who were known to them appeared to be the most influential, as in the example provided above. Some parents also had a high degree of trust in the reviews of parents who were not known to them based on the assumption that parents would provide an unbiased and truthful account of their experience. Others were slightly more cautious as they felt that parents could be just as susceptible as other consumers to criticising a service unfairly, for example based on an isolated incident or specific personal preferences. These parents still valued reviews provided by other parents, but they tended to take into account the overall weight of opinion expressed across multiple reviews to inform their decision-making.

Parents engaging with the education and care service system for the first time seemed to particularly value the experiences of other parents, in lieu of having direct experience as a service user. Those with personal experience of older children using education and care services typically felt more confident in their own judgement, in terms of what to look for when visiting a service and the factors that are most important.

Family members were also influential, especially when deciding on service type

Family members, including extended family, also featured as an influence in the decision-making journey, particularly when education and care services were considered for the first time.

"I talked to my sister and mum. They know my child so could understand his needs, and my sister has two who went to child care here in Port Lincoln." Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

Advice sought from family members tended to focus on the pros and cons of using education and care services in general (as opposed to alternative options) or of using particular types of education and care services. The perspective of family members was valued as they had a deep understanding of the child's unique personality and needs, as well as their best interests at heart. Later in the journey (after the care type decision), family featured less often as a key influence, as focus shifted towards sources that could provide recent information or insider knowledge about specific services.

Parents particularly valued information that was recent, based on insider knowledge and consistent

The views of other parents, as well as education and care service staff and teachers, had such a strong influence on parents' decisions relating to education and care services for a number of reasons. Firstly, these people were able to provide insider information about a service or type of service based on personal experience. This meant that they could provide insight into its strengths and weaknesses over a prolonged period of time, for example taking into account factors such as how a service reacted when things went wrong, staff turnover, the amount of parent-staff interaction on a day-to-day basis, how a service dealt with children experiencing medical issues or other concerns. Secondly they were often able to provide feedback, based on using a service currently or very recently.

"I asked opinions of people in the industry. I have friends that work in the industry so I found their opinion was very good to have... it's not what you know it's who you know." Parent, Cairns, OSHC Intend

Parents also placed more trust in feedback that was provided consistently by a number of people or sources, for example more weight might be given to a large number of positive parent reviews of a service, than a very small number of negative reviews.

Lastly, parents seemed to trust information that focused on or aligned with their own personal preferences or nuances. For example, one parent might prefer that educators did not physically comfort their child (e.g. via hugging or kissing), so they might place more weight on feedback relating to this aspect of a services' care. Another parent might prefer a particular approach to child development/education and so seek out the views of parents with a similar perspective.

There was an underlying trust in government sources, but these were mainly used in the initial fact-finding phases

Participants in this study typically assumed that government (state and/or federal) ensured minimum standards are maintained across all services operating in Australia, even though they had little understanding of how this worked in practice (as discussed in detail in the NQF section of this report). They also had an inherent trust in information about education and care services provided by government. However, the information they had accessed from these sources tended to be limited to the initial fact-finding phase, for example sourcing information about types of services available, or lists of services in their area, rather than helping them to make decisions about the quality of a given service. Specific sources mentioned included MyChild, state/territory education department websites (e.g. Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) in South Australia), and local council websites.

However, the underlying sense of trust in government sources and oversight was coupled with some cynicism about the value of regulatory tools and indicators such as certificates, industry standards, checklists and statistics. There was a sense that services (in general, as well as in the education and care service sector specifically) might simply do what was required to 'tick these boxes', rather than adhering to the underlying principles on a day-to-day basis. There was also some concern that compliance with regulatory requirements is time consuming and therefore reduces the amount of time education and care service staff can spend caring for and educating children.

"It forces them to do paperwork when they should be with the kids doing more."
Parent, Cairns, LDC Current

Few parents specifically sought out government information sources

Most of the parents in this study seemed to stumble across government information sources, rather than specifically searching for them. For example the government websites mentioned above were typically located as a result of a general 'child care in [location]' Google search.

With the exception of the information provided by local councils, there also seemed to be little differentiation between government and non-government information sources. For example some parents talked about the *MyChild* website without mentioning it was a government site and others mentioned the *CareforKids* website without mentioning that it was a commercial site. Indeed, in many cases parents reported that they could not remember which specific website they had used. Rather, they tended to focus on the utility of the information and the functionality of the site.

Parents' own judgement ultimately superseded other influences

This research clearly identifies parental visits to education and care services as the most important of all the influences on their choice of education and care service. Despite being armed with valued feedback from a range of sources, parents' 'gut feel' when visiting an education and care service was one of the strongest influences on their final decision.

"For anything as a parent you go with your gut, if you don't feel right you don't go."
Parent, Melbourne, FDC Current

They believed that they, as parents, were best placed to assess whether a service would enhance their child's development and ensure their wellbeing.

Parents also reported that children played an increasingly direct role in the decision-making process, as they got older (so their point of view tended to be most influential in the selection of a PSK and OSHC). Involving children in the decision helped to reassure parents that they were making the right choice for their child. Parents who felt their child had participated in their decision also found this helped to achieve what might be described as 'buy-in' from the child, meaning they were more willing and happy to attend the selected education and care service.

"[With my second child] we went to visit together. They are the ones going there, and they are old enough to know what they like. From the first one, we know that if they don't like it then 2 hours at outside of school hours means 7 hours of complaining at home. It's much easier if they like the place and enjoy going."
Parent, Cairns, OSHC Intending

Having considered the information sources that influenced the decision, we now turn those factors on which parents base their decision.

Factors considered in the decision

Section summary

- Though few mentioned the word, 'quality' was crucial in parents' decisions
- Parents had their own methods of assessing quality
- Parents' priorities for education and care service quality centred on their child's wellbeing
- There were 5 priorities that influenced parents' perceptions of education and care service quality
- It may be useful to understand the relationship between the 7 NQS quality areas and parents' quality priorities

In order to understand how the NQF can support parents' child care service decisions, this research investigated the factors that parents consider when making these decisions. Importantly, it explored aspects beyond price (taking into account inclusions/exclusions), location and operating hours that were valued by parents and influenced their decisions. Analysis of this information has enabled the development of a model of those factors that are the most influential in this choice process. This framework is detailed in this section.

Though few mentioned the word, 'quality' was crucial in their decisions

Parents typically felt that they took into account both objective and emotional/subjective factors when choosing an education and care service. It was relatively easy for parents to establish whether or not an education and care service provided met certain objective criteria in terms of their costs, opening hours and availability or a place; however, when it came to assessing the quality of these factors parents were primarily reliant on the subjective views of other parents, or their own subjective views formed on visits to education and care services (often very short), viewing service websites and, perhaps, phone calls to service managers/staff.

Parents in this research did not spontaneously use the word 'quality' to apply to education and care services, or their decision-making process, though this research indicates that this is a matter of semantics. In the context of finding the right care for their child, the quality of a child care service or its 'standard of excellence' appeared to be a critical factor in the decision. As discussed, given the extremely high stakes (i.e. the wellbeing of their children), trying to make a judgement about all of the relevant factors (often for multiple services) was stressful, not to mention time consuming, for many of the parents who participated in this research.

Parents currently had their own methods of assessing quality

When exploring the factors underpinning their decisions, parents described many aspects that also comprise quality under the NQF, including those relating to safety; staff; relationships; the physical environment; and communication with families. This focus on quality was evident in parents' descriptions of their ideal service, examples of which follow:

- clean, safe, secure and new facilities and hygienic practices
- a comfortable, home-like environment, with plenty of natural light
- children happy/ listening/ having fun but learning too/ laughter
 - *"Whether my child is going to be happy there, is he is going to fit in with that environment and their structure and their children"* Parent, Melbourne, FDC Current
- educators are welcoming/happy/calm/interacting with children
- educators are qualified, experienced and speak good English
- low staff to children ratio and low staff turnover
- creative activities/ music/ toys/ experiences to support development
- interactive learning/ garden/ pets
- excursions/ outings / events
- different types of play/ choices for children
- large outdoor area/ play spaces, room to move and grass
 - *"The state of outside, grass, playground, room to run around."* Parent, Cairns, OSHC Intend
- dietary and nutritional needs met
- flexibility and understanding of children's different needs/ individual goals
- communication about program and logistics
- honest feedback about child, personal touch and photos.

Regardless of the type of education and care service, parents in this research were indeed very concerned with quality, but had their own ways of describing it, and evaluating it, using the sources of information available to them.

Parents' priorities for education and care service quality centred on their child's wellbeing

An overall understanding of the factors important to parents in choosing a child care service must account for any limitations to free choice (discussed earlier). Some parents were willing to stretch their original budget and locations thresholds to some degree, to find an education and care service place that provided the aspects of quality that were important to them, for example by altering their work hours to fit around a particular service, travelling further than they had initially planned or paying higher fees.

"I had to go with a more expensive one, because it had that better program, better feel and vibe, the location was better." Parent, Sydney, PSK, Current

However, there was a limit to this and some parents had no scope for this type of flexibility. As such, parents may have considered an aspect of quality as important to the decision, but if the service location was not practical, or it was very unlikely to have a place available, then it had to be omitted from consideration.

The model of parents' quality perceptions presented in the following pages represents the priorities of the parents in this research when making child care choices, *once the service falls within their absolute location and affordability thresholds, and assuming that all centres have availability.*

With regards to the series of three layers of decision that parents made in the process of choosing a child care service, this framework applied to both the *type of care decision* (LDC, FDC, PSK, OSHC) and the *decision about which service to use.*

There were 5 priorities that influenced parents perceptions of education and care service quality

While individual concerns varied, overall, parents were most concerned with their children's wellbeing and preferred services that they believed provide an environment where this would be attended to. Five types of wellbeing featured as part of parents' quality evaluation.

Children's safety or physical wellbeing was the most crucial aspect of quality that parents were unwilling to trade off in any way.

"I need to know that she is safe and that she is supported in the environment she is in... and the biggest thing for me is that I know that she is going to get a cuddle when she needs it. I do not want her crying in a cot, I want her falling asleep in someone's arms." Parent, Cairns, LDC Current

Some assumed that children's safety or physical wellbeing would be assured in all approved services (i.e. expected as a minimum standard), but if they saw or heard anything that implied otherwise then this would certainly result in rejection of that service. For example one parent rejected a service with a low fence surrounding the outdoor play area because of security concerns.

"The fence around the play area outside was really low... My son's a climber so I'd be very worried he'd try and escape." Parent, Sydney, PSK, Current

In terms of influence on choice, safety was typically followed by emotional wellbeing or providing a sense of belonging, which was primarily about relationships between carers, carers and children and between children. A service's capacity to support a child's both physical and emotional wellbeing was fundamental to all parents.

Though not as crucial, a service's capacity to support children's growth or developmental wellbeing was still highly valued by parents when choosing a service. This was an area where parents' tended to compare services and make trade-offs and

consequently, where individual parent values and preferences were most apparent. For instance, some parents valued active development of life skills such as cooking or gardening, while others were more concerned with physical development and others were focused on academic skills. The child's age was also a factor as parents of older children tended to be more concerned with school readiness.

Links between the service, and families and the broader community, which provide continuity and a sense of connection, were less valued overall. Some parents did value regular and honest communication from staff about their child (especially those with prior experience), however others did not mention it. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents emphasised a service's capacity to facilitate this, which shifted community wellbeing into a higher priority than developmental wellbeing for these parents (see Perspectives of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community section).

Finally organisational wellbeing (comprising management, processes and governance) appeared to have no influence on parent's active choice of service as it was considered to be something that underpinned smooth functioning of the service and influenced all of the other factors, rather than being a decision factor in its own right. Parents were concerned who the director of a service was, and in particular that staff training was adequate and that staffing levels and continuity ensure stable and sufficient staff. However, these aspects are expected to be overseen by service management.

Figure 4 – Model of parents' priorities for education and care service quality

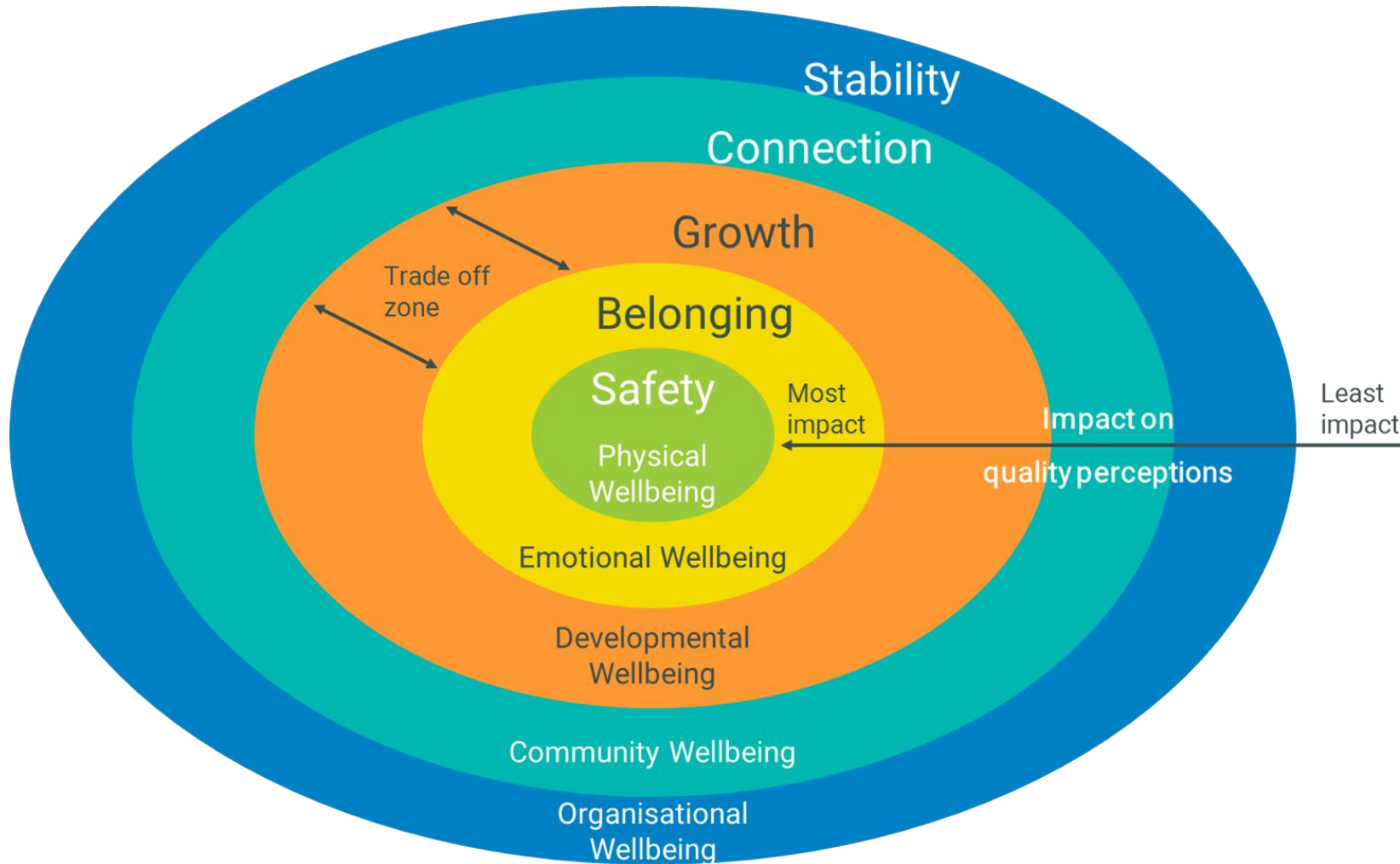


Table 1 – Parent quality perceptions and the NQF

The table below provides a more detailed explanation the relationship between the NQS quality areas and parents' quality priorities or those aspects of their child's wellbeing that impact parents' education and care service decisions. Importantly, it shows how the 7 areas rated under the NQS relate to the way parents prioritise elements of quality.

Quality priorities	Underlying emotional benefit	Impact on quality perceptions	Link with NQF quality areas
Physical wellbeing	Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most impact on perceptions of quality • Central issue when deciding on a service - safety foremost in parents' minds • Expected as a minimum from all services • Unwilling to trade-off or compromise 	QA 2. Children's health and safety QA 3. Physical Environment
Emotional wellbeing	Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High impact on quality perceptions • Based on observations of relationships, interactions and dynamics • Seen to be largely delivered by staff • Can be defining factor in selection • Will only trade-off if no other choice • An area of perceived difference between services and used to help distinguish between them 	QA 5. Relationships with children QA 4. Staffing arrangements

Quality priorities	Underlying emotional benefit	Impact on quality perceptions	Link with NQF quality areas
Developmental wellbeing	Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate impact on quality perceptions • Differs by age of child and stage of development • Parents have different beliefs and preferences regarding what supports development • An area of perceived difference between services and used to help distinguish between them • Area where most trade-offs happen, given parity in price, location, availability) – i.e. willing to compromise one aspect of development in favour of another 	<p>QA 1. Educational program and practice</p> <p>QA 3. Physical environment</p> <p>QA 5. Relationships with children</p>
Community wellbeing	Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less impact on quality perceptions • Links between services and families and communities valued by some (especially feedback to parents) • May be traded off for more influential and highly valued factors 	<p>QA 6. Collaborative partnerships with families and local communities</p>
Organisational wellbeing	Stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little or no impact on quality perceptions • Management, processes, staffing arrangements and governance not considered a matter for parents • Valued as underpinning smooth functioning of the service, staff stability etc. but not part of conscious decision 	<p>QA 4. Staffing arrangements</p> <p>QA 7. Governance and leadership</p>

National Quality Framework

Section summary

- Parents assumed all education and care service services must meet minimum government standards
- Awareness of NQF and use of NQS ratings was very low
- The value of the NQF and the NQS ratings became clearer as parents learned more
- Key gaps in understanding would need to be addressed to build trust
- The NQF has the potential to ease both the cognitive and emotional burden on parents
- NQS ratings could have multiple roles at different stages in the decision-making journeys
- Presentation of rating scale impacted on interpretation and potential use of ratings

Parents assumed all education and care service services must meet minimum government standards

The parents who participated in this research assumed that all education and care services in Australia must meet stringent quality standards in order to be granted a licence and to continue operating, particularly in terms of the health and safety of children. This appeared to stem, at least in part, from the perception that stringent quality standards are imposed across a wide range of areas in Australia, from food safety to schools, for example. This led participants to assume that similarly stringent standards would also be imposed on education and care services.

There was little evidence of any concrete understanding among these parents of specific mandated standards or legislative requirements. When pressed to consider how this system works in practice, participants typically assumed that a regulatory body (presumably overseen by government) would assess services and force any that did not meet the required standards to close (or compel them to address the issues within a short time-frame to avoid closure). For most participants, simply believing that such a system is in place seemed to instil confidence in the quality of education and care services; they did not generally expect or spontaneously ask to know more detail about how such a system works in practice.

Awareness of NQF and use of NQS ratings was very low

“All the research I did, which I think was quite a bit, this was never mentioned anywhere, not even on the DEECD website, that I saw anyway.” Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

Participants in this study were initially introduced to the NQF and NQS via a short written overview, including a description of the overall aim of the NQF (...to improve the quality of education and care services in Australia...) and of the seven quality areas (see **Appendix D** for full text).

There was very low awareness of the NQF and NQS among participants. The few parents who were aware of the standards had generally found out about them after their child/ren had started in education and care service – for example as a result of their chosen service displaying a high rating. The terms NQF and NQS were certainly not part of these parents’ vernacular when discussing education and care services. Reflecting this low awareness, no one was certain that they had used the NQS ratings to inform their initial service choice. This seemed to apply even among those who had reportedly used the *MyChild* or *CareforKids* websites to search for education and care services, even though these sites provide the NQS rating for each service. It seems that these parents had either overlooked or forgotten about the ratings.

The value of the NQF and the NQS ratings became clearer as parents learned more

Over the course of the focus group discussions parents were gradually exposed to more information about the NQF/NQS, including plain English descriptions of each of the seven quality areas, a poster with a brief description of the three core ratings (‘Working Towards NQS’, ‘Meeting NQS’ and ‘Exceeding NQS’) and, lastly, a select few Starting Blocks communication materials (see **Appendix D**). Participants also had the opportunity to consider and discuss how the NQF/NQS might be useful to them, and to hear other participants’ views on this. Those who took part in the follow-up online discussion boards also explored and discussed the information provided on the Starting Blocks website in more detail (this is discussed fully in ‘Response to Starting Blocks website and content’).

Participants generally became more positive about the benefits of using the NQS ratings as their understanding of the NQF and the ratings increased. In particular, during the focus groups, the plain English descriptions of the seven quality areas helped them to relate the NQF to many of the factors that were important to them when choosing an education and care service. Parents in this research showed a latent desire for independent information and ratings for education and care services to support them in their decision-making.

“At the time, there was nothing missing from my online search, I found exactly the information I was looking for. Now that I’m aware of the NQS, I would have

definitely looked for the ratings for each of the centres in my area. But at the time I didn't know it existed." Parent, Adelaide, PSK, Intend

However, the challenge for ACECQA will be raising awareness of the NQF/NQS and informing parents about it in a real world setting, when parents are often faced with an overwhelming amount of information and have a myriad of competing demands on their attention and time.

Key gaps in understanding would need to be addressed to build trust

Parents already have a degree of underlying trust in government to establish and enforce minimum quality and safety standards for essential services, including education and care. However, gaps in their understanding of the NQF and NQS would need to be addressed to increase their trust and confidence in the NQS ratings. Although participants in the focus groups generally became more positive about the potential usefulness of the NQF/NQS as they found out more about it, as noted, they were also left with a range of unanswered questions and concerns about the assessment process, which limited their trust in the ratings. Key issues requiring clarification related to the regulatory process, the recency of ratings and the accountability of services if they did not meet standards, that is:

- **REGULATORY PROCESS - How services are rated.** Specifically some participants were concerned:
 - that a service would be assessed via a single visit and that this would not result in a thorough assessment
 - that services might be informed in advance of the assessment date and therefore be on their 'best behaviour' on the specified day, resulting in an artificially inflated rating
 - about who would rate the service (government employees or contractors) and how their independence/objectivity would be assured
 - an assessor would not be able to effectively assess some of the quality areas without direct input from parents of children attending the service, particularly 'relationships with children' and 'collaborative partnerships with families'.

"[how do you] prove a respectful relationship with family is developed and maintained – how can a third party know what the relationship between the parents the child and the childcare workers are..." Parent, Sydney, FDC Intend
- **RECENCY – How often services are assessed:**
 - Participants felt that services would need to be assessed regularly – at least annually (and ideally more often) – for the ratings to remain relevant, particularly if there was a high turnover of staff in the intervening period.

“They might get that rating, but are they maintaining it?” Parent, Adelaide, PSK, Intend

- **ACCOUNTABILITY - Consequences if a service ‘fails’ an assessment:**

- Participants wanted to understand what the threshold/criteria was for a service to be assessed as failing and what would happen to a failing service. Their expectation was that it would either be shut down immediately or given a very short period of time to rectify the problem. Some were keen to know how many services had fallen into this category and if any services had been shut down as a result.

Many parents felt that transparent answers needed to be given to these questions to improve the overall credibility of the NQF/NQS and to help them decide how much weight to place on the quality ratings, relative to other influences (including parent reviews and their own visits, which would always remain important).

“I want the rating to follow up with words to tell me why it got given that score. The overall rating or rating for the area is not enough.” Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

It is important to note that introducing the NQF/NQS effectively prompted some parents to consider what goes on ‘behind the scenes’ to check that education and care services in Australia attain the high standards they expect, when this was something they had largely taken for granted previously. This suggests care needs to be taken when explaining the NQF/NQS to ensure it enhances (and does not inadvertently undermine) confidence in the overall child care system.

“This worries me a little bit, because you’d think there was already a government standard for this.” Parent, Sydney, LDC Current

The NQF has the potential to ease both the cognitive and emotional burden on parents

Given the high stakes, and stressful service decision already described, many felt the NQS ratings could help them ‘tick off’ at least some of the more objective factors, which would reduce the cognitive burden.

“Looking at this and knowing this would make me feel better, let me know my selection was ok and had ticked the boxes.” Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

As such, the NQF/NQS could allow parents to focus more on their own emotive or subjective assessment of quality, primarily gleaned through direct contact with the service i.e. whether they felt that a particular education and care service would meet the unique needs of their family.

NQS ratings could have multiple roles at different stages in the decision-making journey

Parents typically suggested that the NQF/NQS would be most useful towards the start of their journey, either when first starting to navigate the system, and creating an initial

long list of services (within their price and area thresholds), or when narrowing their long list down to a shorter list of services to visit.

At the very start of their journey, parents often felt overwhelmed and confused by the prospect of navigating the education and care service landscape and felt they needed some help to start the process.

“Sometimes you do so much research that it makes you go a bit crazy, so this could help you create a list of places that meet the standards... all from one place without having to go to lots of different sites.” Parent, Sydney, PSK, Current

Some therefore hoped, or assumed, that the NQF/NQS website would help them to compile an initial long list in one easy step, by allowing them to search for a specific type of service or services in a particular area, within a certain price range, with NQF rating(s) also shown for each service.

Many thought the NQS ratings would (also) be useful in narrowing down their long-list into a short-list of services to visit by helping them make an initial assessment of the services that might be suited to their child/ren’s needs. At this stage parents were feeling a range of emotions, including frustration and uncertainty, for example as a result of hearing negative feedback from other parents about education and care services or upon realising that many services with good reputations had long wait lists. Exactly how parents thought they would use the ratings to narrow down their list varied, as discussed in the ‘rating scale’ section below.

“If you had 3 that were all on par then you could use the rating to go with the one that was Exceeding.” Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

As already alluded to above, the NQF could help to reduce the burden of parents having to make an individual judgement about all aspects of a service, by reassuring them that a service meets (or exceeds) objective standards in specific areas. This would allow them to concentrate on assessing the more subjective elements that might make a service ideally suited to their child/family, particularly when they visit services in person.

Having taken into account a whole range of factors and influences to select a service, some parents continued to worry about whether they had made the right choice. Guilt about the impending prospect of entrusting the care of their child to relative strangers also seemed common. At this stage the NQS ratings may have helped to reassure parents that they had made a sound decision.

The NQF also has the potential to play an educative role throughout the journey, by helping some parents to think more broadly about the factors that constitute a high ‘quality’ education and care service. This knowledge could help them to feel more empowered to know what to look for when collecting relevant information, visiting, and assessing a service.

Looking beyond the initial decision-making process, some participants with a child/ren already in an education and care service were keen to find out the ratings for that service, so they could query any low ratings with their service and/or to see if their perception of the service were reflected in the ratings achieved. Some parents who already had concerns about certain aspects of the service being provided, were particularly keen to look up the ratings with the expectation that they might be able to use this information to back-up to their own concerns.

While it was not explicitly stated by parents, there was a sense that knowing about the NQF and the NQS might also provide parents with a structure to help them organise their thinking in relation to quality in education and care services and to increase their confidence when assessing services and discussing any problems with service educators/managers.

In other words, the NQS could function as a tool to empower parents to advocate for higher quality services throughout their decision-making journey.

"...use that momentum to start demanding some changes be made and standards lifted." Parent, Adelaide, OSHC Current

Presentation and language used in the NQS rating scale impacted on interpretation and potential use of ratings

Before seeing the ratings, participants in the focus groups tended to assume that the NQS ratings would use a generic and familiar scale such as stars (e.g. similar to the Health Star Rating system for food products) or, less commonly, the alphabet (A, B, C, D etc.).

They were introduced to the three main NQS ratings ('Working Towards', 'Meeting' and 'Exceeding') via a poster, which also provided a brief explanation of each rating, as shown in the excerpt below:



Figure 5: NQS ratings (extract from poster)

Participants generally assumed that services rated as 'Working Towards' were falling below the minimum standard and, as such, wondered why they would be allowed to continue to operate. Some felt that 'working towards' was just a 'polite' way of saying a service was failing to meet the minimum standards required (perhaps to stop parents with children attending the service from panicking, for example).

"Working Towards still sounds too positive for the fact that it's failing." Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

This interpretation was also influenced by its context – comparison with the 'Meeting NQS' rating directly above it led to the conclusion that a rating below 'Meeting NQS' must imply failure to meet the quality standards.

The largely negative interpretation of the 'Working Towards NQS' rating was tempered somewhat by the accompanying text which explained that services with this rating still provide a safe program and that a service with one area rated at this level would be given an overall rating of 'Working Towards NQS', although some seemed to overlook or not absorb this explanation until it was pointed out by others.

When asked to explain how they would use the rating system, based on this scale and the accompanying information presented on the poster, a range of approaches were suggested. Initially, these parents commonly indicated that they would simply exclude services with an overall rating of 'Working towards NQS' – i.e. they would effectively treat it as a binary pass/fail scale.

In the absence of an in-depth understanding of the education and care accreditation and rating process, participants were left to draw their own conclusions, based only on the description and presentation of the NQS ratings. This resulted in them conflating the NQS with the minimum legislative requirements for an approved service. As such, rather than seeing the NQS as a distinct quality indicator above and beyond a minimum standard, services were perceived as either meeting, falling short of, or exceeding these basic standards.

However, in the focus group context and following further consideration, discussion and review of the information provided, some participants (though not all) said they would adopt a different approach, including:

- excluding services with a 'working towards' rating for quality areas that were most important to them. For example, a parent might be very concerned if a service received a 'Working Towards' rating for 'Children's health and safety' but less concerned if a service received this rating for 'Collaborative partnerships with families and communities.
- imposing a maximum cut-off point in terms of the number of areas with a 'Working Towards' rating that they would accept.

- taking into account a Working Towards NQS rating along with other influences when assessing a service. For example, they may still visit a service with a 'working towards' rating if other parents had provided positive feedback.

"I think this [NQF] would be a fact thing that you would still look at, but your gut feeling would still be there... [The NQF] would be a consideration but not a deciding factor. They could be down in a few areas, but then you go in there and you don't experience those things and your kid loves it, it makes you think, hang on where did this rating come from." Parent, Adelaide, PSK, Intend

"This says that [for 'Working Towards'] only one or more areas are identified for improvement, so it could just be one area that we all don't care as much about anyway... so I wouldn't discount [this centre] but it makes me think about what the ratings actually mean." Parents, Sydney, PSK, Current

Some parents were also keen to know more about the 'Working Towards NQS' rating to better inform how they would respond to a service with this rating, including more specific information about what had caused a service to receive this rating (i.e. beyond simply stating which of the seven quality areas were requiring improvement), what the service would do/would be required to do to address this, whether a timeframe had been imposed for changes to be made, and how/when the impact of these changes would be assessed.

The term 'Working Towards' did have positive connotations for some parents, who felt that it could suggest ongoing improvement rather than failure. However, if parents overlook the explanatory text then this approach may risk undermining faith in the stringent quality standards required of all education and care services, and, perhaps even causing feelings of guilt for parents who send their child to a facility with a 'working towards' rating.

"If there were two you were tossing up and one got a 5 and one got a 7 (out of 10), of course you would prefer the 7. But if you don't have a choice and have to go with the 5 anyway then you feel a bit shit that you are sending your kid to a centre that's not the best but you can't do anything about it." Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

It is important to note that the problems with the presentation and language used in the rating scale, as outlined above, were exacerbated by position bias – the well documented tendency for people to dismiss any option placed at the bottom of a rating scale. When participants were told that there was a rating below 'Working Towards NQS' (i.e. 'Significant Improvement Required') some interpreted the 'Working towards NQS' rating a little more favourably, although this did not entirely negate the other issues. They also wanted to know more about the consequences for a service given a 'Significant Improvement Required' rating.

The full rating scale, as presented in other Starting Blocks materials, is shown below:



Figure 6: NQS ratings (extract from Starting Blocks website)

Response to Starting Blocks website and content

Section summary

- Starting Blocks appeared to have a great deal of unrealised potential
- Parents suggested a range of channels to raise awareness of Starting Blocks
- Search function and NQS ratings were considered an essential feature of Starting Blocks, but the range of other content increased its overall value
- Starting Blocks led parents to feel emotionally, as well as practically, supported
- The website was simple to navigate, and the language was considered parent friendly
- Starting Blocks' colourful, clean look and feel was engaging and felt appropriate to the topic
- It was not immediately clear to parents that Starting Blocks is a government initiative
- The direct connection between Starting Blocks and the NQF was not obvious to parents
- Starting Blocks did not fully address key gaps in parents' understanding
- Language in the printed materials did not immediately signal relevance to education and care services

Starting Blocks appeared to have a great deal of unrealised potential

The vast majority of parents in this study could not recall having seen any of the Starting Blocks materials or the Starting Blocks website prior to taking part in the research. They were surprised that they had not come across them given that they had been actively looking for information on the topic, including online, and/or regularly using an education and care service.

"I didn't know that Starting Blocks was in its third year. For such a useful tool and resource for parents, that's run by a government body... I'm really surprised I hadn't ever heard about Starting Blocks at all." Parent, Sydney, LDC Current

As they were iteratively exposed to the Starting Blocks website and materials as part of the research process, the perceived value of the Starting Blocks resource gradually increased. Parents reported that had they known about the content, Starting Blocks would have helped them be better prepared for the decisions they had to make to select an education and care service and therefore taken away some of the anxiety and stress they experienced. Not only did parents see value in Starting Blocks for themselves, they

also expressed enthusiasm about being able to share this resource with other parents in their networks.

"I feel the more I view the site, the more I appreciate its value." Parent, Adelaide, PSK, Intend

"I have already started to share it with friends - both in private message and on my Facebook page as I think it needs to be out there more so more people can experience the site and find the assistance they need." Parent, Adelaide, OSHC Current

Parents suggested a range of channels to raise awareness of Starting Blocks

During the focus group discussions, parents suggested a number of potential communication channels to increase their awareness of Starting Blocks, these comprised both online and offline channels, including:

- Leaflets and/or posters informing parents about the NQF/NQS and directing them to Starting Blocks that would be provided in a range of settings, for example:
 - in information packs provided by health professionals to expectant or new parents (e.g. Maternity Sample Bags¹⁶)
 - in information/introductory packs provided by individual education and care services
 - at public places such as GP waiting rooms, Centrelink service centres, and libraries
 - at baby or early childhood health centres
 - by health professionals, when children are assessed at key developmental milestones or when they are vaccinated.
- Links on relevant websites, such as:
 - individual education and care service homepages
 - websites providing information about, and listings of, education and care services, such as local council websites
 - websites providing other information to parents, such as Centrelink.
- Social media, in particular local community, buy/swap/sell and mothers' groups on Facebook.
- Search Engine Optimisation, to ensure Starting Blocks is listed when parents search for education and care services in their area.
- TV advertising (particularly during kids' programme scheduling), radio and out of home advertising (e.g. bus stops in school areas).

¹⁶ <http://www.bountybags.com.au/>

"It should be given perhaps within the mother's bag we are given during our prenatal care at the hospital as an option later down the track in some sort of flyer form." Parent, Sydney, LDC Current

"They could advertise on TV or radio, but being in a country area I feel like we miss out on a heap of the stuff they get in Adelaide. We have different lifestyles [in Port Lincoln] so the ads might not catch our attention or be relevant to us if they are generic." Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

Search function and NQS ratings were considered an essential feature of Starting Blocks, but the range of other content increased its overall value

For the parents who explored the Starting Blocks website, the central content value lay in the 'Find Childcare' function, which allowed them to search for education and care services in their area and find out basic information about the centre, such as location, contact information and quality ratings. However, there was a demand for additional functionality and information to increase the tool's usefulness as detailed later in this report (Table 2).

"Availability and approx. cost or price range would be very helpful." Parent, Sydney, FDC Intend

"Testimonials of parents/workers would be great." Parent, Cairns, LDC Current

"More information or even a link that takes you to the whole overall report rating for the centre so you can read a bit more in depth - that would be very good." Parent, Adelaide, OSHC Current

Also, although displayed on the homepage, some felt more could be done to make parents aware of this, as a key function of the website.

In the context of this study, the parents who participated were generally focused on investigating education and care service options, rather than actively seeking information about broader topics, such as child development and activities that parents could do with their children at home. However, the wide range of other content available on the Starting Blocks website was a pleasant surprise and considered useful by the parents in this study. That said, there was a sense that parents did not necessarily connect how these materials could help them to build a stronger link between education and care services and home. In other words this link may need to be made more explicit.

Initially, first time users of education and care services were perceived to be the primary target audience for the site as a result of the banner heading 'your first steps into education and care', plus the facility to search for education and care services. Upon further investigation the breadth of content across a range of topics relating to education and care services and development increased its appeal and relevance to experienced parents as well.

The mixture of text, infographics and video content on the Starting Blocks website also appealed to parents, and differentiated this site from other government resources they had seen relating to education and care services. Parents commented that the mixed media engaged them with the website and presented information in a format that was easy to digest but still provided the depth of information they required.

Parents particularly liked the Facebook forum. Parents felt this was an unusual feature for a government websites and they appreciated the opportunity it would give them to connect with other parents who were going through similar parenting experiences.

“The direction to the Facebook forum, I thought that was really good. It is nice to be able to speak to other people going through the same thing.” Parent, Port Lincoln, LDC Intend

Starting Blocks led parents to feel emotionally, as well as practically, supported

Knowing that Starting Blocks was available to them, led the parents in this research to feel more supported – both emotionally and practically.

Those who had felt overwhelmed and alone at the start of the decision-making journey believed that the resources would have helped them feel emotionally supported and more confident in their decision-making, and alleviate some of the pressure they had felt or were still feeling about the decision. Part of this emotional support was attributed to Starting Blocks confirming to parents that there are standards in place that regulate all education and care services and giving them greater insight into this.

“The last couple of weeks were frustrating because we felt that we were all alone out in the wilderness but this website is a great resource to assist with raising our babies. I think parents are all grateful for anything that makes their job easier in today's busy world.” Parent, Sydney, LDC Intend

They also felt that Starting Blocks would have a role in practically supporting their decision-making – by providing a user-friendly search tool, housing reliable and comprehensive information about education and care services, education and development in a centralised place, making the information easily accessible to parents, and therefore reducing the overall ‘research’ burden to parents.

“The Starting Blocks site is comforting to me because when I first considered day care for my son it was such an overwhelming and stressful time. I didn't have any clear focus start point - I was just going on opinions and advice from friends and family. But most of the information was NOT that of what this site offers (e.g. quality framework, types of care, bonding activities and the worker/children ratios etc.). It was opinions, not facts. And for such an important decision like this you want to have access to both so you can make the right choice most beneficial and suited to your babies.” Parent, Melbourne, FDC Current

Further parents believed that Starting Blocks could support parents beyond their service decision, in other aspects of education and care service and development too; such as activities to help develop their children in the home, connecting with other parents through events displayed in the News and Events section or through the Facebook link, and understanding their child's developmental milestones.

The website was simple to navigate, and the language was considered parent-friendly

The parents who explored the Starting Blocks website overwhelmingly reported that it was intuitive to navigate, locate information and move between pages and content. The content categories, as displayed in the colourful boxes on the homepage and top menu bar, facilitated parent's exploration of the site. In addition to the layout, the use of plain English throughout the content aided engagement with and comprehension of the information. Overall, participants felt that the Starting Blocks website accounted for parents being time poor by providing useful information in a format that could be easily located and digested. Furthermore, parents liked that they were not confronted by pop ups or bombarded with lots of scrolling/moving features when navigating the site.

"It was quite simple to navigate around the icons are all big to be able to find the information I was looking for easily." Parent, Adelaide, PSK, Intend

Starting Blocks' colourful, clean look and feel was engaging and felt appropriate to the topic

These parents mostly complimented the simple look and feel of the Starting Blocks materials. Unlike other child-related sources of information they had come across, particularly online, Starting Blocks did not overwhelm parents with information or visual content. Parents felt the layered dissemination of information on the website encouraged them to engage with the content and find out more. For example, on the home page, parents liked that the coloured squares were clearly labelled with headings that, when hovered over, revealed more information, and further could be clicked on to access additional information.

The bold bright colours were considered attractive and visually reflected the connection between Starting Blocks and education and care service.

"It was bright and colourful which was kind of cute... I normally associate websites that are anything to do with children, childcare, playgroups [with being] bright and pretty with lots of block colours. So the website itself I thought aesthetically looked really good." Parent, Melbourne, FDC Current

It was not immediately clear to parents that Starting Blocks is a government initiative

The parents in this research reported that the Starting Blocks materials (particularly the printed resources) had the look at feel of commercial rather than government issued resources. This 'commercial' look and feel is not necessarily problematic, and may even

be a positive attribute. However, the Starting Blocks materials and the Starting Blocks website did not effectively communicate to parents that they are government resources. Branding the information with ACECQA did little to facilitate this, as low awareness of ACECQA meant that parents did not make the connection with government.

“What’s ACECQA? ‘Rating awarded by ACECQA’, who is that? It’s an acronym for something, but it doesn’t mean anything.” Parent, Sydney, LDC Current

Given parents’ desire for government backed, independent information on education and care service, this ambiguity limited the credibility of information for some parents. When parents were informed that Starting Blocks is backed by government, concerns over credibility were alleviated. Parents actively looked for a government logo on the print materials and website, indicating that inclusion of this would be beneficial.

“I think what could help parents trust it is maybe some government links or government of Australia underneath the name. For all parents know this could be a privately owned company whom favour some child cares over others. Having more government logos will help this.” Parent, Sydney, LDC Current

The direct connection between Starting Blocks and the NQF was not obvious to parents

A core purpose of Starting Blocks is to inform parents about the NQF and to encourage them to use the NQS ratings to inform their choice of education and care service. However, the direct connection between Starting Blocks and the NQF was not obvious to parents who explored the website. They generally got the impression that information about the NQS was simply one feature on the site. As a result, their main ‘take-out’ may, for example, be information relating to children’s development, rather than a solid understanding of the NQF/NQS and how it could be useful to them. Beyond informing parents about the NQF/NQS, a more obvious link between these and the advice provided on Starting blocks may also serve to enhance its credibility.

Starting Blocks did not fully address key gaps in parents’ understanding

As discussed in the previous section, having been introduced to the NQF and NQS via printed Starting Blocks materials during the focus groups, parents were left with a number of outstanding questions. This limited their trust and confidence in the NQF and NQS rating, which in turn limited the extent to which they expected to use the ratings for their own decisions. These three outstanding questions were also not fully addressed by the Starting Blocks website, as detailed below:

- **RECENCY**

How often are services assessed? – Although the assessment date was provided for each education and care service identified via the search function, parents did not come across any information about how often they could expect services to be assessed under the NQF. Further, when an assessment date perceived to be relatively old was shown (e.g. two or more years old) for a particular service, this

tended to reduce the perceived credibility of the rating. This was especially the case if a service had received a 'Working Towards' rating (there was an underlying presumption by some parents that these services would be required to demonstrate improvement to inspectors, within a reasonable period of time).

- **REGULATORY PROCESS**

How are services rated? – This included wanting to know what was involved in the assessment process, as well as who conducts the actual assessment. Parent responses indicated this question was not addressed by the Starting Blocks website.

- **ACCOUNTABILITY**

What are the consequences if a service 'fails' the assessment? – Some parents reported that the Starting Blocks website confirmed that there would be serious repercussions for services with a 'Significant Improvement required' rating. Specifically they understood that these services would not be allowed to operate. This level of detail was sufficient to reassure some parents, but others still wanted to know more, including whether services would get a chance to improve before being shut down, what the timeframe would be if so, and who would make the final decision.

It is also important to note that the NQS rating scale is presented in the same way in some places on the Starting Blocks website as in the printed materials shown to focus group participants (i.e. with only the three main ratings shown – e.g. on the NQF page¹⁷). This is problematic for a number of reasons, as outlined in the previous NQF section.

Language in the printed Starting Blocks materials did not immediately signal relevance to education and care services

When asked in the focus groups if the printed Starting Blocks materials would attract their attention (for example, in an information pack or as a leaflet displayed in the GPs clinic), most parents said that they would not due to the absence of any direct reference to education and care services in the Starting Blocks name or key headings. This was particularly noted when viewing the 'Choosing the right service for your child' leaflet with a few parents raising the point that changing the title to read 'Choosing the right childcare service for your child' might be a simple and effective solution. It was not until reading the body of the content on the printed materials that its relevance to them became clear.

One parent commented directly on the text 'It starts with Starting Blocks' printed on a small foldout pamphlet, and noted that they would not have known what the content

¹⁷ <https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/other-resources/factsheets/national-quality-framework-how-can-it-help-me/>

entailed as it does not say 'childcare information' or 'how to choose a childcare' on the front.

Additionally, some felt that ambiguity with the name Starting Blocks in relation to education and care services was a hindrance to locating the website online.

"Name of the website is not helpful, and probably explains why people can't find it. It doesn't relate to childcare or children." Parent, Sydney, FDC Intend

The following table provides detailed feedback on specific sections/pages of the Starting Blocks website.

Table 2 – Response to Starting Blocks website

Webpage/section	Strengths	Improvement opportunities
Homepage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The look and feel of the home page was aesthetically pleasing and eye catching – bright, colourful, the block colours stand out, colours fit with education and care services • The layout and clear topic headings were easy to navigate and did not overwhelm • It was clear that the topic headings led to more information and the headings accurately described the content pages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some suggestions that images/ pictures relating to education and care services would aid recognition that Starting Blocks relates to education and care services • Increase size and prominence of tagline ‘Your first steps into early childhood education and care’ (user larger, bolder text) to better communicate Starting Blocks’ purpose • Watch out: very few suggestions that the homepage was boring and the purpose of Starting Blocks was not obvious
About us	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive reception of the video – majority say it provided a complete overview of the information they could expect to find on the Starting Blocks website • The tone, length, animation, content and automatic playing of the video was well received and held parents attention • Parents related to the acknowledgement in the video that the decision to send children to education and care services is complex. This 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More information about Starting Blocks is sought, e.g. who runs it (some felt this wasn’t clear), how long it has been operating, etc. • Clarity around Starting Blocks’ purpose and benefit to parents – ‘provide you and your family with trusted information, all in one place’ – would drive the value perception to parents

Webpage/section	Strengths	Improvement opportunities
	<p>made parents feel understood and interested to find out more information from the website</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt the content was targeted at first time parents 	
Find child care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigating to the section was intuitive and obvious – either through the green colour block or top menu bar • Functionality is easy to use with little to no instruction, but some say the search criteria and output is basic • Clear display of the quality area ratings are highly appealing and the option to find out more about what the ratings mean. Parents liked that the additional information about the ratings linked to another page within the Starting Blocks website (unlike other education and care service search websites that link to the ACECQA website) as the consistency of family friendly language and easy to read layout was consistent • The ability to add education and care services to favourites which saved your preferences and export these was a useful feature for parents to return to and aid their ongoing research 	<p>Suggested improvements to the search functionality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include option for smaller search radius (e.g. 2km) • Filter to search by care type • Ability to search by part of centre name – one parent found it difficult to search their education and care service because they did not search the exact name <p>Suggested additions to the 'More info' pop up for each centre</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Price • Website of the education and care service • Picture(s) of the education and care service • Availability of the centre (places available) • More information on the area(s) that a centre is 'Working Towards' to explain what the service is doing to improve in that quality area

Webpage/section	Strengths	Improvement opportunities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The radius search increased parents awareness of centres in their area they had not previously known about 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Date the centre opened –could potentially help to alleviate concerns about date rated <p>Other suggested improvements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detail about the rating process - how centres are rated, who by, frequency, criteria, etc. User ratings and feedback for services (parent testimonials) – parents are used to this function from other comparison sites across other categories (e.g. Trip Advisor) and expect Starting Blocks to have similar functionality Ability to compare centres selected side-by side
Translated resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceived ease of navigating to the Translated resources page was polarised. Locating via the search bar was considered most simple There was some appetite for translated resources within Starting Blocks as a centralised source that parents can access information. There is potential that this could increase access to education and care service information for CALD parents who might not have researched English only language sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High chance that parents would not know Starting Blocks offered this content and most would not have located the content unless directed to look for it. Parents also cautioned that it would be difficult for parents who have limited reading in English to navigate through the pages to locate the resources (all of the CALD participant in this research spoke fluent English). A heading of its own on the menu tab was suggested to increase awareness of the content and increase ease of locating. Ideally,

Webpage/section	Strengths	Improvement opportunities
		<p>the Find Childcare function and explanation of the search results (including explanation of the NQS ratings) would be available in a range of common languages (as this was particularly valued by the parents in this study), along with the current translated fact sheets. The titles of translated materials should also be translated, so that non-English speakers can identify relevant materials.</p>
Contact us	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to locate from the top menu. There is some interest in also presenting the 'Contact us' page as a coloured block in the home page • The format is familiar and intuitive to use – it feels and looks like other websites • Younger parents found the option to enquire through Facebook appealing and something they would use • Positive sentiment that the contact us page does not ask parents for too much personal information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some appetite for the option to contact Starting Blocks via an email address or contact number – this is preferred if the query is sensitive, contains personal information or requires a fast turn-around response • It is not clear whether the 'Contact us' form on the website can also be used for specific questions (parents are directed to use Facebook). Some parents do not have Facebook and were uncertain about what they would do if they had a specific enquiry • Providing indicative response times would be valued to set expectations and has the potential to alleviate request for a contact number

Webpage/section	Strengths	Improvement opportunities
		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Openness to an online chat option (facilitate quick enquiry and response interaction)

Parent responses to specific Starting Blocks fact sheets is provided in **Appendix E**.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent perspectives

Section summary

- Service decision making process appeared less confusing or overwhelming for these parents
- Influences on the decision making process were primarily from the immediate community rather than online sources
- A higher priority was placed on links with family and community when deciding on services
- Parents showed little interest in the NQS ratings and had more faith in their own assessment

Service decision-making process appeared less confusing or overwhelming for these parents

The majority of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents who participated in this research had children attending a range of education and care services including LDC, PSK, and FDC, and were able to share multiple perspectives across these care types. Overall, parents in this sample were very familiar with the education and care service options available to them having been through the process several times already; only one of these parents was going through the service decision-making journey for the first time.

Similar to the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, returning to work was a key trigger for parents in considering education and care services for their children. However, within these two groups, parents more readily offered their child's needs as a reason to consider education and care services. For example, some parents had children with specialist learning and development needs, such as autism, and felt that formal education and care services would develop their child's ability to socialise with other children, prepare their child for school, and give them access to specialised carers.

A few parents said they had considered education and care services to reduce the burden on family members (e.g. grandparents, aunties, elders), who up to that point took an active role in caring for the parent's child or children.

"We started our youngest son at day care to take the burden off our mothers, because we drive our mothers around the bend looking after all the grandchildren. She needs a break too, she tells us 'that's what those places are for'." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, regional area

There was some sentiment that the purpose of education and care services was to support their child and give parents and family a break from full-time caring, regardless of their work situation. This was perhaps related to education and care services being seen as an extension of the family and community.

Reflecting on the start of the journey, these parents did not report feeling overwhelmed by the process and did not appear to find it particularly stressful. In the metropolitan group, the choice tended to comprise three options: send their child to the preferred Aboriginal community-managed education and care service centre, to draw upon family to look after the child, or to make the decision to not return to work and look after the child themselves. Overall, in both the metropolitan and regional areas, these parents seemed clear on the options available to them going into the journey, when compared to reports from non-indigenous parents. Two dominant factors emerged:

- Most commented that they had been prompted by family and community members (e.g. one of the 'mob', 'aunties', parents, siblings, extended family, those working in education and care services) to put their child on the waitlist, either while they were pregnant, or shortly after their child had been born.

"[Name] and the other aunties usually just come around, they already know who is having babies so they are on your back, 'here's the paperwork, fill it out, bring it back'. They'll get on to you." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, regional area

- Parents themselves had an awareness of which other families were enrolled in the education and care service they had waitlisted for, which meant that they had a feel for when a place would become available for their child. For example, one parent knew roughly when her daughter was going to get a place in the 2 year old day care group, as she was aware of another child currently in the class (a member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community) who would be moved up to the 3-4 year old class.

Influences on the decision-making process were primarily from the immediate community rather than online sources

In terms of sources of information, none of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents in this study researched education and care services online, nor sought information outside of their friends, family, or community. Further discussion revealed that in most cases, for these parents researching online did not cross their mind as part of the service decision-making process. Accordingly, research outside of personal word of mouth recommendations did not feature at any stage through the journey. As one parent aptly put it:

"Yeah, there was no Googling or anything like that." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, regional area

Parents placed a high degree of trust in the perceptions and recommendations of other members of the community, including family and friends, which resulted in them being the most influential source of information on parent's decision-making. Parents described feeling comforted knowing that their child's family members were attending the prospective centre.

"[the decision was] heavily influenced by the rest of the mob, made sure they were with cousins... even going to [suburb], they learn the language and there is Koori staff." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, metropolitan area

This interest in known and familiar people being at the service was seen as important from when children were very young, not just when they were school age or close to school age.

Also knowing teachers/carers at the service comforted parents and gave credibility to the centre; parents felt confident their child would be adequately cared for and they trusted the service's staff would communicate with parents to inform them of their child's progress and any matters that required attention. In some cases, there was an element of child influence on the decision, particularly for those with specialised needs (such as autism). Even though parents had one or two preferred centres, those parents who took their child to visit the centre in person said that the ultimate decision came down to the child and where they felt most comfortable when attending a visit.

"I wanted to take my kid there and show him the place, get him used to it. All his siblings go to the other centre so I wanted to send him there, but he preferred the other place, I think because it has much more natural light. So we got one of his cousins to go to that school to so he wouldn't be alone and have someone familiar with him." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, regional area

Thus, the role of this in-person visit to the centre was a key influence, as seen among the non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, however for these parents it was more for the child to explore the centre and discern if they liked it, rather than the parent.

A higher priority was placed on links with family and community when deciding on services

Parents described a ‘family environment’ and the presence of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community as dominant factors they looked for in an education and care service. A family environment was described including both direct family members (e.g. cousins, siblings) and broader family members (e.g. members of the community not directly related).

“Even non-Aboriginal workers, they call them aunties and uncles... everyone plays a role in the raising of the children.” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, metropolitan area

“It makes you feel more comfortable if you already know them, and you know that they are going to look after your kids well.” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, regional area

Regardless of the definition, for parents a ‘family environment’ meant that their child would feel supported and would emotionally adjust to the education and care service environment.

Whilst parents said that it was not necessary for a service to be exclusively for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, they preferred at least a proportion of the children and carers to identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (particularly in regional areas). They were also keen for cultural activities to be incorporated into the service’s regular program.

“... with us, even if we didn’t send our child to an Aboriginal day care, we would have ensured that it was culturally appropriate... even though we are going to implement culture and identity at home, the centre supports it so they have that strength and identity growing up.” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, metropolitan area

Knowing that their chosen education and care service valued and understood Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ culture and was involved with their community increased parents trust in the service. In addition to this, and an extended family environment, other factors that were considered by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents in this study included:

- **Proximity of service to home** – this was particularly important for the parents who did not have access to a car. In the regional area it was noted that some PSKs offered pick up/drop off services, which helped to alleviate this requirement.
 - *“The kids love it... they pick them up and drop them off, and that’s a good thing because some parents don’t have vehicles to drop and pick up their kids.”* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, regional area
- **Price** – although considered, price was not top of mind for these parents as the services of interest to them (for the reasons outlined above) tended to be less expensive than other education and care services in the area, sometimes by half, and were within their price threshold.
 - *“Fees are a lot cheaper at Aboriginal specific childcare. When I talk to other parents and they tell me the fees, I wouldn’t be able to afford to send my kids there.”* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, metropolitan area
- **Cleanliness of the facilities** – this factor was mentioned by parents as a consideration, however no-one reported that this had ruled out any of their preferred services, as they all had a good standard for cleanliness and hygienic practices.
- **Individualised learning and development plans**– these parents were polarised about the weighting of this factor. Some parents firmly believed that education and care services should be more than just a place for children to play (as they could do that at home) and that they should learn something while they are there. Others felt that while learning and development activities were beneficial, they were not essential at this stage, as education would be the focus of school.
- **Large outdoor area** – this deemed especially important by parents who described their children as highly active.

Similar to other parent groups, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents in this research did not explicitly use the word ‘quality’ to describe factors that they considered in relation to education and care services, but they certainly had their own methods for assessing it, through what they and their child saw and experienced and from word of mouth feedback. Specifically, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents in this research discerned quality through the following indicators:

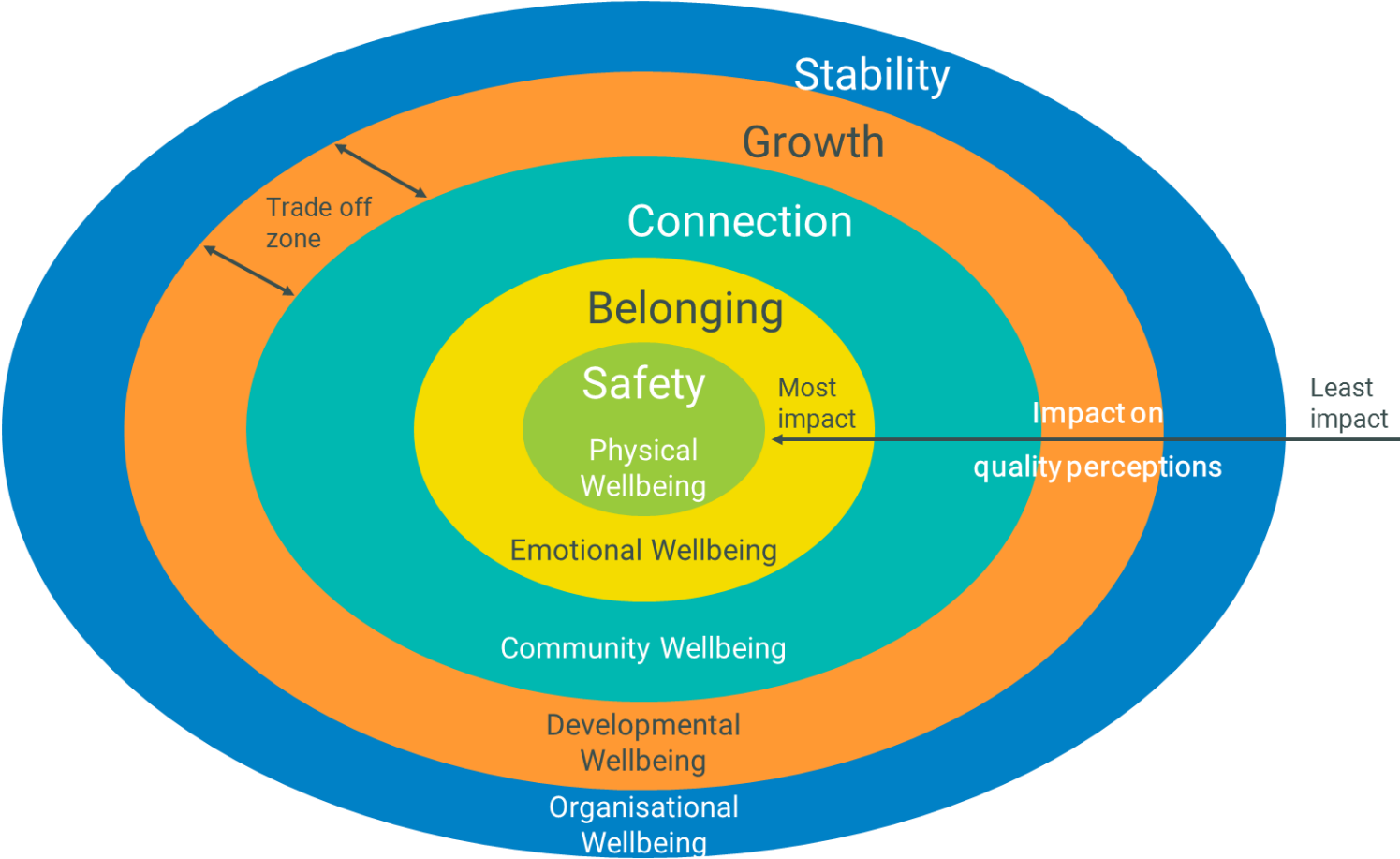
- Their child’s enjoyment when attending the centre, as indicated by their behaviour, particularly when they were dropped off (level of comfort/distress when parents leave) and picked up (appear happy and even reluctant to leave).
 - *“When you pick them up, they’re happy and you know they’ve had a good day.”* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, metropolitan area

- *“We often have to get to the centre 15 minutes early to try coax them out of there. They don’t want to leave.”* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, regional area
- Positive feedback from other parents and staff of the service. Feedback from other parents already using a service was considered a strong indicator of quality as there was a belief that other parents wouldn’t trust the care of their child over to a service they did not perceive to be good quality.
- The friendliness and engagement of teachers/carers, as evidenced by the way they approached and engaged with parents each time they visited the service (to drop off or pick up their child). This included the teachers/carers knowing and talking about each child’s individual needs and progress, which indicated that they knew each child and genuinely cared about their wellbeing.
- Excursions, outings, events, on-site activities (e.g. kinder gym, on-site cycle tracks).
- Specialist staff and facilities to care for children with learning and/or development needs (e.g. children with autism).
- Extra services that were perceived to be above and beyond what most education and care services offer, for example health and development checks, lunchbox notes with recommendations for healthy eating options, house visits, etc. For example, in the regional area, parents mentioned that the ‘aunties’ from the centre conducted home visits to update parents on their child’s learning, development and general wellbeing at the centre. This level of care was perceived to reflect a quality service.

Unique to the regional area was the relationship between two of the preferred centres considered by these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents. These two centres reportedly shared each other’s facilities (e.g. outdoor area, cycle track, health check-up services), so parents were less concerned about which centre their child attended as they effectively felt they got the best of both worlds.

Most of the factors and indicators considered by these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents overlapped with quality areas underpinning the NQF, however it was clear that *Community wellbeing* featured as a more dominant aspect of quality for these parents, after *Emotional wellbeing* (refer to Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community model of parents’ priorities for education and care service quality



Parents showed little interest in the NQS ratings and had more faith in their own assessment

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents living in the regional area were slightly more aware of the NQS rating than those in the metropolitan area. This was due to one of the main education and care services in the area having a well-publicised 'Exceeding NQS' rating. Parents with children attending this service had seen the rating displayed on the front door, printed on staff t-shirts, announced at the centre's committee meetings, and publicised in the service's newsletter (including what the service was doing to maintain this standard).

When prompted, these parents said that the positive NQS rating primarily confirmed to them that the centre was operating appropriately, particularly in areas relating to:

- health and hygiene
- staff qualifications, background, and suitability to work with children
- security (e.g. gate, doors, fences etc. to prevent unauthorised people entering and children escaping)
- appropriate learning and development program.

These Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents generally (metropolitan and regional) expected that the service attended by their child/ren would have received an 'Exceeding' rating, as they perceived that these services had high standards. For these parents, the rating would reflect and reconfirm the assessment they had made themselves, but not tell them anything new.

"I haven't seen a rating at our centre. To us, if our centre looks and feels [right], and they embrace you. And the ladies there, especially with her boy who has autism, they cater for his needs and they make sure that he's actually occupied from the moment he gets in there and they will approach me the moment I get in the door because they know what he's like – he can get really upset, so they will engage him with activities to settle him." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, regional area

Like other parents who took part in the study, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents typically felt that all education and care services should be of a high standard and assumed that any failing to meet high quality standards would not be allowed to operate. This view influenced their interpretation of the NQS ratings and their expectations for the rating achieved by their child's service. For example, they typically assumed that their child's service would have an 'Exceeding NQS' rating. Some also expected that all new services would have a rating of 'Not meeting standards', as it would take time to develop their practice, and that older more established services should all have a rating of 'Exceeding NQS'. Others questioned why the rating system was not simply 'approved/accredited' or 'not approved/accredited'. In other words they expected a binary (pass/fail) rating system and interpreted the actual NQF ratings in a binary way. There was also an assumption that the

'Working towards NQS' rating meant that a service was failing to meet the required standards across all quality areas.

Some parents in the metropolitan area thought that there was a specific Aboriginal component to the NQF to ensure that services were culturally appropriate, however they could not provide further detail to this point. Others felt that there were some factors that were important to them as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents that could not be assessed via a framework such as the NQF, which caused them to question the credibility and relevance of the NQS ratings. Specifically, to these parents, the descriptions of the quality areas and the ratings themselves appeared to present a "westernised view". This seemed to be primarily linked to a perception that the quality areas did not cover key elements that are an important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, such as storytelling. The language/tone was also described as "mainstream" and there was an assumption that services would be rated by a non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander assessor.

"As a Koori parent, I know they would all have the accreditation, we have trust and faith in them to do that... what's not included in this framework is the blackness that won't be counted or seen or at any other childcare centre. You can't mandate or qualify identity in a framework." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, metropolitan area

These parents suggested that if this perception was incorrect, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues were, in fact, taken into account, then this would need to be communicated to them. They also felt there would need to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community involvement (including Aboriginal staff, parents or other community members) in the ratings process to convince them that:

- the ratings are relevant to them
- the assessors have a deep understanding of Aboriginal culture and the weighting of its presence in the education and development of Aboriginal children
- the ratings are credible and tell parents something useful about the service(s).

Overall, these parents did not seem to feel that the information provided by the NQS ratings would be useful to them. Many had more faith in their own assessment and had relatively low levels of interest in the detail underpinning the NQF ratings.

"I feel that when we get accredited at [my centre], we are either accredited or we are not. We're not lacking in this area, or that area. We are accredited across the board. So I don't understand what this is for." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, metropolitan area

However, if their centre was to receive a rating below 'Exceeding NQS', some indicated that they would take more interest in what that meant generally, and specifically for their centre.

In particular, they would want to know which quality areas had been rated below 'Exceeding', what the service was planning to do to address this and an expected timeline for improvements.

"You'd want to find out standards they are not actually meeting. If they aren't meeting something that's super important you wouldn't want your kids going there anyway, even if they did like the place." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, regional area

It seems that the NQF and NQS ratings might be more valued by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents if there was a specific component which would help them to distinguish between education and care services based on the extent to which they specifically addressed the priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents (as outlined above).

Despite only muted interest in the NQF and NQS ratings, the printed materials presented to the groups did not offend and were received in a positive manner. Consistent with other parents' feedback, the parents in these groups liked the bright colours on the print materials and perceived them to reflect children and related topics on education and care services. One parent was attracted to the brochure that displayed a picture of an Aboriginal child on the front, and it was suggested by several parents that including more Aboriginal references (including imagery) would help to indicate that the information was relevant to them and drive engagement with the materials.

"If it's for Aboriginal people, then having the cultural appropriateness on it would help, whether it is images – like that brochure with the [Aboriginal] kid on it, or art that shows it's for us... that stands out. Also if the information is endorsed by the mob, or an Aboriginal organisation, then that authenticates it. We can spot phoney's from a mile away. So the mainstream service can be trying their best to be able to do it but it has to be authentic, it has to be real to us." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, metropolitan area

Likely related to these parents' apparently limited interest in the NQF and their tendency to research education and care services via word of mouth and face-to-face visits (rather than online information sources) they mostly thought that it was not parents' job to seek out the ratings or information about them, so the services themselves should promote the NQS ratings (e.g. on the front door, noticeboard, newsletter, etc.). Consistent with this, there also appeared to be little appetite for visiting Starting Blocks to inform their decision-making journey.

"The rating didn't really matter because we already think it's a great place for our kids and our kids love the place, and we chose it already. So if a day care wants us to know about the rating they should tell us and be proud of their rating, especially if they just got given a good rating." Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent, regional area

Opportunities and recommendations

These research findings point to several opportunities for ACECQA to progress towards its remit of improving families' and the wider community's access to and understanding of information about education and care service quality, and increasing the priority placed on this information.

This section initially highlights evidence and key opportunities that emerge from this research. It then provides detailed recommendations for realising these opportunities, based on the findings.

Overarching opportunity to progress towards greater access, understanding, and priority placed on education and care service quality

An independent, trusted source of parent support

The parents who participated in this study understood the importance of their children's early years for their cognitive, physical and emotional development, so they were highly invested in the choice of education and care service. However, they found the process of selecting an education and care service stressful, time-consuming and over-whelming. They were also largely reliant on the subjective views of other people, combined with their own judgement, to assess service quality.

Parents were therefore open to receiving support from an independent, credible, trusted source of information about education and care services; specifically the NQS ratings and Starting Blocks website.

A leader in centralised, independent, service information

Beyond direct and indirect word of mouth sources (including social media) few information services were salient to these parents. Parents consistently reported having to consult multiple sources in order to: navigate the education and care landscape; build a list of potential childcare services; and gather feedback about service quality.

As no single source dominates this space, there is an opportunity for ACECQA to fill this gap and become the leading source of information and advice in relation to education and care services consulted by parents.

A pioneer in developing quality literacy in the community

Parents considered a wide range of factors when assessing the suitability of a service for their child, and these broadly appeared to mirror the elements that make up the quality standards, as well as the seven quality areas. However, parents felt that knowing about the NQS and NQS ratings could increase their confidence when interacting with service providers,

so they would know what to expect from their service, particularly if they needed to raise concerns about aspects of service quality.

There is an opportunity for ACECQA to pioneer increases in quality literacy among parents and for the NQF and the NQS ratings, as well as Starting Blocks to function as tools to empower parents to advocate for higher quality services.

Recommendations to assist ACECQA in realising these opportunities follow below, along with a brief summary of the key findings on which they are based.

Recommendations for realising these opportunities

The recommendations for increasing access, understanding and priority placed on service quality relate to four main areas: raising awareness, engaging parents by focusing on their priorities, developing messaging that resonates with parents, and building trust, as explained below.

Area 1. Raising awareness

There was very low awareness of the NQF and the NQS among participants in this research. The few parents who were aware of the standards or NQS ratings had generally found out about them after their child/ren had started attending an education and care service. No one was certain that they had used the NQS ratings to inform their initial service choice and none reported visiting the Starting Blocks website prior to the research.

Recommendation 1a: Raising awareness of the NQS ratings and the Starting blocks website (as the key source for listing services and finding out individual service ratings) will be critical to expand the impact of the NQF and NQS ratings among parents. A significant 'above the line' (ATL) campaign, supported by 'below the line' (BTL) strategies, is recommended to raise awareness of the NQS and Starting Blocks among a large proportion of the relatively broad target audience (essentially parents of children ages 0-12) as quickly as possible. 'Above the line' activities should ideally be expanded to include communications channels with a broad reach, including television and radio (in addition to digital and social media), as well as special interest media to target specific groups.

Parents were particularly influenced by the views of 'insider' sources, including parents with children already attending education and care services and educators/other staff.

Recommendation 1b: The influence of ‘insiders’ could be harnessed by engaging a high profile and influential Champion and/or by establishing a peer ambassador program (which could include influential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members), and by encouraging educators, peak bodies and other key sector stakeholders to promote use of the NQS and Starting Blocks when interacting with parents, through articles in newsletters, and industry publications.

Recommendation 1c: The development of highly engaging and therefore sharable content would be particularly valuable to leverage the influence of word of mouth to spread the campaign messages (via social media).

Parents thought that the NQS ratings would have been particularly useful to them when they first began to navigate the system and compile an initial list of prospective services.

Recommendation 1d: Though increasing quality information and literacy would be beneficial to all parents of children aged 12 and under, priority should be placed on raising awareness among parents as early as possible, before they begin navigating the system. This would provide the greatest benefit and would fit with their existing decision making process. In addition to a broad ATL campaign, expanding the range of partnerships to facilitate third party promotion is recommended to achieve this, with a particular focus on partners that could provide information to parents of young children at key touchpoints / milestones, such as after birth (along with the provision of each child’s Personal Health Record for example), at developmental checks, or vaccinations.

A table summarising communication tactics to raise awareness of the NQF, NQS and Starting Blocks website is provided in **Appendix F**.

Area 2. Engaging parents by focusing on their priorities

The key functions of the NQS ratings of most interest to parents were:

- building a list of education and care services by searching for childcare services that met their key thresholds (in terms of location, cost, and opening hours) and
- comparing service quality ratings between those services of interest to them.

Recommendation 2a: Centre communications on alerting parents to the availability of an independent government rating system for childcare services and a comprehensive website that will allow them to search for and compile a list of suitable childcare services (ideally based on price, service type, and opening hours, as well as location), compare their ratings and find out more about the ratings process.

Recommendation 2b: Ensure the Find Childcare search function is the most prominent item on the Starting Blocks homepage, followed by information about the NQS and ratings. The NQS ratings should also be prominent in search results (including the rating for each quality area), along with accompanying information (particularly to explain the 'Working towards NQS' rating, as this raised concerns for some parents), via links if necessary.

Recommendation 2c: Enhance the Find Childcare search function by including a smaller search radius option, the ability to filter by care type and price. Investigate the possibility of including availability/wait list information and parent reviews in search results, as this information would be valued by parents (although these additions may be impractical/prohibitively time consuming to maintain).

Quality is important to parents and they consider several factors relating to their child's wellbeing when evaluating the suitability of a service.

Recommendation 2d: Highlight that the NQS ratings have been designed to assess the aspects of quality that matter to parents and demonstrate this alignment by mentioning specific factors that are fundamental to all parents (i.e. those relating to physical and emotional wellbeing). Where the seven quality areas are provided, present those that align with parents' most common priorities first – i.e. children's health and safety and relationships with children, followed by the physical environment, educational program and practice, family and community links, and finally staffing arrangements and governance.

Parents have slightly different quality priorities depending on the service type, the age of children (i.e. LDC/FDC vs. OSHC vs. PSK) and the cultural background of the parents.

Recommendation 2e: In future (after raising awareness more broadly), increased targeting may be beneficial, for example, tailoring messaging for parents of older children and/or by service type (e.g. OSHC more about fun, relaxation and peer relationships, PSK more about school readiness) and/or by cultural background/identity (e.g. for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents highlight standards that focus on community engagement, respect for children/parents culture, utilise more images of children who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and establish partnerships with community leaders).

The Starting Blocks name was not meaningful to parents and it did not communicate its relationship to education and care services.

Recommendation 2f: Assuming the Starting Blocks name must be retained, it should always be accompanied by supporting text to explain its relevance to parents seeking/using childcare services.

Parents related to the plain English description of the seven quality areas in particular, as well as the use of plain English throughout the Starting Blocks website. However, some of the terminology used in the Starting Blocks materials did not align with parents' vernacular or immediately signal the relevance of the content to parents seeking education and care services. Parents tended to use generic terms such as childcare or daycare to describe education and care services (encompassing LDC, FDC and PSK), as well as more specific terms such as 'kindy', preschool, or after school care, rather than more formal terms such as 'Outside school hours care' or 'services'. They also did not spontaneously use the word quality when discussing their decision-making process. However, once introduced, the concept of quality was meaningful to them, and they did not suggest or use alternatives that would be more appropriate.

Recommendation 2g: Parent-friendly terminology should be used in communications wherever possible. Where formal language must be retained, ensure this is accompanied by plain-English explanations (as is already the case when presenting the seven quality areas). Ensure all headings clearly signpost the accompanying content, again reflecting the language used by parents wherever possible.

Area 3. Developing messaging that resonates with parents

Parents have different support needs at each stage of the decision-making journey. For example, when they initially begin to investigate education and care options they are primarily interested in building a list of education and care services and comparing service quality ratings for these services. Once their child has begun attending a service, information about the NQS and education and care more generally would be useful in empower them to advocate for service improvements.

Recommendation 3a: Communication messaging should be built around the need states experienced by parents at each stage in the decision-making journey, including: navigating the education and care system, list building, initial elimination/short-listing, validation of their choice and education (further details are provided in the Customer Value Proposition, below).

Selecting an education and care service was a highly emotive journey for parents, with their choice perceived to have extremely high stakes outcomes (their child's wellbeing and development).

Recommendation 3b: Communication messaging and the creative concepts used to convey this should acknowledge and leverage the range of emotions that parents feel when choosing an education and care service for their child, to engage parents.

Although parents sought feedback from various 'insiders' and were also interested in accessing the NQS ratings to inform their choice of education and care service, they firmly believed that they were ultimately best placed to assess whether a prospective service would enhance their child's development and ensure their wellbeing.

Recommendation 3c: The tone and content of communication messaging should acknowledge that parents understand their child's unique needs better than anyone and position the NQS rating and Starting Blocks as complimentary tools to support (rather than replace) them in making a final judgement.

Recommendation 3d: Key communication materials should be tested among the target audience(s) to evaluate their effectiveness (e.g. in terms of message comprehension, emotional resonance, perceived relevance, credibility, tone, 'look and feel', call to action etc.).

Area 4. Building trust in the NQS ratings

In the absence of an in-depth understanding of the education and care accreditation process, parents typically assumed that all education and care services in Australia would be required to meet stringent minimum standards. Informing parents about the NQS ratings and introducing them to the rating scale caused some uncertainty and confusion. In particular, the presentation of and language used in the rating scale suggested to parents that services with a 'Working towards NQS' rating had failed to meet minimum standards. This could

Recommendation 4a: Reinforce and confirm parents underlying belief that all operating childcare services must meet stringent quality standards in all communications. An infographic might assist with this, by summarising the relationship between education and care service accreditation and the NQS.

potentially undermine parents' confidence in the quality of the education and care system as a whole, as well as cause unnecessary concern about, or rejection of, services with a 'Working towards NQS' rating.

Recommendation 4b: Assuming it is not feasible to change the NQS rating scale labelling, the presentation of the scale should be adapted to clarify that all services with a rating above 'Significant improvement required' at least achieve the legislative requirements for operation in Australia, to enhance trust and confidence in the quality of the education and care system. A mock-up of this type of approach is provided below. Existing explanatory text should also be retained and the full scale should always be shown (i.e. including 'Significant improvement required'). An example of one potential approach is provided in **Appendix G**.

Some parents had a degree of cynicism about the value of regulatory tools and indicators such as certificates, industry standards and checklists. As such, they wanted to know more detail about the NQS ratings, beyond the information provided in the example Starting Blocks materials and/or from exploring the Starting Blocks website (specifically in relation to regulatory process, recency and accountability).

Recommendation 4c: Provide transparent information about the NQS ratings process on the Starting Blocks website. This information does not need to be overly prominent, but should be available to those who want it, for example this could be in a FAQs section. Where answers to questions may differ from parents expectations, reassurances should ideally be provided (for example, parents raised concerns about the depth of assessment that could be achieved by a single in-person visit, but some reassurance could be provided by explaining that historical evidence is also taken into account, through the examination of administrative records etc.)

It was not immediately clear to parents that the NQS or the Starting Blocks website were government initiatives, which limited the credibility of the information and the NQS ratings for some parents.

Recommendation 4d: Ensure the link between the government, the NQS Ratings, and Starting Blocks and Government is make clear, via text and visual signals such as government crests/logos, and reiterated in messaging.

Value proposition

Having identified the key opportunities for the NQF and NQS ratings, as well as recommendations for realising these opportunities, a potential 'value proposition' based on these findings is proposed, along with creative messaging territories that could be utilised in communicating with the target audience, as outlined below. Please note that while this has been developed to align with the recommendations provided above (in terms of tone and content), the proposed proposition and messages are examples only and have not yet been tested with the target audience.

Fundamental/underlying need: "Support me throughout the journey to ensure that I find the best childcare service for my child."

- Intended emotional shift – from overwhelm, confusion, disappointment and guilt to clarity, hopefulness, empowerment and confidence.
 - Example message – Starting Blocks and the National Quality Standards can support you in selecting the best 'childcare' service for your child.

Core messaging territories:

1. **"Save me time and stress, by getting me started in my search for quality childcare."**
 - Example message – You can quickly and easily search for childcare services in your area and find the Government's National Quality Standard rating for each service by visiting the Starting Blocks website.
2. **"Help me to eliminate services that do not perform well in quality areas that are important to me."**
 - Example message – The Government's National Quality Standard ratings can help you to compare childcare services and focus your attention on services with high ratings in the areas that matter to you (www.startingblocks.gov.au).
3. **"Reduce the number of things I need to think about when I visit a service, so I can focus on how well it will suit my child."**
 - Example message - You know your child's unique needs better than anyone. Look up the Government's National Quality Standard ratings for a childcare service before you visit, so you can focus on judging how well your child will settle and thrive there (www.startingblocks.gov.au).
4. **"Give me confidence that I have made the right choice of childcare service for my child."**
 - Example message – By looking up the Government's National Quality Standard rating, you can be confident that you have found a childcare service that

performs well in the quality areas that matter to you and your child (www.startingblocks.gov.au).

5. **“Empower me to advocate for my child to receive high quality care.”**

- Example message – All approved childcare services in Australia must provide a safe environment and good quality care and education for your child, visit the Starting Blocks website to find out more about what you should expect from a quality childcare service (www.startingblocks.gov.au).

Reinforcement need: confirm (rather than undermine) parents’ underlying belief that all operating childcare services must meet stringent quality standards.

Concept positioning for Starting Blocks: Starting Blocks is the only website you need, to search for childcare’ services, with independent government quality ratings for every approved childcare service in Australia, as well as information about types of childcare, early childhood development and education (visit www.startingblocks.gov.au).

Appendix A – Journey mapping template

Current user template

Child care service journey map

Personal information:

1. Name: _____ 2. Age of child (now): _____ 4. Child currently attends service: Yes No, not yet

3. Type of service attending/will be attending:

Long day care Preschool/Kindergarten

Family day care (in home care) Out of school hours care (before and after school/vacation/holiday care)

5. Which services were you considering for this child at the start of this journey (list names of all services, centres or providers considered). ➔

Long day care service: _____

Family day care service: _____

Preschool/kindergarten service: _____


Out of school hours care service: _____

Your journey:

Journey begins
Start to consider need for formal child care

Month/year: _____


Age of child (at start of journey): _____



Journey ends
Child starts attending child care service

Month/year: _____

Age of child (at end of journey): _____



Intending user template

Child care service journey map

Personal information:

1. Name: _____ 2. Age of child: _____ 4. Child currently attends service: Yes No, not yet

3. Type of service attending/will be attending:

Long day care Preschool/Kindergarten

Family day care (in home care) Out of school hours care (before and after school/vacation/holiday care)

5. Which services were you considering for this child at the start of this journey (list names of all services, centres or providers considered).

Long day care service: _____

Family day care service: _____

Preschool/kindergarten service: _____

Out of school hours care service: _____

Your journey:

Journey begins
Start to consider need for formal child care

On this timeline, please mark with an (X) how far along this journey you are

Journey ends
Child starts attending child care service

Month /year: _____

Age of child: _____

Appendix B – Discussion guide and online board guide

Focus Group Discussion Guide

WAITING ROOM TASK - NAMING YOUR JOURNEY MAP

Respondents to receive instruction when they arrive to the group and sign in.

Instruction (verbal or written depending on group venue): Please give your journey a name that you think best encapsulates your experience, or the experience you have had so far. Write this on the top of your journey map.

WARM-UP

5 MINUTES

Aim: to build rapport between moderator and group participants, and promote a safe environment for discussion

- Thank participant for taking part, introduce self, HP independent researcher, confirm incentive (\$120)
- Housekeeping – bathrooms, exits, help yourself to food/drinks, mobile phones on silent
- Today you are all here because you have a child or children [currently attending/ that you are intending to send to] [insert care type for group]. We want to chat to you about your experiences deciding this type of care for child. **IF CARE TYPE IS NOT MIXED:** This care type, [insert care type], will be the focus of our discussion today.
- Explain process of discussion – 1.5 hours, no right or wrong answers, mix of discussion and activities that we will do as a group, but sometimes we will get you to collect your individual thoughts, you have been selected for a reason so interested in your point of view, it's ok if you don't agree with other opinions in the group but we do ask that everyone is respectful of what each other has to say
- Explain confidentiality and privacy; code of conduct, audio and video recording, aggregated reporting

To start with, let's get to know each other. We'll go around in a circle, please tell the group a bit about you and your family, how old your children are, and for fun, what your guilty pleasure is when you get 1 hour of free time to yourself!

SERVICE CHOICE PROCESS

15 MINUTES

Aim: review homework, probe rationale for steps in the journey, understand emotional context to decision-making, listen for the presence and value of quality ratings in the journey, explore key decision-making points and disruption opportunities in the journey where NQF can better inform and assist parents with their decision-making, understand the relationship between the decision to choose a care type and care provider

Thanks for the introductions. We know that going through the process of choosing a formal child care service for your child can be very involved. Sometimes there are a lot of different factors to consider, it can be quite an emotional journey, and we can be faced with difficult decisions to make. We are going to be exploring all of this today.

I'd like you to think back to when you first started considering a child care service, and step back into your shoes at the very beginning of your journey...

- What were some of your expectations you had about this journey (not having started it yet)?
- What did you think would matter or be important to you?
- What did you think the challenges would be?
- And what sort of emotions were you feeling at the start of this journey?

Great, we're going to come back to that in a bit, and this leads us into your journey mapping tasks that you completed before the group. Thank you for sending a copy through ahead of this session, I've had a chance to look over these and I've pulled out what I think are some common steps from your journeys.

MODERATOR TO PUT UP A3 SHEET OF COMMON STEPS. READ EACH STEP OUT LOUD.

- Overall, do you think that this reflects the journey to choosing a [insert service type] service?
- Is there anything that we have missed? **MODERATOR WRITE IN MISSING STEPS**
- What about any other key decision-making points or turning points?
 - Did anyone else experience this?
 - Why was it a turning point/ key decision-making point?
 - At what point did you decide on the type of care?
 - At what point did you decide on the specific care provider?
- Does the journey break up into sections or chapters? Where and why?

MODERATOR CAPTURE ON NEW FLIP CHART SHEET OR ON MAP

Influences (5 min)

Now I want to know about the influences in your journey (e.g. people, information, anything that that influenced what happened in your journey), these are written under the circles on your journey map **[LISTEN OUT FOR: GOVT RESOURCES, STARTING BLOCKS, NQF WEBSITE, MYCHILD. IF MENTION RATINGS, PROBE: WHERE THEY SAW RATING]**

- **If websites not mentioned:** did you use the internet to find out information related to child care? What kind of information did you look for? What sites have you used?
- Which were the most helpful influences in your journey? How come? What did they tell you?

- Which of these influences are the most trustworthy in your opinion? How come? [**PROBE: KNOW FROM DIRECT EXPERIENCE, CREDIBLE INFORMATION, WORD OF MOUTH RECOMMENDATION**]
- **If not mentioned:** what about [local GP clinics, expos]? Was that an influence in anyone's journey? What or why not?
- Are there any influences that you encountered on your journey that you feel were not very helpful? Why is that? [**LISTEN OUT FOR GOVT RESOURCES**]

IF NOT ALREADY COVERED

FOR CURRENTLY USE

- Now that you have finished your journey, did what seemed important to you at the start seem different by the end? [**PROBE: EXPECTATIONS, UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES**]
- Since your child has been attending [insert care type] and you've seen and experienced the service, have your feelings changed about what's important?
- If you could wave a magic wand and know one thing that you didn't when you were going through the journey, what would that be? [**ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION**]
- **PROBE IF REQUIRED:** What, if anything, would you do differently if you could do it again?
- Is there anything missing from your journey that you wish you knew going through it? [**IDENTIFY CONSUMER NEED FOR NQF**]
- What, if anything, would you do differently if you could do it again?

IF NOT ALREADY COVERED

FOR INTENDING TO USE

- Now that you are part way through your journey, have any of your expectations about this journey changed?
- From your experience so far, is there anything missing from your journey that you wish you knew at this stage? [**IDENTIFY CONSUMER NEED FOR NQF**]
- What emotions are you feeling now, compared to the start of your journey? [**IF DIFFERENT, PROBE: WHY**]

GENERAL ATTITUDES TO ECEC SERVICES

10 MINUTES

***Aim:** understand the factors that influence decision-making and what is important to them, understand weighting of fact and feeling in decision-making, begin to uncover the meaning of 'quality' in their own words in the ECEC context*

Optional exercise if time or respondents have low energy to re-engage [max 5 min]

Ok, everyone up on their feet. Thinking back on the journey as a whole/ the journey so far, how much of your decision-making was based on fact and how much on feeling? We are going to draw an imaginary line across the room, where this end represents you making these decisions purely based on facts and information alone. The other end is if your decision-making was purely based on

feelings and emotions, no facts involved. Please move to the position along this line where you think you sit.

LOOK FOR GROUPINGS, CHALLENGE POSITIONING AND PROBE:

- **Groupings of participants**
- **Why are you standing more on the fact/feeling side/in the centre**
- **How does it make you feel to see fellow participants over there?**
- **Do you feel like you're missing out on anything by being in here along the line?**

Important factors – individual capture + flip chart (5 min)

Now I'd like to move on to discussing all the specific things or factors that you feel are important when considering [a formal care service/ specific care type] for your child. On the note pad in front of you, please write down your thoughts individually, then we will capture these on the flip chart as a group. **ALLOW PARTICIPANTS 1 MINUTE TO COLLECT THEIR INDIVIDUAL THOUGHTS.**

- Ok, let's get these up on the board. **GET PARTICIPANTS TO CALL OUT FACTORS AND WRITE THEM ON FLIP CHART. [PROBE MEANING IF ANY FACTOR UNCLEAR/ NEEDS EXPLAINING]**
- Which are the essential deciding factors/ non-negotiables? [COST OF ENTRY]
- Which factors do you use to separate care types/ centres? [TRADE OFFS]
- Which are nice to haves? [LUXURIES]
- **PROBE FACTORS THAT MIGHT CHANGE CATEGORISATION: AGE OF CHILD, PRIOR EXPERIENCE, SERVICE TYPE**
- Which areas/factors come under 'quality'? **WHAT SITS UNDER 'QUALITY' AND WHAT SITS OUTSIDE**
- Does this change if we think about different types of services? What about other factors that change what we think is most important? **[PROBE: AGE OF CHILD, PRIOR EXPERIENCE]**
- **If 'quality' comes up spontaneously:** I'm interested in this word 'quality'. What does this mean to you in the context of formal child care services? **MODERATOR TO CAPTURE DIFFERENT COMPONENTS OF QUALITY ON FLIP CHART**
- **[PROBES FOR ALL FACTORS (INCL QUALITY): IS THIS A FACT OR FEELING? HOW DO YOU DETERMINE IF THIS FACTOR MEETS YOUR STANDARDS/EXPECTATIONS?]**

DREAM OR NIGHTMARE

10 MINUTES

Aim: understanding the factors that influence decision-making in more detail - hygiene factors and nice to haves, explore the emotional impact linked to these factors, understand what factors are being delivered to and what are missing from people's experiences

Moderator decision to facilitate activity as a collective group, or workshop in mini groups. Optional for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

IF FACILITATE AS COLLECTIVE GROUP

Close your eyes or lower your gaze. Imagine you are walking into the [insert care type] of your dreams. Think about what you are seeing as you go through the centre, what sounds you hear, the smells, the colours. Think about how you feel walking through. You might explore inside and

outside. Keeping your eyes closed or lowered, I'd like you to call out to me some of these things you are seeing, feeling, sensing. **MODERATOR TO CAPTURE ON FLIPCHART**

REPEAT FOR NIGHTMARE

We're now going to repeat this, but thinking about the [insert care type] of your nightmares. Lower your gaze... **MODERATOR TO CAPTURE ON FLIPCHART**

- Do you think this dream/nightmare is more fact or feeling? Why is that? **[LISTEN FOR: FACT e.g. ratings, accreditation, play equipment, food, etc. FEELING e.g. positive feeling when visiting, happy child, etc]**
- Is there anything on here that you expect that all [insert care type] would have or offer? **[IDENTIFY HYGIENE FACTORS]**
- Which are the features that you consider to be true dream-like/ nightmarish elements?
- **For dream:** How could a service show you, or communicate to you that they are doing this?

IF WORKSHOP AS MINI GROUPS

Thanks for that. We've had some discussion about factors that are important to you as parents when choosing a formal child care service for your child, we are now going to apply this to [insert service type]. We'd like you to paint a picture for us (using words, and drawings if you want!) of what you think the ideal [insert care type] looks like, and what you think the worst imaginable [insert care type] looks like. We like to call this a 'dream or nightmare' activity. We'll get half of you to show us what the dream side looks like, and the other half to show us what nightmare looks like.

You will have an A3 sheet to create the [insert care type] of your dreams or nightmares. You'll have 5 minutes maximum to do this activity, then we will share back with the group.

RECONVENE AS A GROUP

Please share with us your version of the [care type] dream/ nightmare..... Thank you for sharing.

ASK OTHER GROUP

- What are your thoughts on this dream/nightmare version?
- Is there anything that you would add? Why?

ASK ALL

- Do you think this dream/nightmare is more fact or feeling? Why is that? **[LISTEN FOR: FACT e.g. ratings, accreditation, play equipment, food, etc. FEELING e.g. positive feeling when visiting, happy child, etc]**
- Is there anything on here that you expect that all [insert care type] would have or offer? **[IDENTIFY HYGIENE FACTORS]**
- Which are the features that you consider to be true dream-like/ nightmarish elements?
- **For dream:** How could a service show you, or communicate to you that they are doing this?

REPEAT FOR OTHER SIDE (DREAM/NIGHTMARE)

FOR ALL:**IF NOT ALREADY COVERED****FOR CURRENTLY USE**

- Reflecting on your own personal journey - how close did you get to the dream? What are the dreamy aspects you did not get and why?
- Are there any aspects you compromised on? What were they? Why did you make this compromise? **[PROBE: TRADE OFF DECISIONS]**

IF NOT ALREADY COVERED**FOR INTENDING TO USE**

- Of the services you have seen/ investigated – how close are they to the dream/ or nightmare?
- Are there any aspects you compromised on? What were they? Why did you make this compromise? **[PROBE: TRADE OFF DECISIONS]**

QUALITY RATINGS AND THE NQS**10 MINUTES**

***Aim:** awareness, comprehension and usage of the NQF and NQS, consideration for the NQS in the decision-making process, understand the relative importance of NQS to other factors*

NQF awareness (3 mins)

Something that we have touched on in the discussion so far is this idea of 'quality' and what features make up a [insert care type] service that we feel confident and comfortable sending our children to.

- Who has heard of the National Quality Framework or National Quality Standard for child care services?
- IF AWARE:
 - What do you know about it?
 - How did you find out about it? **[LISTEN FOR RATING DISPLAYED AT SERVICE PROVIDER]**
 - Did anyone know about the quality ratings system during their journey?
 - What information did this provide you at the time? Was that information helpful to you? Why or why not?
- For everyone, who do you think determines how the child care services are rated? And who rates them?
- Where would you expect to find information about the National Quality Framework or the ratings? **[PROBE: MEDIA/TV, CAMPAIGNS, PRINT MEDIA, ONLINE; LISTEN OUT FOR: STARTING BLOCKS, NQF WEBSITE, AT SERVICE CENTRE, MYCHILD]**

Reveal NQF description (5 min)**MODERATOR HAND OUT NQF DESCRIPTION AND READ OUT LOUD**

- What is your initial reaction to this description?

- How useful do you think the NQF is for helping parents make decisions about childcare services they are considering for their child?

QUALITY RATINGS DEEP DIVE

25 MINUTES

Aim: understand how closely aligned are important factors are to the quality standards, understand relative importance of NQS vs other factors deemed important, what is missing in the communication to align the factors that are important to them to how the standards are communicated

Card sort – Quality areas flash cards (5 min)

On these flash cards are the 7 quality areas of the National Quality Standard + brief description. We're going to split into 2 groups, each will get a set of flash cards, and I'd like you to order them from what is most essential in your decision-making to least essential. We'll then come back as a group and share. [ALLOW 3 MIN. TAKE PICTURES]

AS A GROUP: COMPARE TOP 2-3 AREAS AND BOTTOM 2-3 AREAS. ASK FOR RATIONALE & MAP BACK TO THE FACTORS LIST.

Pilot groups only to sense check comprehension Naming the quality areas (5 min) –

Ok, I'm going to jumble these up a little MODERATOR TO SORT STANDARDS INTO 7 QUALITY AREA GROUPS USING COLOUR CODES ON CARDS.

- I've grouped these into the 7 quality areas. I'd like for us to give each of these groups a name that you think makes sense and best sums up this quality area in a way that you understand. [GO THROUGH EACH GROUP AND NAME. NO MORE THAN 3 MINUTES]
- Is there anything that you think is important that is missing/ not covered by these 7 areas we have named?

Ratings (10 min)

- How would you expect these quality areas to be rated? [PROBE LEVELS VS YES/NO]

REVEAL 3 RATINGS ON FLIP CHART: This is how the 7 quality areas are rated.

- What do each of the ratings mean to you (working towards, meeting, exceeding)?
- How would you use these ratings, as they are, to help you make decisions about child care services for your child? [PROBE: SPECIFIC ENOUGH VS TOO BROAD, WHICH STAGE IN JOURNEY WOULD THEY USE THE RATING]
- Thinking back to your decision journey map, at what point would it most useful? How could it help?
- Is it clear what each of these ratings mean for each of the 7 quality areas? [PROBE: WHAT ELSE DO THEY NEED TO KNOW TO USE THEM]
- How much of a decision-making tool would you anticipate the ratings to be? [PROBE: KEY DECIDER, TO RULE OUT SOME/ MAKE A SHORT LIST]
- Do you think these ratings would help you assess if a service meets your standard of...
 - Essential deciding factors/ non-negotiables? [COST OF ENTRY]

- Factors do you use to separate care types/ centres? **[TRADE OFFS]**
- Nice to haves? **[LUXURIES]**
- Is there anything that is essential to you that this rating could not help you with? **[PROBE: FACTORS THOSE THAT SIT OUTSIDE NQF]**
- Where would you expect to see this information about the ratings and NQF? **[PROBE: MEDIA/TV, CAMPAIGNS, PRINT MEDIA, ONLINE, SOCIAL MEDIA]**

[LISTEN FOR MENTIONS OF RECENCY AND CURRENCY OF RATINGS. IF SPONTANEOUSLY MENTIONED, PROBE: WHAT EFFECT, IF ANY IF WOULD HAVE ON HOW THEY MIGHT USE THE RATINGS]

Wrap up section (10 minutes)

- If all you had was this rating to choose which [insert care type] provider you were going to send your child, would you be able to make the decision?
- **If yes**, why is that? What steps or sources of info, if any, would it replace?
- **If no**, what would you be missing? What else would you need to know?

I want to give you some more details about this...

Supplementary exploration included for focus groups following the pilot sessions

Even services that receive a 'working towards' overall rating meet the minimum standards in Australia – in other words they provide a safe education and care program.

- Do you get this sense from reading the materials? Does knowing this change how you would use the ratings? Why?
- There is also another rating not shown on here – 'significant improvement required' – if a service receives this rating the regulatory authority will take immediate action. Does knowing this change how you would use the rating? Why?

STARTING BLOCKS EXPLORATION

15 MINUTES

Aim: understand broad level comprehension of Starting Blocks materials (focusing on language, usefulness of information, intended target audience, areas of confusion), and understand potential value positioning in the decision-making journey

We have about 15 minutes left, so for our last section of tonight, I'd like to show you some materials from the Starting Blocks website. [\[HAND OUT MATERIAL\]](#). Spread these around, have a look through and read what is on them. [\[ALLOW 2-3 MINUTES\]](#)

- Who do you think this information is targeted at? You? **[PROBE: 1ST TIME PARENTS/ INTENDING TO USE]**. Why?
- Do you understand what they are saying to you? **[PROBE: EASY TO UNDERSTAND LANGUAGE, PURPOSE OF MATERIALS, PROBE HEADINGS IF MAKE SENSE IF LOW AWARENESS OF STARTING BLOCKS]**
- Is any information standing out to you/ pulling you in? What information is most useful? **[PROBE: WHICH ALERTS THEM TO NQF, WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT WORKS?]**

- What do you think of the design and images? [**PROBE: DOES IT FEEL LIKE IT'S FROM GOVERNMENT BODY?**]
- Do you wish you had access to this or knew this during your journey? At which point? [**REFER BACK TO COMMON STEPS AND PROBE SECTIONS OF JOURNEY IT BEST FITS**]
- Is there anything unclear/ confusing that you have seen or read?
- How, if at all, would you want to receive this information/ have it communicated to you? [**PROBE: GP CLINICS, EXPOS, SOCIAL MEDIA, PAMPHLETES, ONLINE WEBSITES, VIDEO, INFOGRAPHICS, ATTEND AN INFORMATION SESSION, AT CHILDCARE SERVICE/PROVIDER, BILLBOARD, TV**]
- If you saw this information in these places would you pick it up/ watch it/ click to find out more?

WRAP-UP**2 MINUTES**

- Opportunity for viewer to ask questions
- Ask participants if they have any questions
- Explain client is The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority that oversees the National Quality Framework (NQF) for early childhood education and care.
- Thank participants, collect homework, hand out incentive and URL to Starting Blocks website

Online Board Discussion Guide

Background

The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) are looking to:

- understand what 'quality' means in the context of early education and childcare.
- explore user experience with ACECQA's Starting Blocks website.

The current research aims to inform and help ACECQA better target communications with families. In addition to Identifying points in the decision making journey to position Starting Blocks as a 'go-to' resource for parents, driving usage and awareness of the website and content.

Research objectives

The research needs to:

- Inform and help ACECQA better target future communications with families. In particular, analysing the success of Starting Blocks in communicating the purpose and importance of the NQF when choosing an early childhood education and care service.
- Explore optimisation opportunities for Starting Blocks to inform and guide development of future communications, messaging and strategic targeting opportunities;
- Identify points in the decision making journey to position Starting Blocks as a 'go-to' resource for parents, driving usage and awareness of the website and content.

Resource

- 1) 'NQF' fact sheet – <https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/other-resources/factsheets/national-quality-framework-how-can-it-help-me/>
- 2) 'Building strong links' fact sheet - <https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/other-resources/factsheets/building-strong-links-between-home-and-child-care-services/>
- 3) 'Educator to Child Ratios' fact sheet - <https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/other-resources/factsheets/educator-to-child-ratios-what-to-expect/>
- 4) 'Activities you can do at home' page - <https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/at-home/activities-you-can-do-at-home-with-your-child/>
- 5) <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC60TTJwq3DSjX469xLI6MKg>

RESEARCHER TO CONSTANTLY CHECK BACK AS TO:

- *What would Starting Blocks replace or compliment in terms of resources?*
- *Where does Starting Blocks fit in the decision making process*

Day 1: Getting to know you

Aim	Introductory phase to familiarise participants with the online board, building rapport and trust amongst participants and moderator, re-familiarise with topic of ECEC. To get an understanding of online search behaviours in relation to childcare and initial impressions of the Starting Blocks website
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction of participants, their family and children - Understanding key words that are used when researching for resources - What is an important resource that parents are searching for - Initial impressions and thoughts of the Starting Blocks website
Date live	Monday 16 th April

Introduction	<p>Hi everyone,</p> <p>Welcome to our online board! We really enjoyed speaking with you recently in the focus group discussions and are excited that you have chosen to take part in the next stage of this research. We are Anne & Margaux and we're here to guide you through the discussions and activities over the next few days.</p> <p>During this online board we would like you to take part in group discussions, and complete various tasks, such as surfing the web and recording some of your opinions in a video on the topic of childcare services. During the focus groups we introduced to you some material about the National Quality Framework (NQF) and Starting Blocks, both which we will spend some time exploring in more detail in this online board. We value all your opinions and are interested in what you have to say, so be as honest and as open as you can.</p> <p>We want you to know that this is a safe space for sharing all your thoughts, and that some activities that may be more personal will be marked private, to show that only you and the moderators will see your responses on them.</p> <p>Also know that if you have any concerns or problems along the way that we are here to help – so don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.</p> <p>Thank you again for taking part in this research!</p> <p>Anne & Margaux</p>
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Task 1	<p>Title: Tell us about yourself</p> <p>Type: Open response</p>
Text/ Activity	Each of you have been selected to take part in this board so that we can understand your thoughts and opinions in more detail. We were very interested in what you had to say during the focus groups and look forward to talking with you some more.

	<p>Some of you may have met each other in the focus group session already, and others will be new faces. We'd like to start our first day off with some introductions.</p> <p>Please introduce yourself to the other online board members and tell us a bit about you and your family, including what childcare type and centre your children currently attend or you are intending to send them to - you may like to upload images to illustrate your introduction.</p> <p>Feel free to say "Hi!" to others on the online board as you will be spending the next few days together!</p> <p>Once you have told us a bit about you, move onto the next task.</p>
Probes/ Prompts	N/A

Task 2	<p>Title: Online search Type: Open response</p>
Text/ Activity	<p>In our focus group discussions, we talked about the influences or sources of information you use to help you choose a childcare service for your child. For some of you it is talking with friends and family, social media groups, searching websites, reflecting on past experiences, or something else altogether. We want to focus on how you search for information about child care services online. Even if you haven't used websites to search for information about childcare service, we'd like you to think about if you were to in the future.</p> <p>Please imagine that you are going online for the first time to search for information regarding child care services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please list for us the kind of information you'd be most interested in searching for online in relation to child care services and providers • What key words would you search for? Are there any websites, blogs, or resources that you would search for? <p>Now, for those of you who did go online to search at some point in your journey, thinking about your actual experience searching online for information about child care services...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you expect to find in your search? • Did you find everything you expected to find in your search? Why or why not? • Was there anything surprising that you found out in your search? • Was there any information you felt that was missing from your search?
Probes/ Prompts	- PROBE: services near me, price, location, quality of service

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Whether they found something that prompted another search? - If they searched something specific – why was this important? - Was there any consideration of the NQF?
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Task 3	Title: Exploring a website Type: Private response
Text/ Activity	<p>We'd now like you to go to a website, have a look around and do some free exploring – we recommend at least 5 minutes. We want to know <u>what your first impressions are of the website</u>. If you've seen and been on it before, we still want to know what your thoughts are.</p> <p>Afterwards, you're going to need to record 2 short videos about your opinions of the website.</p> <p>More details in a little bit! But first... The website we would like you to visit is: www.startingblocks.gov.au</p> <p>After you've visited the site and had some time to explore it, move onto the next question.</p>

Task 4	Title: Thoughts on Starting Blocks Type: Enable video upload – Private response
Text/ Activity	<p>Thanks for taking some time to browse the website. We now ask you to share your thoughts in 2 separate videos. These videos are private and no other participant can see your video, just you and the moderators of this online board.</p> <p>Before recording, please make sure you are in a well-lit and quiet setting. We want to be able to see and hear you clearly.</p> <p>Video 1 For the first video, in one minute or less could you please tell us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What did you think about the Starting Blocks' homepage? - What did you think about the general look and feel of the website? - Was it easy to navigate around? - Was there anything that stood out / was eye-catching? <p>Video 2 The next video is about the information that you found on Starting Blocks while you were exploring. In a separate one minute video could you explain to us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anything that you found particularly interesting or useful - Anything you found that wasn't so interesting or useful - Anything you liked or disliked?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anything missing that you would expect to see? <p>Please upload both of your videos to the online board, or email them to: info@hallandpartners.net.au</p>
Probes/ Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - PROBE: colour, navigation bar, video content, infographics, content, navigation, language easy to understand - Homepage PROBE: amount of information (enough, too much), is it too simple - Extent Starting Blocks helps them make decisions based on fact/ vs feeling - If they've seen the website before this activity – where did you see/hear about it first?

	<p>Title: End of Day 1 Type: Text only, no response</p>
Text/ Activity	<p>That is all for Day 1, stay tuned for more discussions tomorrow! Also, please don't forget to check for any further questions we may have for you.</p> <p>Thanks, Anne & Margaux</p>

Day 2: Starting Blocks Exploration

Aim	Exploration of the Starting Blocks website and initial impressions
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding overall look and feel, layout, and ability to find specific areas of the website - Exploring suggestions for website improvement
Date live	Tuesday 17 th April

Task 1	<p>Title: Online task 1 Type: Open response</p>
Text/ Activity	<p>Welcome back! Today we are going to do some more exploration on the Starting Blocks website and ask you to complete some specific tasks. After each task, we have some questions for you about it. There are 6 tasks in total.</p> <p>Firstly, please open a new web browser on your computer or device and go to the Starting Blocks homepage: www.startingblocks.gov.au</p>

	<p>For the first task, we would like you simply to navigate to the 'Find Child Care' section from the Starting Blocks homepage. <i>As soon as you have found it, please answer these questions.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> How easy or difficult was this section to find? How come? Did you find the information useful and easy to understand? Why or why not? Does it tell you something new? Was there anything surprising that you noticed? Any improvements you would like to see to this section of the website?
Probes/ Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usefulness of the information, improvements, easy to find, easy to understand - PROBE: Homepage - look and feel, navigation, simplicity, stand out, informative/ambiguous

Task 2	<p>Title: Online task 2 Type: Open response</p>
Text/ Activity	<p>Next – on the same 'Find Child Care' page, we would like you to search for the childcare provider that your child is currently attending or the one that you are considering. <i>Once you have looked at the search results, please answer these questions.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> How easy or difficult was it to search for the childcare provider? Is there anything that would make your search easier? What are your thoughts on the results that came up from the search? How useful is the information on the childcare provider that you have searched? Is there anything missing from this search? What other information would you want to see here?
Probes/ Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usefulness of the information, improvements, easy to find, easy to understand - PROBE: km radius search too wide, type of service is clear (OSHC, FDC, LDC, Preschool/Kindergarten), Overall rating vs Quality area rating, description of Quality area is clear/ambiguous, where to find more info about ratings, ability to compare services/'Favourites', exporting/printing, usefulness of info in choosing a service

Task 3	<p>Title: Online tasks Type: Open response</p>
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Text/ Activity	<p>Please return to the Starting Blocks homepage: www.startingblocks.gov.au</p> <p>Starting from the home page, please navigate to the ‘Translated Resources’ page. <i>Once you have found it, please answer these questions.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> How easy or difficult was this section to find? How come? Are there any improvements that you would like to see to this section of the website? For those of you who speak another language at home, how appealing is the option to view Starting Blocks in other languages?
Probes/ Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usefulness of the information, improvements, easy to find, easy to understand - PROBE: option to select language on landing page or somewhere else on the home page - Desire for whole website to be in other language, or just specific pages/content. If the latter, which content?

Task 4	<p>Title: Online tasks Type: Open response</p>
Text/ Activity	<p>Please return to the Starting Blocks homepage: www.startingblocks.gov.au</p> <p>Starting from the home page, please navigate to the ‘Other Resources’ page, then on to the ‘Infographics’ page.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Please tell us your initial thoughts and feelings about the Infographics page Is there anything that you like or dislike about this page?
Probes/ Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usefulness of the information, improvements, easy to find, easy to understand - Confusing/ overwhelming, too many links, categorisation of infographics makes sense - Suggestions to improve layout of this page

Task 5	<p>Title: Online tasks Type: Open response</p>
Text/ Activity	<p>Next, we’d like you to locate the “Contact Us” page. <i>Now please answer these questions.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> How easy or difficult was this section to find? How come? What do you think of the query form for feedback? Would you prefer another method to contact Starting Blocks about any queries or feedbacks? What other method, if any, and why?

Probes/ Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usefulness of the information, improvements, easy to find, easy to understand - PROBE: phone number, email address, live chat
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Task 6	Title: Online tasks Type: Open response
Text/ Activity	<p>Lastly, we would like you to navigate to the “About” page and have a quick read through.</p> <p>a) Thinking about all the website information you have seen so far from the previous tasks; do you think the ‘About’ page gives a good outline of you found on the website? Why or why not?</p>
Probes/ Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usefulness of the information, improvements, easy to find, easy to understand - Is there anything missing? - Did it help you understand more about what Starting Blocks offers? Why/why not?

	Title: Day 2 Wrap up Type: Text only, no response
Text/ Activity	<p>That is all for Day 2. Don’t forget to check in for any additional questions we may have for you over the last day.</p> <p>See you tomorrow for our final day!</p>

Day 3: Making Starting Blocks Better

Aim	To get an understanding of what participants thought of the Starting Blocks website and what improvements are needed to make it better.
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Looking into resources on Starting Blocks and understanding its usefulness - Understanding where Starting Blocks could fit into their decision making process - Improvements to Starting Blocks to make it a better resource.
Date live	Wednesday 18 th April

Task 1	Title: Starting Blocks Resources Type: Multiple Open response
Text/ Activity	Thanks for tuning into Day 3 of our online board. There are 3 parts to this final day of activities.

	<p>For our first activity today, we would like to show you a few more resources on the Starting Blocks website and then answer some questions about them. There are 5 resources to review in total – 4 fact sheets and 1 short video. These resources are not only available on the website, but may be found on social media, at your local GP, at your child care provider, at expos, etc.</p> <p>Please click on the hyperlink to look at each resource, then answer the questions about it, before moving on to the next resource:</p> <p>[5 HYPERLINKS TO SHOW]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) NQF fact sheet – https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/other-resources/factsheets/national-quality-framework-how-can-it-help-me/ 2) Building strong links’ fact sheet – https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/other-resources/factsheets/building-strong-links-between-home-and-child-care-services/ 3) ‘Educator to Child Ratios’ fact sheet - https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/other-resources/factsheets/educator-to-child-ratios-what-to-expect/ 4) Activities you can do at home fact sheet - https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/at-home/activities-you-can-do-at-home-with-your-child/ 5) Activities you can do at home video - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fplz-dmVlcA <p>[QUESTIONS TO REPEAT AND ASK FOR EACH HYPERLINK]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) What did you think of the language, was it easy to understand? b) Was the information useful? c) Did the resource tell you something new? d) Was there anything else you wanted to know from this resource? <p>Once you have finished this task, please move on to the next page.</p>
Probes/ Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - PROBE: Language – family friendly, easy to understand, colour, visual appeal, uniqueness of content, text heavy or easy to read - PROBE: Images – general appeal, do they look like they are from government or private institution - Where would you want to find/locate this information? PROBE: social media, at your local GP, at your child care provider, at expos, etc. - PROBE: effectiveness of SB advertising through this channel - Usefulness of the information? Did it meet their expectations on what a useful resource is? Anything novel or new?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did it contain any information/resource they wish they had access to earlier? - PROBE: other resources, websites, similar information that was informative
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Task 2	<p>Title: Starting Blocks – how do you feel? Type: Word Selection</p>																																				
Text/ Activity	<p>Thinking about all that you have seen regarding Starting Blocks (the website and resources) that we would like to ask you:</p> <p>How does it make you feel knowing there is a resource like Starting Blocks available to help you with your decisions about child care services for your child?</p> <p><i>Please select all the words that apply to you:</i></p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td>supported</td> <td>happy</td> <td>indifferent</td> <td>sad</td> </tr> <tr> <td>surprised</td> <td>pleased</td> <td>angry</td> <td>unhappy</td> </tr> <tr> <td>excited</td> <td>thrilled</td> <td>frustrated</td> <td>disappointed</td> </tr> <tr> <td>curious</td> <td>calm</td> <td>confused</td> <td>devastated</td> </tr> <tr> <td>hopeful</td> <td>relieved</td> <td>helpless</td> <td>tense</td> </tr> <tr> <td>confident</td> <td>satisfied</td> <td>worried</td> <td>embarrassed</td> </tr> <tr> <td>grateful</td> <td>revived</td> <td>alarmed</td> <td>guilty</td> </tr> <tr> <td>amused</td> <td>trusting</td> <td>disgusted</td> <td>jealous</td> </tr> <tr> <td>amazed</td> <td></td> <td>overwhelmed</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	supported	happy	indifferent	sad	surprised	pleased	angry	unhappy	excited	thrilled	frustrated	disappointed	curious	calm	confused	devastated	hopeful	relieved	helpless	tense	confident	satisfied	worried	embarrassed	grateful	revived	alarmed	guilty	amused	trusting	disgusted	jealous	amazed		overwhelmed	
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grateful	revived	alarmed	guilty																																		
amused	trusting	disgusted	jealous																																		
amazed		overwhelmed																																			

Task 3	<p>Title: Your Child Care Services Journey Type: Open response</p>
Text/ Activity	<p>At the very start of this research we asked you to create a map of the journey you have been through to select or consider a child care service for your child.</p> <p>Thinking back to that journey, now that you have seen some more about the Starting Blocks website...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In which step of your decision making journey, if any, do you think Starting Blocks would be most useful to you? Why there? 2. What information or influences, if any, would Starting Blocks' resources replace if you knew about this resource from the very start? 3. What improvements would make the website more suited to your needs? 4. How likely would you be to recommend Starting Blocks to others who are looking into child care services? How come?

Probes/ Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PROBE: different parts of the decision making journey (start, middle, end, none), usefulness as a decision making tool, ability to deliver to rational and/or emotional needs of parents • PROBE IMPROVEMENTS: needs – what are they? Other examples of resources that have met their needs. Look and feel, quality of information, • PROBE: RECOMMENDATION – what makes it a good resource to recommend. • <i>If 'currently using ECEC service':</i> reasons for recommendation, to whom, at which stage in journey
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	<p>Title: Day 3 Wrap up Type: Text only, no response</p>
Text/ Activity	<p>Thanks again for taking part in our online discussion! We've enjoyed talking to you all and appreciate all the feedback to help us make Starting Blocks useful and informative resource for parents exploring child care options for their child.</p> <p>Just a few quick notes before we part – to receive your full incentive, please make sure you have answered all our follow up questions and completed all the daily activities.</p> <p>Please email your bank account details to info@hallandpartners.net.au by Tuesday 24th April and your incentive will be paid by EFT on Wednesday 25th April.</p> <p>Cheers, Anne & Margaux</p>

Appendix C – Screening questionnaire

Recruitment grid

12 x 1.5 hour focus groups with 6-8 participants

Intend to use: defined as those intending to use an education and care service in the next 12 months, and have already done some research into education and care Services.

Currently use: defined as have at least 1 child attending an education and care service.

Grp #	Care type	Service use status	SES	Cultural/ ethnic background	Parent's age	Location
1	PSK	Intend to use	Low-Mid	As it falls	Min. n =3 young + Min. n = 3 mid/older	Adelaide, NSW
2	FDC	Intend to use	Mid-High	As it falls	Min. n =3 young + Min. n = 3 mid/older	Sydney, NSW
3	OSHC/ Vacation Care	Intend to use	Low-Mid	Min 2 language other than English (CALD)	Min. n =3 young + Min. n = 3 mid/older	Melbourne, VIC
4	LDC	Intend to use	Low-Mid	As it falls	Min. n =3 young + Min. n = 3 mid/older	Port Lincoln, SA
5	PSK	Currently use	Mid-High	Min 2 language other than English (CALD)	Min. n =3 young + Min. n = 3 mid/older	Sydney, NSW
6	FDC	Currently use	Mid-High	As it falls	Min. n =3 young + Min. n = 3 mid/older	Melbourne, VIC
7	OSHC/ Vacation Care	Currently use	Mid-High	Min 2 language other than English (CALD)	Min. n =3 young + Min. n = 3 mid/older	Adelaide, SA
8	LDC	Currently use	Low-Mid	Min 2 language other than English (CALD)	Min. n =3 young + Min. n = 3 mid/older	Sydney, NSW
9	Mixed	Currently use	As it falls	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	As it falls	Melbourne, VIC
10	Mixed	Currently use	As it falls	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	As it falls	Port Lincoln, SA
11	OSHC/ Vacation Care	Intend to use	Low-Mid	As it falls	Min. n =3 young + Min. n = 3 mid/older	Cairns, QLD
12	LDC	Currently use	Mid-High	As it falls	Min. n =3 young + Min. n = 3 mid/older	Cairns, QLD

RECRUITMENT SCREENER

Good morning/afternoon,

I am calling on behalf of Hall & Partners, an independent market research company. We are currently conducting a study on early childhood education and care.

We will be running a number of discussions with small groups of people across Australia. These conversations are generally open and relaxed and most people enjoy taking part. There is also an activity to complete by yourself any time before attending the group discussion which will take about half an hour. We will provide to you **by post**, instructions and a template for this activity to be filled out. You will be required to send us a picture of your completed template 48 hours before your group session, and bring the original with you to the group discussion.

For the 1.5 hour group participation and completion of the pre-discussion activity you will be reimbursed for your time with an incentive of \$120 in total in form of an EFTPOS/Gift card.

Everything you say would be anonymous and confidential. Participation is voluntary. Would you be interested in taking part?

- If no thank & close
- If YES – Great! First I just need to ask you a few questions to see if you fit the profile that we are looking for to take part in this research. This will take about 5 minutes, is that okay?

RECORD

Confirm...

Q1 Gender

[SR, RECRUITER TO RECORD]

1	Male	
2	Female	

SCREENING CRITERIA AND TO RECORD

Q2 Have you ever attended a group discussion or taken part in an interview for market or social research?

[SR]

1	Yes	Continue
2	No	Go to Q5

Q3 When did you last attend a group or take part in an interview?

[DO NOT READ OUT OPTIONS]

1	If more than 6 months ago	Continue
2	If less than 6 months ago	TERMINATE

Q4 How many of these groups or interviews have you ever attended?

[DO NOT READ OUT OPTIONS]

1	3 or less	Continue
2	More than 3	TERMINATE

Q5 Do you or any of your close family members of household work or volunteer in:

[MR]

1	Market research	TERMINATE
2	Media - TV, radio, print or online media	TERMINATE
3	An ad agency, PR firm or marketing company	TERMINATE
4	A government department*	TERMINATE
5	Politics	TERMINATE
6	Childcare or teaching	TERMINATE
7	Refused	TERMINATE
8	None of these (DO NOT READ OUT)	Continue

*Note this doesn't exclude people working on the ground as nurses etc.

Q6 Do you have any children either currently enrolled in formal child care services, or intending to be enrolled in formal child care services in the next 12 months?

Formal child care services includes long day care, preschool/kindergarten, out of school hours care/before and after school care/vacation care and family day care.

[SR PER COLUMN, DISPLAY AS DROP DOWN FOR EACH COLUMN]

	Q6a. Children currently enrolled	Q6b. Children intending to enrol
1	None	None
2	1	1
3	2	2
4	3	3
5	4	4
6	5 or more	5 or more

TERMINATE IF BOTH Q6A AND Q6B CODE 1 (NONE).

IF Q6A CODE 2-6 AND Q6B CODE 1 = RECRUIT FOR 'CURRENTLY USE' GROUPS

IF Q6A CODE 1 AND Q6B CODE 2-6 = RECRUIT FOR 'INTENDING TO USE' GROUPS

IF Q6A AND Q6B CODE 2-6 = RECRUIT FOR EITHER 'CURRENTLY USE' OR 'INTENDING TO USE' GROUPS

Q7 Are you the main or joint decision-maker when it comes to choosing a formal child care service for your child?

[SR]

1	I am the main decision maker	Continue
2	I am a joint decision maker	
3	I am not involved in the decision making	TERMINATE

Q8 What age is your child/children who ...

ONLY SHOW Q8a. IF Q6a. DOES NOT CODE 1

a. Are currently enrolled in these formal child care services?

ONLY SHOW Q8b. IF Q6b. DOES NOT CODE 1

b. You intend to enrol in these formal child care services in the next 12 months?

[OPEN TEXT, CAPTURE AGE FOR EACH CHILD MENTIONED AT Q6]

Q8a.	Q8b.
Age/s of children currently enrolled	Age/s of children intending to enrol
ENSURE GOOD SPREAD OF CHILD'S AGE ACROSS ENTIRE RECRUITMENT SAMPLE (1-12 YRS)	ENSURE GOOD SPREAD OF CHILD'S AGE ACROSS ENTIRE RECRUITMENT SAMPLE (1-12 YRS)

Q9 Can you please confirm which type of service ...

ONLY SHOW Q9a. IF Q6a. DOES NOT CODE 1

a. Your child/children is currently enrolled in?

ONLY SHOW Q9b. IF Q6b. DOES NOT CODE 1

b. You intend to enrol your child/children in?

[MR]

	Q9a. Service type currently enrolled in	Q9b. Service intend to enrol in
FAMILY DAY CARE: where a professional carer looks after your child in the carer's home. This type of care is sometimes known as home-based care.	1 [Recruit for group 6, 9, 10]	1 [Recruit for group 2]
LONG DAY CARE: is sometimes referred to as centre-based care or just childcare. Some centres may also offer a preschool/kindergarten program within the day care centre.	2 [Recruit for group 8, 12, 9, 10]	2 [Recruit for group 4]
PRESCHOOL/KINDERGARTEN: Preschools or kindergartens for three and four year olds, separate to a long day care environment, usually running during school hours and during school terms. (i.e. through community kindergartens, independent or government schools).	3 [Recruit for group 5, 9, 10]	3 [Recruit for group 1]
OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL HOURS CARE: sometimes referred to as before or after school care and vacation/holiday care. Provides care for primary school aged children, before and after school (7:30 am - 9:00 am and 3:00 pm - 6:00 pm), during school holidays and on pupil-free days.	4 [Recruit for group 7, 9, 10]	4 [Recruit for group 3, 11]
OCCASIONAL CARE	5	5

IN HOME CARE (i.e. care provided by nanny, family member, friend)	6	6
---	---	---

ONLY ASK Q10 IF Q6b CODE 2-6 (INTENDING TO ENROL AT LEAST 1 CHILD)

Q10 Have you begun actively looking into a formal child care service for your child/children?

This could include looking up services online, talking to friends or family, attending an information session, reading a brochure or magazine, etc.

[SR]

1	No – I am not actively looking into services yet	DO NOT RECRUIT FOR INTENDING
2	Yes – in the last month	PRIORITISE RECRUITMENT OF CODES 2-5 FOR 'INTEND TO USE' GROUPS
3	Yes – in the last 3 months	
4	Yes – in the last 6 months	
5	Yes – in the last 12 months	
6	Yes – more than 12 months ago	HOLD AND CONSULT HP

ASK ALL

Q11 What is your age?

[SR]

1	Less than 18 years	TERMINATE
2	18 - 19	YOUNGER PARENTS <i>Min n=3 for groups 1-8, 11, 12</i>
3	20 – 24	
4	25 – 34	
5	35 – 44	MID/OLDER PARENTS <i>Min n=3 for groups 1-8, 11, 12</i>
6	44 – 55	
7	55+	

Q12 Which of the following best describes your household structure?

[SR]

1	Couple with children at home	ENSURE GOOD MIX OF FAMILY TYPES ACROSS ENTIRE SAMPLE
2	Single parent with children at home	
3	Group of related adults with children at home	
4	Parent with children not living at home	
5	Other (please specify)	

Q13 Which of the following best describes your current employment status?

[SR]

1	Employed full time	ENSURE GOOD MIX OF EMPLOYMENT STATUS ACROSS ENTIRE SAMPLE
2	Employed part-time	
3	Self employed	
4	Manage household	
5	Unemployed	
6	Other	TERMINATE
7	Prefer not to say	TERMINATE

Q14 Which of the following best describes your highest level of education?

[SR]

1	Year 12 or less	LOW-MID SES <i>Recruit for group 1, 3, 4, 8, 11</i> <i>Capture for groups 9, 10</i>
2	TAFE/Vocational	
3	University – bachelor or postgraduate qualification	MID-HIGH SES <i>Recruit for group 2, 5, 6, 7, 12</i> <i>Capture for groups 9, 10</i>

Q15 Do you speak a language other than English at home?

[SR]

1	YES	<i>Recruit min n=2 speak a language other than English at home for groups 3, 5, 7, 8</i>
2	No	

ASK ALL

Q16 Are you of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin?

[SR]

1	Yes	<i>Recruit for groups 9, 10, 11, 12</i>
2	No	TRY RECRUIT FOR OTHER GROUPS OR TERMINATE

Thanks for your responses so far! We have 1 last question for you

Q17 Following the discussion group, we are looking for 12 participants to complete a follow up activity which will involve participating in an online board. The online board will involve 3 days of questions about a website that we will ask you to review. This will take about 20 - 30 minutes of your time per day. To remunerate you for your time, you will receive an incentive of \$80 in total paid to you by EFT after the completion of the online board (please note this will be paid separately to the incentive for participating in the discussion group and completing the pre-discussion activity).

The online discussion board will run in the week commencing 16th April 2018. Participants selected to take part in the online board will be notified in the week following the discussion group, along with instructions how to access the online discussion board.

Would you like to register your interest to participate in the online board follow up activity, AND can you confirm that you have access to internet and a mobile, tablet, laptop, PC/desktop device to complete this task?

[SR]

1	Yes	GO TO Q18.
2	No	CONTINUE WITH CONFIRMING RECRUITMENT FOR FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

Q18 As part of this follow up activity, we will ask you to video record yourself telling us about your experience using the website and upload it to the online board. All the footage will be confidential and will only be used for internal research purposes. Is this something you feel confident doing?

[SR]

1	Yes	RECORD NAMES AND BSB AND ACCOUNT DETAILS
2	No	CONTINUE WITH CONFIRMING RECRUITMENT FOR FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

END OF SCREENER. COLLECT:

- Postal address for homework task to be posted to them at least 10 days before their group session
- Inform participants that their postal details will be destroyed once homework task has been sent to them

Read participant instructions (page over) before finishing call.

Important participant instructions:

Recruiter to ensure participant is aware of the following: The research session will be video and audio recorded. These recordings will be used by Hall & Partners and the company commissioning the research for market research purposes only. Anything you say will be treated confidentially. At no time will your details be passed on to a third party.

- ask participants to arrive 5-10 minutes early before the start of the group to ensure a prompt start, also make sure they can stay for the whole duration

- all to bring reading glasses if required

- all to bring completed pre-session task to the group discussion. Must send photo/screenshot of completed task 48hrs prior to session.

- please ask participants to turn off mobile phones during group discussions

- important: please ask all participants to bring a form of id (driving licence/bank card/passport) to prove their name before entering the discussion NB respondents may be turned away without payment if they have no form of identification with them.

THANK AND CLOSE

Appendix D – NQS description and Starting Blocks materials shown

NQF/NQS description

“The National Quality Framework aims to improve the quality of early childhood education and care services in Australia, including long day care, family day care, preschool/kindergarten, and outside school hours care. The National Quality Framework sets a higher national quality standard to encourage services to continue to improve their programs and practices. Services are assessed and rated against seven quality areas of the National Quality Standard: Educational program and practice, Children’s health and safety, Physical environment, Staffing arrangements, Relationships with children, Collaborative partnerships with families and communities, and Governance and leadership. Each of these 7 quality areas are made up of standards and elements. Services receive a rating for each of the 7 quality areas and an overall rating based on these results, and these ratings can help you choose a service for your child.”

Starting Blocks materials shown

Each of the materials provided to participants in the focus groups and online boards are listed below, and shown overleaf.

Focus Group	Online Board
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting Blocks booklet • ‘Encouraging your child’s development’ height chart • ‘National Quality Framework’ fact sheet • ‘Choosing the right service for your child’ fact sheet • ‘Nutrition in child care’ fact sheet • ‘Ask about the child care rating’ poster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘National Quality Framework’ fact sheet • ‘Building strong links’ fact sheet • ‘Educator to child ratios’ fact sheet • ‘Activities you can do in the home’ fact sheet

Starting Blocks
ENCOURAGING YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT

3 TO 5 YEARS
How can you encourage your child's learning?
 • Encourage them to play outdoors
 • Be creative in setting up play activities
 • Sing, pointing, music, art and craft
 • Help helping hands e.g. help with setting the table for dinner
 • Be involved in their questions and help them to try

2 TO 3 YEARS
How can you encourage your child's learning?
 • Give them more exposure to going to different places e.g. parks, beaches, public swimming pools, shops
 • Encourage them to mix and match things together
 • Ask them to solve everyday problems e.g. it's raining, what do we need to take when we go outside?
 • Use role playing, e.g. pretend play, using food
 • Use their favorite toys, books and understand concepts such as 'under' and 'over' by making blocks connect in the tower or going 'over' 'under' through the tunnel, under the table.

1 TO 2 YEARS
How can you encourage your toddler's learning?
 • Encourage your toddler to ask questions and have fun
 • Challenge e.g. what's the right way to go down the stairs?
 • Help your toddler to experiment with everyday things e.g. show and explain why some things float
 • Talk about how things change during the day or over the week e.g. the weather or the season

4 TO 8 MONTHS
How can you encourage your baby's learning?
 • Make fun sounds and actions
 • Sing, rhyming, counting
 • Encourage their motor skills e.g. place a toy ball in front and encourage them to catch it
 • Put games e.g. peek-a-boo, which have fun, but give them and show their reflection
 • Make fun faces with simple, bright pictures
 • Read from books with simple, bright pictures

BIRTH TO 4 MOVING
How can you encourage your baby's learning?
 • Encourage slight movement and self-care in their activities
 • Move and play with blocks together
 • Get into a routine - eat, sleep, play, repeat
 • Talk and sing to them
 • Use simple games e.g. peek-a-boo
 • Smile back when he or she smiles at you

www.startingblocks.gov.au

Starting Blocks
Your first step into early childhood education & care

A simple government website for new families looking for quality child care.

Visit startingblocks.gov.au for:
 • developmental milestones
 • service quality ratings
 • activities at home and to find local child care and preschool services.

How to choose the right service for your child?

There are many education and care options available to suit the needs of your child and family.

These services are regulated by state and territory governments.

www.startingblocks.gov.au

Starting Blocks
National Quality Framework - how can it help me?

Each Region shows quality early education and care leads to better health, education and employment outcomes later in life.

National Quality Framework
The National Quality Framework aims to improve the quality of early childhood education and care services available to children.

Provision of children early quality experiences early in life can help to improve health, education and employment outcomes, building a productive and fair Australia.

The National Quality Framework includes legal requirements that all services must comply with. These include requirements for:
 • the number of staff and their qualifications
 • ensuring children's health and safety
 • service hours and hours
 • What services are included?
 • Long day care
 • Family day care
 • Out-of-home care
 • Preschool services

National Quality Standard
The National Quality Standard sets a higher standard of quality for early childhood education and care services to improve the quality of care and education for children.

Services are assessed and rated against seven quality areas of the National Quality Standard:
 1. Educational program and practice
 2. Children's health and safety
 3. Physical environment
 4. Relationships with children
 5. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
 6. Governance and leadership

www.startingblocks.gov.au

Starting Blocks
Choosing the right service for your child

Choosing the right service can be an exciting and sometimes overwhelming time for you and your child. It's important to consider your values and research the type of early education and care that suits your family best and will provide the best outcomes for your child.

What are my options?
 • Long Day Care
 • Family Day Care
 • Out-of-home care
 • Preschool Services

Outside School Hours Care
Outside school hours care operates before and after school and during school holidays. The service usually caters for parents with school age children, who need care outside of school hours.

Long Day Care
Long day care is a service for children who are aged 3 to 5 years. It is a full-time service, usually operating from 8.30am to 5.30pm, 5 days a week. It is a service where children are cared for in a group setting.

Family Day Care
Family day care is a service for children who are aged 3 to 5 years. It is a part-time service, usually operating for 2 to 4 hours a week. It is a service where children are cared for in a family setting.

Out-of-home care
Out-of-home care is a service for children who are aged 3 to 5 years. It is a part-time service, usually operating for 2 to 4 hours a week. It is a service where children are cared for in a non-family setting.

Preschool Services
Preschool services are for children aged 3 to 5 years and are designed to prepare children for school. They are usually operated by government or non-government organisations.

Mobile Services
Mobile services travel through communities to offer services, preschool or long day care services to rural, remote and remote areas. It generally operates for children aged 3 to 5 years and is designed for children who live in remote areas.

www.startingblocks.gov.au

Starting Blocks
Nutrition in child care

A healthy child is a happy child. At home or in child care, some services will provide all or most of your child's meals while they are there, while others may only supply snacks or require you to provide all of your child's food.

Whether or not food is provided, your child's service has a responsibility to provide good nutrition for your child, and they should provide your family with correct information about healthy eating.

Why is good nutrition important for my child?
Good nutrition is important for my child's health and development. It helps them to grow and develop and supports their physical and mental health. It also helps them to learn and concentrate in school.

Can I breastfeed my child when they are in the service?
Breastfeeding is the best way to feed your child. It provides them with the best nutrition and helps to protect them from illness. If you are breastfeeding your child, you should discuss this with the service to ensure they have a plan for storing, cooling and providing of expressed breast milk to children.

How can my child's nutritional needs be met?
The National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia (NHMRC) recommends children's addresses include a variety of foods which include the five main food groups. Healthy eating for children and adolescents should be encouraged to support their growth and development.

The Council also states that a healthy diet includes:
 • lean meat, fish, poultry
 • milk, yoghurt, cheese
 • bread, cereal, pasta, rice
 • fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds

The balance of these food groups is essential for ensuring your child's health and wellbeing. You should encourage your child to eat a variety of foods throughout the day. The NHMRC states that about 10 healthy meals throughout the day will also help maintain your child's energy levels.

www.startingblocks.gov.au

Starting Blocks
Educator to child ratios - what to expect

Quality early education and care lays the foundation for development and learning. One of the most influences of quality are the qualifications of staff and ratio of qualified staff to children.

Higher numbers of staff to children allow qualified staff to focus on addressing the needs of individual children and observing to gain more individual information about each child's skills and interests. This allows them to tailor their teaching and learning to each child's needs and interests, which is more effective and meaningful than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Why does the ratio matter?
 • Educators can better observe and respond to each child's needs and interests.
 • Educators can better support children's learning and development.
 • Educators can better manage children's behavior and ensure a safe and positive learning environment.

Admission requirements
 • An education ratio is required, particularly when a child is admitted to a service.
 • Services must ensure that the ratio is maintained at all times and that the ratio is not exceeded.

How can I help to support compliance in my child's early education and care?
 • Encourage the type of experiences and activities your child is involved in.
 • Talk to the service about the ratio and how you can help your child to understand the importance of the ratio in their learning.

Remember
 • The ratio is not a magic number. It is a guide to help you understand the importance of the ratio in your child's learning and development.

www.startingblocks.gov.au

Starting Blocks
Building strong links between home and child care services

Children benefit when there is a strong link between home and child care services. This means that children's learning and development is supported both at home and in child care.

How can I help to support compliance in my child's early education and care?
 • Encourage the type of experiences and activities your child is involved in.
 • Talk to the service about the ratio and how you can help your child to understand the importance of the ratio in their learning.

What types of routines and experiences should be consistent?
 • Bedtime
 • Mealtime
 • Playtime

Stay and visit
 It is best to allow staff about the routine you use at home for sleep and eat, such as bedtime and mealtime. This helps your child to understand the routine and helps them to settle in to the service.

Remember
 • The ratio is not a magic number. It is a guide to help you understand the importance of the ratio in your child's learning and development.

www.startingblocks.gov.au

Starting Blocks
ASK ABOUT THE CHILD CARE RATING

EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES ARE RATED AGAINST 7 QUALITY AREAS. MOST SERVICES WILL RECEIVE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING OVERALL RATINGS.

WORKING TOWARDS
Services provide a safe and secure environment for children and meet the minimum requirements for quality care.

MEETING
Services provide quality education and care in all 7 quality areas.

EXCEEDING
Services go above and beyond the requirements in at least 4 of the 7 quality areas.

The 7 quality areas of the National Quality Standard:
 1. Educational program and practice
 2. Children's health and safety
 3. Physical environment
 4. Relationships with children
 5. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
 6. Governance and leadership

For service ratings visit www.startingblocks.gov.au/childcare

www.startingblocks.gov.au

Appendix E – Responses to Starting Blocks’ fact sheets

Fact sheet	Strengths	Improvement opportunities	Parent Quotes
NQF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall consensus that the language and content is straightforward, to the point, easy to understand (the plain English language was received positively) The quantity of information is digestible and does not overwhelm The type of information is relevant and of interest to parents Parents like that the page links to the Find Child Care page; it makes sense and is convenient The descriptions under the 7 quality areas which provide more detail about the quality areas were welcomed. Parents said the explanation was useful to know when comparing centres (as this additional information is not shown on the Find Child Care page) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desire for more detail about services that are not meeting standards: what are the implications for these services? How long do they have to improve? How are they reassessed? Interest in more information and detail about the assessment process: How often are services assessed? Who assesses them? What qualifications do assessors have? Who do they work for? Clarity about how the framework and standards apply to different care types – is it the same or different? Linking the information to what parents can expect from centres to drive connection between the NQF, Starting Blocks and quality education and care services (e.g. Are services supposed to display their rating clearly in the centre? Should the centre be communicating the ratings to parents?) 	<p><i>“It was easy to understand and follow - and what I liked was it written for the average person not in “political or government talk” style.”</i></p> <p><i>“It broke down the 7 areas a little more so that made it good for when you’re researching, referencing and comparing providers.”</i></p> <p><i>“I’d like to know why the resource does not state how long the centre has to improve if it is not meeting a requirement/s? Nor does the fact sheet state how often a centre is assessed.”</i></p>

Fact sheet	Strengths	Improvement opportunities	Parent Quotes
Building strong links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompted parents to think about the routines they have with their children, and acted as a gentle reminder to revisit practices that may not be top of mind • Information about how to take action and promote consistency between home and the education and care service felt empowering • Listing out the types of routines and experiences was interesting and useful • Parents felt reassured and set-at-ease reading this fact sheet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to drive further engagement with language that inspires • For some parents, especially experienced parents, the information is not new and/or common sense. Consider presenting new findings/ research on the topic to increase interest and engagement with experienced parents 	<p><i>“Straightforward, to the point and very in depth, but easily understood.”</i></p> <p><i>“Helpful to understand how the relationship between parents and carers works.”</i></p> <p><i>“I had [previously] given some thought to the centre and home having strong/er links... but never really broke it down like this web page did (e.g. sleep, words, etc.).”</i></p> <p><i>“It was not particularly inspiring but I suppose functional.”</i></p>
Educator to child ratios	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive response to the infographics – engaging, information is clear, to the point and easy to read at a glance • Language simple to understand • High levels of parental interest in knowing this information; there is a demand for up to date ratios 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductory text could be made more digestible and easier to navigate with subheadings or the use of infographics or images • Some confusion with use of the terminology ‘educator’ as not used consistently throughout the website. Consistency in language or additional explanation to explain how ‘educator’/ 	<p><i>“Yes it is good to know what the ratio of educators to children are and what it means for an educator to be counted.”</i></p> <p><i>“Language was fine, looked a little long winded and not as easy to read as the bottom section (coloured boxes in bullet point, to the point).”</i></p>

Fact sheet	Strengths	Improvement opportunities	Parent Quotes
		<p>'carer' / and 'staff' overlap or are different could alleviate confusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire for information that details the qualification requirements of carers for each age group / state / care type 	<p><i>"[I] am slightly confused with the educator ... Is this a carer or someone who educates and comes in for this reason?"</i></p>
<p>Activities you can do at home</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents were positive towards the depth of information and ideas for new activities presented • The information made them think about the impact small things / activities have on a child's development • Some parents reported that they felt comforted and motivated to do more having read this fact sheet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase engagement with the information through layout enhancements that are visually appealing, e.g. more pictures to illustrate the activities or interactive icons • Watch out that the content encourages parents, not makes them feel guilty. An introduction that expresses an understanding of parent's busy schedules could help set a positive tone • Sentiment that the list of activities could be made even more useful if listed by or filtered by child age 	<p><i>"I think it was perfect, it makes me happy knowing this page is up for parents to read."</i></p> <p><i>"Made me think of the small things we can do to make a bigger impact for our child in the long term."</i></p> <p><i>"It was great reading and good to know, but for a moment there I'm wracked with this awful guilt of 'am I causing any adverse effects to their childcare needs if I'm not able to do all 50 activities on that page, every day?!"</i></p> <p><i>"Language was fine and easy to understand. This would be better with pictures and not in a top to bottom format - better as buttons side by side with a few bullet points underneath."</i></p>

Fact sheet	Strengths	Improvement opportunities	Parent Quotes
			<p><i>Then maybe when you click on a picture, you get even more information."</i></p>
<p>Activities you can do at home (video)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of the information directly from another parent was enjoyed • Information communicated was easy to understand • Video would nicely complement the fact sheet on 'Activities you can do at home'. Parents reported being engaged with one of the formats and liked the potential of having a choice of how to consume this information (watch or read) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider 'bite-size' videos to increase engagement and hold parent's interest/attention • Opportunity to add visually engaging elements to the video, e.g. examples of the activities described • Desire for video content, delivered by another parent, that talks about the importance of supporting parents through emotionally and how this is also an important part of their child's development process 	<p><i>"It was good seeing a fellow parent discussing everything."</i></p> <p><i>"Although the focus of Starting Blocks is about childcare and [the] framework, perhaps some mention about the importance of the mother's/parent's health and well-being, and how important it is to look after yourself, especially for those feeling overwhelmed."</i></p> <p><i>"I really think I zoned out a little, there was no change of tone, no music, no action. Call me a 21st century guy with an attention span of a gold fish if you like, but I bet I'm not the only one thinking it."</i></p>

Appendix F – Communication tactics – summary

Key strategic objective: communicate the need for NQF, NQS & Starting Blocks, to raise awareness & increase community engagement			
Audience	Communication Objectives	Tactics	Outcomes
Primary audiences: Parents of children aged 0-12 (esp. 1st time parents)	<p>Overall: To position NQF, NQS ratings and Starting Blocks as expert resources to support parents.</p> <p>Specifically: To educate parents about the benefits of understanding the NQF and accessing the NQS ratings when making choices about their child's/children's care provider.</p> <p>To increase awareness and understanding of the 7 NQS quality areas.</p> <p>To position Starting Blocks as a consolidated source of comprehensive, independent, trusted information to support parents.</p>	<p>Develop a communications resource kit which brings together new & existing collateral.</p> <p>'Above the line' Television (CSAs) Radio (CSAs) Newspaper (local and local freebies) (In addition to: digital - paid, social media, Google & banner ads)</p> <p>Special interest media & publications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media – Ethnic media – School newsletters – Parent magazines, newsletters <p>'Below the line' Expand/establish additional partnerships (online and offline) to facilitate events,</p>	<p>Better understanding & more engagement with NQF, NQS ratings & Starting Blocks</p> <p>More empowered, confident and hopeful parents and community</p>

Key strategic objective: communicate the need for NQF, NQS & Starting Blocks, to raise awareness & increase community engagement

Audience	Communication Objectives	Tactics	Outcomes
		<p>information sessions & third-party promotion (e.g. Maternal Child Health Services).¹⁸</p> <p>Establish an Ambassador Program – utilising high profile Champions and/or Peer Ambassadors – develop collateral for a Peer to Peer Kit – parents who are trusted community members, leaders or influencers, with relevant experience (e.g. child/ren already attending education and care services), as Ambassadors to support other parents and to be used as talent in ATL, TTL articles, media, social etc.</p> <p>Expand in situ collateral to include: Schools Community centres, libraries & clubs Centrelink offices Sports centres Churches & religious orgs</p> <p>(in addition to Health care centres & physicians' offices, education and care</p>	

¹⁸ E.g. explore opportunities to provide parents with information at key touchpoints / milestones, such as after birth (e.g. along with the provision of each child's Personal Health Record), developmental checks, or vaccinations.

Key strategic objective: communicate the need for NQF, NQS & Starting Blocks, to raise awareness & increase community engagement

Audience	Communication Objectives	Tactics	Outcomes
		Services and Maternal Child Health Services)	
Secondary audiences: Child care professionals Education & Care providers Peak bodies Sector key stakeholders and intermediaries	To promote communication about NQF, NQS & Starting Blocks between parents and child care services To educate services staff and administrators about the benefits of promoting NQF, NQS & Starting Blocks to parents	'Through the line' - Secondary Audiences Expand content in newsletters for care services staff and also for other stakeholder employee groups confirm the importance of promoting NQF & Starting Blocks Articles in professional journals	

Appendix G – Example presentation of the NQS ratings scale

All provide a safe education and care program, in-line with legislative requirements

Significant Improvement Required

Service does not meet one of the seven quality areas or a section of the legislation and there is a significant risk to the safety, health and wellbeing of children.

The regulatory authority will take immediate action.



Working Towards National Quality Standard

Service provides a safe education and care program, but there are one or more areas identified for improvement.

Meeting National Quality Standard

Service meets the National Quality Standard. Service provides quality education and care in all seven quality areas.



Exceeding National Quality Standard

Service goes beyond the requirements of the National Quality Standard in at least four of the seven quality areas.



Excellent

Service promotes exceptional education and care, demonstrates sector leadership, and is committed to continually improving. This rating can only be awarded by ACECQA. Services rated Exceeding National Quality Standard in all 7 Quality Areas may choose to apply for this rating.



* Provided for illustrative purposes only (not tested).