

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Recommendations	2
Affordability and eligibility	2
Terms of reference: (c)	2
Destitution created by Federal Government policies	3
The need for additional ECEC support	3
Unclear eligibility requirements	5
Cultural safety	5
Terms of reference: (a) (b)	5
Child protection	7
Terms of reference: (b) (f) (g)	7
Accessibility and housing insecurity	8
Conclusion	10

Introduction

Founded in 2001, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) is Australia's largest independent aid and advocacy organisation for people seeking asylum and refugees, supporting and empowering people at the most critical junctures of their journey. Our services include legal, casework, housing, medical, education, employment, and emergency relief. Based on what we witness through our service delivery, we advocate for change with refugees and people seeking asylum to ensure their human rights are upheld.

The ASRC welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in Victoria. Whilst the Victorian government has taken welcome steps to provide subsidised childcare to refugees and people seeking asylum, this is not sufficient in meeting our community's needs. Federal government policies prevent people seeking asylum from accessing subsidised early childhood care or education. This creates critical gaps in ECEC services and has devastating impacts on families, especially single parents.

Refugees and people seeking asylum continue to face barriers to accessing ECEC, such as cost, eligibility and cultural safety. These issues are often created by government policies that exclude people seeking asylum from accessing mainstream social support. Restrictive visa conditions that exclude people seeking asylum from subsidised ECEC prevent people from joining the workforce, as they cannot afford childcare, and disproportionately impact women who are often the primary carers.

Further support from the Victorian government is needed to address these barriers and allow refugees and people seeking asylum to access basic supports and rebuild their lives. The government must ensure that children from refugee backgrounds are protected and have the best possible start in life, equal to other children in Victoria.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Provide subsidised childcare for children of people seeking asylum in government-owned ECEC centres.

Recommendation 2: Provide training, education and clear policy directions so that ECEC providers better understand eligibility requirements for people seeking asylum.

Recommendation 3: Mandate cultural safety training in ECEC centres and early childhood education training programs.

Recommendation 4: Ensure continuous collaboration with multicultural communities when implementing child protection policies.

Recommendation 5: Include mandatory child abuse prevention training in the WWCC and advocate for a nationally integrated WWCC program.

Recommendation 6: Advocate to the Federal government for people seeking asylum to have access to work rights and mainstream social support services, including Centrelink payments such as the Special Benefit and the Child Care Subsidy, for the duration of their protection visa application process, including merits review, judicial review, and ministerial intervention stages.

Affordability and eligibility

Terms of reference: (c)

- C. The impacts of Victoria's predominantly privatised ECEC system, including a comparison with public, not-for-profit and cooperative models in terms of accessibility, affordability, safety and outcomes.

Whilst the Victorian government has provided much-needed childcare subsidies for children aged 3-4 from refugee backgrounds, our community is still excluded from the Federal Government's Child Care Subsidy. As a result, **many people seeking asylum are not eligible for essential childcare services such as infant daycare or afterschool care.**

The lack of subsidised support and the prohibitive costs of private childcare mean that many people seeking asylum cannot afford ECEC, and are prevented from entering the workforce when their children are aged between 1-3 years. Their work opportunities are also significantly curtailed,

even when their children are of school age, as they are limited to working only during school hours because of the need to be at home outside of school hours to pick up and care for children.

Destitution created by Federal Government policies

Eligibility for the Federal Government's Child Care Subsidy requires Australian citizenship, a permanent visa, a special category visa, or certain temporary visas (that are not bridging visas).¹ People seeking asylum are therefore not eligible, so access to childcare is extremely cost-prohibitive. As a result, **many primary carers of children cannot work, and without access to financial support due to restrictive visa conditions, families are put in dire financial situations.**

Federal government policies prevent people seeking asylum from accessing mainstream support such as Centrelink, and the **vast majority do not have access to any financial support at all.** The minimal financial support provided through the Government's Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) is insufficient (lower than Centrelink payments) and forces people to live below the poverty line. Continued cuts to funding and hardline eligibility criteria mean only around 2,000 people receive SRSS,² approximately 7% of people seeking asylum.³

These gaps in government support force people into reliance on charities, which is unsustainable. In the last year, the ASRC saw a **35% decrease in donations** to our centre because of cost of living pressures - meaning resources are becoming more and more scarce.

Charities should not be considered to be a permanent safety net for families living in destitution - their resources should be available to be turned to in a crisis, but they should not be relied on to meet basic needs indefinitely.

The need for additional ECEC support

The Victorian Government has taken welcome steps to provide affordable childcare for refugees and people seeking asylum. The Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) program provides three-year-old children from a refugee or asylum seeker background 15 hours per week of free or low-cost kindergarten.⁴ This includes children whose families have a refugee or humanitarian visa or are in the process of applying for one. Children who have accessed ESK are also eligible for free or low-cost Four-Year-Old Kindergarten (Pre-Prep). In 2025, up to 25 hours per week of Pre-Prep will be available for children from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds.

However, Federal Government policies that exclude people seeking asylum from subsidised childcare are creating critical gaps in the services available. **Families who are seeking asylum and have children outside the ages of 3-4 do not have access to affordable childcare.**

The subsidised childcare that the Victorian Government provides is not enough to meet our clients' needs. Whilst 15-25 hours of state-subsidised childcare a week is a welcome first step, this needs to be increased with other types of care so that our clients can access the childcare they need to work, support their families, and rebuild their lives.

¹ Services Australia, <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/residence-rules-for-child-care-subsidy?contextot=41186>

² Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Home Affairs Portfolio, AE25-474, December 2024.

³ Department of Home Affairs, 2025.

<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/monthly-update-onshore-protection-866-visa-processing-june-2025.pdf>

⁴ Victorian Government,

https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/Early_Start/Kindergartlivingen_for_Refugees_and_Asylum_Seekers_Brochure.pdf

Furthermore, as refugees and people seeking asylum are excluded from the Child Care Subsidy, they are not able to access subsidised outside of school hours care.⁵ Excluding people seeking asylum from accessing before or after-school childcare impacts many of our clients who are employed in full time work, and prevents many from working due to the difficulty of securing school hours work.

This disproportionately impacts women who are often the primary caregivers and prevents them from joining the workforce. Single parents with young children, without a support system or access to subsidised childcare, are left with few options. This creates further disadvantage and prevents people who want to work from contributing to their communities and living independently.

Case study

Divya* came to Australia with her husband and two young children. Following incidents of family violence, she has since separated from her partner, who is currently in immigration detention. She is now a single mother with two young children, aged six and eight. Divya cannot access the federal government childcare subsidy as she is on a Bridging Visa E and is not eligible.

Divya works as a casual cashier and does shift work. She is not able to drop off and pick up her children from school and cannot afford before-school and after-school care, which would cost \$90 each child per day. School holidays are especially difficult, given the high cost of school holiday childcare, which she cannot afford. She was paying her friend to drop off and pick up her children and care for them while she was at work; however, her friend is now moving away.

Divya is struggling to make ends meet and pay her rent, which has recently increased. She cannot afford to move and says she feels stuck and doesn't know what to do. She is not eligible for financial support through SRSS now that she has work rights, and is currently accessing ASRC Foodbank services in Dandenong to help support herself and her two young children.

Divya has never received any childcare support from the government. As a result of these policies, she is experiencing significant financial stress, which has impacted her mental health.

Accessing free or low-cost childcare would hugely benefit single parents like Divya, who says she sees a real difference in those who are eligible for subsidised childcare and those who are not. Divya says that not being able to access subsidised childcare affects everything in her life - her ability to work, support her family, put food on the table, and pay rent.

As a result of these policies, many of our clients cannot work as they cannot afford childcare. Without access to mainstream supports such as welfare or public housing, this places refugees and people seeking asylum in dire situations. Providing subsidised access to State-run childcare, for more than 25 hours a week, for children of all ages and during after-school hours, would be a

⁵ Victorian Government, 2023.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/parents/additional-needs/Pages/oshc-information-parents.aspx>

logical and impactful next step - **removing a key barrier to employment and enabling more parents to contribute their skills to Victoria's economy.**

Recommendation 1: Provide subsidised childcare for children of people seeking asylum in government-owned ECEC centres.

Unclear eligibility requirements

The differences in state and federal childcare support have also created confusion among people seeking asylum, and many are unaware of their eligibility for state-funded childcare. We have also seen this from schools and childcare centres that refuse our clients even though they are eligible due to misunderstandings and unclear requirements.

The staggered approach to rolling out state-subsidised childcare across Victoria has created confusion regarding which local government areas are eligible. **Complex policies and unclear eligibility requirements are preventing our community from accessing essential childcare services even when they are eligible.**

The people we work with are often new to Australia and therefore have difficulty navigating their service eligibility. They may be experiencing multiple barriers such as high levels of stress as a result of the protection process, difficulty with English, lack of community connections and support and overall unfamiliarity with services. As a result, it is difficult for our members to understand and self-advocate for access to the services for which they are eligible.

Clear policies and procedures along with strong and regular education for centre directors, educators and support staff is therefore critical to ensuring that people seeking asylum can access the ECEC they are eligible for.

Recommendation 2: Provide training, education and clear policy directions so that ECEC providers better understand eligibility requirements for people seeking asylum.

Cultural safety

Terms of reference: (a) (b)

- A. The adequacy of current quality and safety standards across all ECEC service types.
- B. The quality and oversight of educator training, professional development and qualifications, including a review of the effectiveness of Working with Children Checks and of Registered Training Organisations issuing early childhood certifications.

Our clients have reported many issues with childcare not being culturally safe. This impacts the quality and safety of the care their children receive. Childcare providers follow a standard approach, which often does not consider families' cultural or religious requirements. This creates an additional barrier for children of families who are seeking asylum to access early childhood education, which is critical for their development.

Children from a refugee background or who are seeking asylum have often experienced trauma in their country of origin, have been separated from their extended family and friends, and have lost important support networks. They may be experiencing grief or the mental health impacts of trauma, and learning to navigate a different world. This has a significant impact on children, and the education of centre directors, educators and support staff on how to meet their needs is important to their safety in ECEC centres.

Every child, regardless of their cultural or religious background, should feel safe and comfortable when they are at childcare.

ASRC clients who are training or working as early childhood educators have also experienced issues with their training not being culturally safe. Some of our clients have reported experiencing racism and religious discrimination in childcare centres as staff. This occurred in childcare centres in multicultural communities, which raises concerns about the **quality and safety of care children and staff from CALD backgrounds receive.**

Case study

Inaya* received assistance from ASRC's Employment Program and is currently working as an early childhood educator. She has experienced racism and discrimination due to her religion and head covering. She experienced multiple incidents where other staff made fun of her language skills and made inappropriate comments regarding her religion in front of children. One staff member verbally abused and harassed Inaya in front of the children.

Inaya ignored these comments and later reported the incidents to her manager and HR. All incidents were ignored, and no further action was taken. She was advised to speak to the staff member directly and was provided with no further support.

This ECEC centre is located in a multicultural area and has diverse children and staff, yet it does not provide staff with any cultural awareness training. Inaya said she felt unsafe going to work, ignored by management and discouraged from working in this sector.

Inaya loves children and is passionate about the work she does. However, traumatic experiences with racism, high physical and mental demands, and low pay are discouraging her from working in the ECEC sector. She feels that more funding and support are needed for ECEC educators to provide children with quality care.

Discrimination and a lack of cultural awareness should not deter people from a CALD background from working in this much-needed sector. Early childhood educators or child carers are considered an occupation in demand in Victoria from 2023-26.⁶ Creating culturally safe workplaces and

⁶ Victorian Government, <https://www.vic.gov.au/state-victorian-labour-market-2023/occupations-demand-2023-2026>

training will help encourage people seeking asylum and refugees to fill much-needed gaps in Victoria's childcare and education sector.

Everyone training or working in the ECEC sector, regardless of their cultural or religious background, should feel welcomed and supported at work.

Cultural safety is a critical factor in ensuring the quality and safety of ECEC services for refugees and people seeking asylum. **Providing culturally safe ECEC centres will reduce barriers to entry for children and staff from CALD backgrounds.** It will also help to address job shortages in the ECEC sector and protect children from multicultural families.

Recommendation 3: Mandate cultural safety training in ECEC centres and early childhood education training programs.

Child protection

Terms of reference: (b) (f) (g)

- B. The quality and oversight of educator training, professional development and qualifications, including a review of the effectiveness of Working with Children Checks and of Registered Training Organisations issuing early childhood certifications.
- F. Whether there is sufficient oversight of the Department of Education and the role it plays in monitoring and maintaining child safety;
- G. Any other matter in relation to the adequacy, implementation, compliance and/or enforcement of child safety standards and regulations in the ECEC sector.

The recent failures of the childcare system to protect children and horrific cases of abuse have created fear in communities of people seeking asylum. **These concerns are heightened as families lack information and understanding on how their children are being protected.**

Child protection procedures and regulations must be implemented in a way that is clear to multicultural communities to restore confidence in the ECEC sector. Information about what protections are in place should be shared with parents in easy English and in other languages if necessary, particularly in suburbs or regions where there is a high proportion of families who speak languages other than English at home.

Any support provided to families in response to these failures should be implemented in a way that is inclusive to multicultural communities - such as by providing information in languages other than English, making interpreters available when needed, and ensuring sensitivity to diverse cultural and religious contexts.

Recommendation 4: Ensure continuous collaboration with multicultural communities when implementing child protection policies.

The devastating incidents of child abuse exposed systemic failures in Victoria's child protection system. The Working with Children Check (WWCC) does not provide training to prevent and detect child abuse and has failed to protect Victorian children. Experts in the sector, such as the Australian Childhood Foundation, have long called for the government to include mandatory child abuse prevention training in the WWCC. This is informed by the experiences of survivors who find that everyone working with children must know how to recognise signs of child abuse.⁷

The failure to implement a nationwide WWCC creates discrepancies and means that a person with adverse records in one jurisdiction may be able to obtain clearance in another jurisdiction where these records are not available.⁸ These reforms must be made urgently to ensure that children in Victoria are protected and that parents can trust that their children are safe while they are in childcare.

ASRC clients experience heightened vulnerability due to a lack of community connections, language barriers and unfamiliarity with ECEC services. Many families have faced significant trauma and difficulties seeking asylum in Australia, and do not have access to government support such as a social safety net or mental health care.

Where parents do not have work rights or access to Services Australia social security payments and are therefore destitute, they can be highly dependent on the charity of people they meet and who offer assistance, placing them at great risk of exploitation. These vulnerabilities together with a lack of support and understanding of ECEC systems can also mean that families seeking asylum can be at greater risk of being groomed by perpetrators.

It is essential that children from particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged families are protected in ECEC centres, and that robust child protection protocols are in place to ensure that children are protected from would-be offenders.

Recommendation 5: Include mandatory child abuse prevention training in the WWCC and advocate for a nationally integrated WWCC program.

ECEC accessibility and housing insecurity

Even when refugees and people seeking asylum can afford childcare, many face difficulties due to a lack of transportation and housing insecurity. Transportation is a major issue for our clients, as many do not have a license or a car. Public transport is sometimes not accessible and often takes too long. In the last financial year, the ASRC provided **1,690 Myki top-ups** for our clients. The lack of affordable and adequate transportation creates additional barriers preventing refugees and people seeking asylum from accessing essential ECEC services for their children.

⁷ Australian Childhood Foundation, <https://www.childhood.org.au/app/uploads/2025/02/Our-Collective-Experience-Report-II-V3.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.

Refugees and people seeking asylum often experience housing insecurity as a result of Federal Government policies that prevent people from working and accessing mainstream social support - forcing many families into destitution. This makes it extremely difficult to find a suitable childcare centre. Families are often placed on the waitlist for a childcare centre in one area, **only to be forced to move to another area and be pushed to the bottom of a new waitlist.**

Without access to subsidised housing, work rights or financial support, there are few housing options available for people seeking asylum, meaning that people are often moving between short term or insecure housing options. **In 2024-25, the ASRC provided over 20,000 nights of shelter for people seeking asylum, which was significantly less than the demand for housing support. This includes supporting over 150 children with accommodation.**

Case Study

Nabila*, Arif*, and their three children arrived in Australia with the intention to lodge for protection. At the time, Nabila was 6.5 months pregnant, and their other three children were all under the age of six. The family arrived on a Tourist visa and had exhausted their funds within the first month in Australia.

When they arrived at ASRC, they were homeless and had nowhere to sleep that night. While the family had recently lodged for protection through Refugee Legal, they were still waiting for their Bridging Visas to come into effect.

Arif was very concerned about how he would support his wife and children prior to his work rights being instated. The family were advised to present to Launch Housing, which was able to provide two weeks of crisis accommodation.

During these two weeks, the ASRC supported the family to access the Foodbank, our internal health program, and make a referral to the Royal Women's Hospital for Nabila's care. After these two weeks funded by Launch Housing, ASRC continued to support the family in crisis accommodation until they found a longer-term housing option.

Over the next few weeks, the ASRC reached out to all possible contacts that may have properties or any short-term options, given that Nabila would be due to give birth within the next month. Our internal Health program had been concerned that Nabila is unable to access a GP in the community as she did not have a fixed address and was not yet eligible for Medicare. Following up on many ads on Gumtree, Facebook and other sites, the ASRC found a landlord who was willing to accept the family for the lease.

Unfortunately, this tenancy did not proceed as the landlord requested four months' rent upfront and bond, which was beyond what ASRC could commit to. Luckily, the same day, another property came up, and the owner, who was very aware of the circumstances our clients faced, having been a refugee himself, was happy to accept the family for the property he owned and was leasing. The family met the owner, Tran*, who kindly offered to support Arif in finding employment through his community networks. The family can now finally settle and prepare for the baby.

This case study demonstrates the many barriers families face when trying to access affordable accommodation when they first arrive in Australia. Finding a property that is affordable and safe for a family when they have no income or rental history is extremely difficult, given the current shortage of rental properties.

Recommendation 6: Advocate to the Federal government for people seeking asylum to have access to work rights and mainstream social support services, including Centrelink payments such as the Special Benefit and the Child Care Subsidy, for the duration of their protection visa application process, including merits review, judicial review, and ministerial intervention stages.

Conclusion

Barriers preventing refugees and people seeking asylum from accessing early childhood care and education include affordability, eligibility for subsidised childcare, cultural safety, transportation difficulties, and housing insecurity. These issues are created by government policies that exclude people seeking asylum from accessing mainstream social support. Whilst the Victorian government has taken welcome steps in providing people seeking asylum with some subsidised early childhood education, this must be expanded to address the needs of our community.

The lack of cultural awareness training prevents both children and childcare workers from refugee backgrounds from accessing care that is culturally safe. Urgent reforms are also needed to address systemic failures in child protection. This should be implemented in continuous collaboration with the multicultural community to regain confidence and trust in the ECEC sector.

Ensuring refugees and people seeking asylum can access adequate ECEC will benefit all of Victoria. It will allow people to rebuild their lives, join the workforce, reduce reliance on charities, and give their children the best possible start in life. The Victorian Government must ensure that children from refugee backgrounds can access the same quality care as other Victorian children in their formative years, which will have a positive impact on the rest of their lives.