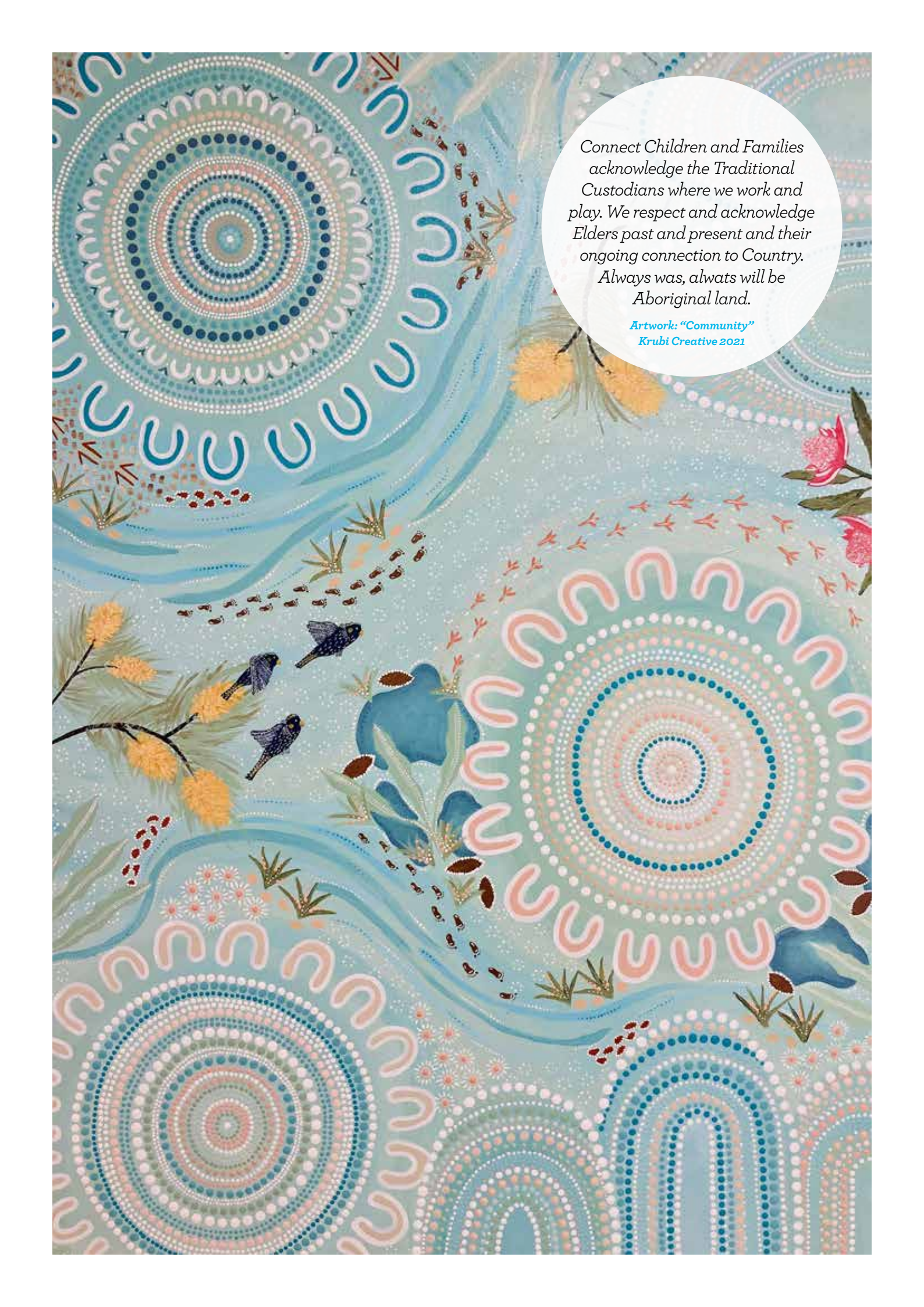




connect
Children and Families

Annual Report FY24



*Connect Children and Families
acknowledge the Traditional
Custodians where we work and
play. We respect and acknowledge
Elders past and present and their
ongoing connection to Country.
Always was, always will be
Aboriginal land.*

*Artwork: "Community"
Krubu Creative 2021*



Children and
families thrive in
safe connected
communities.



Message from Chair

I'd like to thank the board for working with me to lead the strategy and culture of Connect with the executive team. Our strategy focuses on organisational excellence and we have been prepared to invest our reserves to achieve sound systems that support staff to deliver excellence. These strong systems will enable Connect to develop a birth to three service for families in the Mountains where greatest impact on children's development can be made.

I have the greatest respect for our CEO, Ann-Marie, for leading the Connect culture and enabling the delivery of our strategy. Connect demonstrates a commitment to learning at all levels of service and the staff's passion and skills are to be commended. I value the close connection with the Aboriginal community, led by Uncle Lex, which has brought joy to our children as they sing and learn local Languages. Most importantly, I'd like to thank our families who use our services who we listen to and learn from. I am pleased that they rate our services highly and I'm glad that in this coming year, we have a board member with a child in our programs. I look forward to the year ahead as we progress our strategy, connect with our communities and continue to learn and improve.

Rosemary Bishop
Board Chair, November 2024



Together, we support children's & families' learning, safety and wellbeing.



Message from CEO

Dear Connect Children and Families Community,

Looking back on the past year, I feel great pride and gratitude for the amazing contributions of the Connect team. FY24 has been a year of significant challenges and remarkable achievements, and I am delighted to share our progress in this report. This year marked the first year of implementing our new strategy, a bold step towards enhancing our programs and impact. It was not without its challenges. We dealt with rising costs in all programs and fixed pricing in our community services, which meant careful planning and adjustments to our financial modelling. The investment of our reserves has been managed to support the implementation of our Strategic Plan.

One of our proudest achievements was the successful implementation of the Circle of Security training. This program has profoundly impacted our educators, equipping them with the skills to build secure and nurturing relationships with children. We also celebrated the 10th birthday of Heatherbrae, our family space in Lawson, a milestone that underscores our long-term commitment to supporting families in our community. The centre has been a beacon of support, providing a safe and welcoming space for numerous families over the past decade. New programs, such as LEGO Groups, Bush Kindy in Lapstone and Possum's Patch have made a meaningful difference in the lives of children and families.

It was wonderful to witness Angela Gillespie's recognition at the national Early Childhood Australia conference, another highlight of the year. This prestigious award acknowledges Angela's dedication and outstanding contributions to early childhood education. We are very fortunate to have Ange guide our practice approach.

Our Board, including Rosemary, Barbara, Mike, Kush, Peggy, Nolene, and Andi, has played a crucial role in guiding and supporting our organisation through this transformative year. Their commitment to our purpose and strategic vision has ensured that we remain focused on our goals and continue to make a positive impact in the community. Their expertise and dedication have provided invaluable support, helping us to achieve our objectives and lay a strong foundation for the future.

Thank you to **all** the Connect team members and volunteers for your contribution to our community this year.

Ann-Marie Elliott
Chief Executive, November 2024



Birth to Three
Matters



People, Capability,
and Culture

Strategic Plan: Year 1

The launch of the Connect's three year strategic plan (FY24-26) took place at the Hazelwood Yard reveal on Saturday, August 5th, 2023. The event included a Smoking Ceremony conducted by Uncle Lex Dadd, symbolising the start of a new chapter for Connect.

The Plan emphasises the importance of investing in the earliest years with meaningful early support, enabling our people, capability, and culture, and growing our workforce and by enhancements in technology, setting Connect up for long-term sustainability.

In the first year of implementing the Strategic Plan, we have made significant progress, despite facing several setbacks including unsuccessful funding applications, changes in government funding and no changes to NDIS pricing, as well as protracted software implementation.

Much of the progress has been enabled by the commitment the Board made to use the organisational reserves to invest in a strong foundation for achieving its strategic goals. The achievements are outlined below and at the end of year one, the organisation is on track to realise the benefits of the strategy in the years to come. This first year of the strategy has laid a strong foundation for the future, ensuring that we continue to support children's and families' learning, safety, and well-being effectively.

Birth to three Matters

We refreshed our community based support program for the under threes and established our **Pathways Program**. This program is focused on reducing silos, maximising service offers, and better connecting with the community. Our Pathways team support families to access early education, community supports and developmental programs for their young children, knowing the experiences and development that occur during the earliest years of life have long-term implications for a child's future.

People Capability and Culture

We continued our efforts to foster a culture of continuous learning with a strong focus on working with very young children. We provided access to resources such as online courses, workshops and conferences, and promoted knowledge sharing and collaboration among employees.



Circle of Security Training

The Circle of Security training was a cornerstone of our efforts to support educators in building secure relationships with children. This evidence-based program has equipped our staff with the skills to better understand and respond to children's emotional needs, ultimately enhancing their well-being and development.

We are grateful to our Practice Mentors, Kathy Coates and Karen Daniels who worked with every team in the organisation to share their knowledge. Educators have reported significant changes in their practices and reflections due to the training. The training has fostered a culture of continuous learning and improvement, with educators sharing their experiences and applying new strategies in their daily interactions with children.

Practice Framework in Development

Our Practice Team and Operational Managers came together monthly to draft our Practice Framework. It has been developed to support our teams in their delivery of contemporary early childhood experiences, in whatever setting they work across Connect. Our Practice Framework pulls together theoretical perspectives, evidence based research and our organisational values and context to create a best practice guide for all Connect teams.

We know that consistency of practice creates a stronger team and lends itself to higher quality. Connect has over 100 staff members working with children and families. Like many organisations, we have team members who work with us for a long time and some for a short time. We need tools that support all of our team members, new and longstanding, to understand our approach.

Trainee Hub

We continued to invest in our newest team members, with regular support to aid their study and opportunities to network and visit each other's centres. The trainee hub has seen 90% of Connect trainees take up ongoing employment at Connect following the completion of their apprenticeship.

Organisational Excellence

We worked diligently on our IT Strategy implementation including the introduction of managed services for our IT needs, improved cyber security measured, new software for our Connected Abilities team and the implementation of a new Human Resources Information and Payroll software.

56
team
sessions

112
hours
course delivery

Over the past seven months, seven teams at Connect have completed the full Circle of Security Classroom training. This involved **56 team sessions**, totalling **112 hours** of course delivery. The dedication of our staff to participate in this training, despite their busy schedules, has been commendable.



**Organisational
Excellence Transforms**



Kumarninithi: the 2023 Early Childhood Australia Conference

We are committed to sharing our learning and for the second year in a row our application to present our work at the national Early Childhood Conference was accepted.

This year, Early Childhood Australia (ECA) National Conference, themed Kumarninithi—Becoming One: Old Ways, New Wisdom, took place at the Adelaide Convention Centre from October 4th to 7th, 2023. This theme emphasises the importance of valuing traditional knowledge and practices while also embracing contemporary approaches to create new wisdom and unity within the early childhood sector.

We were thrilled to send a large group of Connect staff to participate in and present at this impactful conference. The program featured a variety of streams focusing on essential topics such as diversity, inclusion, children's rights, deep listening, ecological identity and sustainability, and the multilingual lives of children. Among the notable speakers were Karen Mudine, CEO of Reconciliation Australia; Professor Pasi Stahlberg, an expert in educational leadership; Anne Hollands, Australian National Children's Commissioner; Dr. Jools Page, a recognised researcher in attachment-based relationships; and Richard Louv, an author known for his advocacy for connecting children with nature.

Connect's CEO, Ann-Marie Elliott, Senior Manager Ange Gillespie, and local Dharug Elder Uncle Lex Dadd had the privilege of presenting "Yanama Budyari Gumada—Walking with Good Spirit" as part of the deep listening stream. Their presentation shared the story behind Connect's value of "We All Walk Together" that sits intentionally distinct from our commitment to strive for Social Justice.

The presentation highlighted Uncle Lex's work in sharing Culture and Knowledge with our Early Education Centres. It underscored the importance of truth-telling, deep consultation, building authentic, reciprocal relationships between our organisation and the Aboriginal community, and the transformative opportunities that arise from educating our youngest citizens. Throughout the presentation, Uncle Lex shared traditional Dharug stories and songs that aligned with these concepts, including "Buran Mittigar", The Stringy Bark Story, "Wirimbi", The Bat Story, and the song "Gunyaunglung: The Dreaming, Peace, Love and Standing Strong". Our presentation greatly represented the conference's theme, Kumarninithi, respecting and valuing traditional knowledge and applying it through a contemporary practice lens.

Authentic Relationships



Truth Telling



Listening



Respect



Reciprocity



Time



Space



The session was very well attended and received, reflecting the strong interest in fostering meaningful connections and promoting change within the Early Education sector.

In early 2024, three teams were guided to develop and submit abstracts for the 2024 Early Childhood Australia Conference in September. The acceptance of two of these presentations, "Nurturing Beginning Educators; It's More than Training" and "Amplifying Voices; AAC in Early Education", is a testament to Connect's commitment to being a learning organisation and its dedication to living and researching best practices in the fields we work.

Recognition of Excellence

Ange Gillespie, Senior Manager of Practice and Programs at Connect, was awarded the Barbara Creaser Champion Award at the 2023 Early Childhood Australia National Conference. This award recognises professionals who demonstrate leadership and advocacy for young children, honouring Barbara Creaser's legacy in social justice and anti-bias curriculum.

Over the past decade, Ange has amplified children's voices, ensuring their input shapes programs. She engages educators and children in feedback to enhance experiences. As lead mentor in Connect's 2022 practitioner research project, Ange guided educators in integrating research and critical reflection into their practices. Her inclusive approach at Lapstone Preschool has created a participatory environment where all children can thrive.

Ange also advocates for social justice and equity in early childhood education, leading discussions on policies for fair wages and increased funding. In her acceptance speech, she emphasised amplifying others' voices and acknowledged contributions from children, families, and communities, as well as her family.

Ange was also invited to speak as a panellist with Aunty Denise Proud, discussing advocacy motivations, challenges, and strategies for positive change.

Congratulations to Ange for her impactful leadership and commitment to children and families at Connect Children and Families.





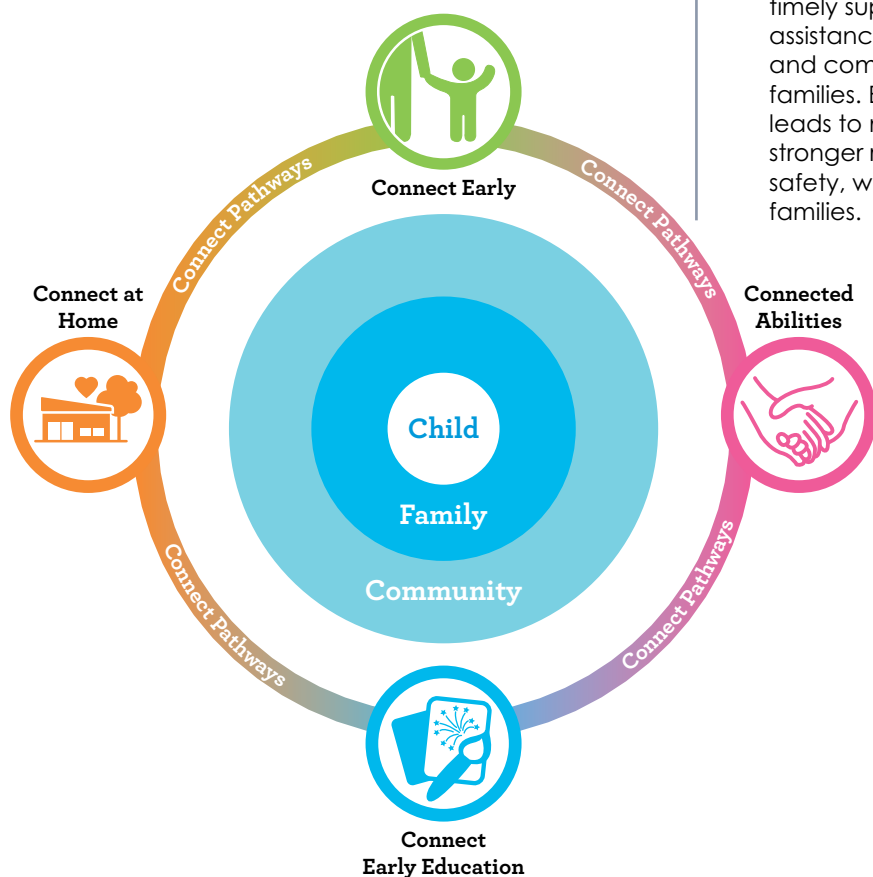
Integrated Service Delivery

We know from evidence that, the more services work in a collaborative and integrated way, the better the outcomes for children and families. Connect is committed to working in this way across our programs.

In FY24, we continued to embed our integrated approach to support children and families across a vast area, from Western Sydney through the Blue Mountains to Lithgow. Despite the geographical challenges, we utilised technology to support coordination across teams. Strong leadership and community partnerships played a crucial role in fostering collaboration and enhancing service delivery. It has been further supported by the development of Connect's Practice Framework which documents our ways of working together.

By continuously seeking feedback, we adapt our services to meet the evolving needs of the communities we serve. This integrated way of working has allowed us to provide efficient and effective support, ensuring the well-being and development of children and families.

Our goal is to create a supportive environment for children and families. By integrating early childhood education, family support, allied health services, and community engagement, we address multiple aspects of well-being. This comprehensive approach allows us to identify and address issues early, provide timely support, and ensure families receive necessary assistance. Services are accessible in homes, schools, and community spaces, simplifying the process for families. Enhanced coordination among providers leads to more efficient and effective support, fostering stronger relationships and trust. Ultimately, this improves safety, well-being, and development for children and families.





Connect Early

Heatherbrae Birthday

The Heatherbrae Family Centre celebrated its 10th birthday this year, marking a decade of providing a safe and welcoming space for families. The centre has supported numerous families through various programs, including the Dad's Playgroup and the NSW Health Child and Family Nurse services. The celebration was a testament to the centre's positive impact on the community.

Heatherbrae opened in 2013, to serve the purpose of supporting parents and children during those often difficult early years. The realisation of the project was made possible thanks to the dedication of Connect staff, and today the funding from the NSW Department of Education and the NSW Department of Community and Justice. Last year we had **394 different families** who came through the door – averaging 18 new families per month. Families come to us from all over the Blue Mountains, often by word of mouth and many visit several times a week – it's a privilege to be part of the children's weekly lives.

Currently, we average 10 families and 13 children per day, and it's not uncommon to reach 20 families. This program is made possible by the amazing work of our regular staff Jasmine Tribe, Robyn Moloney, Vasant DeMello and Rachel Isaacs and our casuals Jeannie, Jane and Sarah who do such a wonderful job, making each family feel welcome and connected, and who manage anything the day throws at them with a smile – as a drop in centre, each day is unpredictable!

Transition to School Playgroups

Our Transition to School Program has been a cornerstone of our efforts to support children and families during this critical phase of change. This year, we have successfully implemented 20 unique programs tailored to the diverse needs of our communities in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains. Our approach emphasises building strong, cohesive relationships among all stakeholders, including educators, schools, parents, and community members.

By recognising children as capable learners and valuing their prior experiences, we have created a supportive environment that eases the transition to school. Our programs are designed to be flexible and responsive, addressing the individual needs of each child and family. We have also focused on leveraging community strengths and fostering long-term partnerships beyond the school gates. This holistic approach ensures that children and families receive the support they need to thrive during this important transition.

We extend our appreciation to Jo Everingham and Layla Boyd and all our team of playgroup facilitators who work diligently to support children and families during this transition period.

We've been able to support 647 in our programs funded by Department of Communities and Justice.



Connect and Nurture (CAN)

The **Connect and Nurture program** in 2023/24 has been an integral part of our efforts to support children and families in the community. This program focuses on creating positive change through a comprehensive and integrated range of services that embrace strengths-based, family-centred practices.

Our CAN team - Shanna and Karen, both part time, coordinate this program across Penrith and the Blue Mountains. The program would not be possible without our wonderful team of volunteers who freely give up their time and generously share their care and community connections with young families.

31

families

60

children

There are currently more than 31 families with 60 children supported uniquely based on their needs.

“

“The CAN program got me through a serious rough patch in my families life. Without the support offered by my support worker and volunteer, I would have lost my mind. I’m the mum I am, because of the program. There is no other service like this around and it meant everything to me.”

– **CG, Jamisontown, Mum of 5**

“I really believe in the programs value both for mothers and for the volunteers. I have seen families move from deeply troubled and difficult places, to safe and happy places. Ive seen completely overwhelmed mothers find themselves again. As a recently retired woman, volunteering for CAN allows me to help families but also to feel like I’m contributing to society.”

– **KJ, Volunteer**



Connected Abilities

LEGO Groups

We were delighted to see five of our Connected Abilities team members being trained to deliver LEGO workshops. Our LEGO Groups have been a hit among children and families, providing a fun and therapeutic environment for social interaction and skill development. These sessions have helped children improve their communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills while enjoying the creative process of building with LEGO.

Connected Abilities

Our Connected Abilities team continue to support children in our community accessing NDIS funding, and providing consultations, screeners and assessments for children who are experiencing developmental delays. There has been significant focus in the media about the challenges of delivering the NDIS, with rising costs and fixed prices for registered providers. Connect felt the impact of this keenly in FY24, not least because of the significant travel costs associated with our region. However, the Board were resolute in their determination to continue this vital program to children and families in our community. The following stories provide an insight into the impact our program has.

Our Key Worker Approach in Action

Miles* is in kindy, he has transitioned to primary school with no early childhood experience in a mainstream setting. He has been cared for at home by his parents who are from culturally diverse background.

He has a diagnosis of Autism and attended all the orientation visits for kindy with his family. Support funding has been applied for and he receives 1hr of classroom support, 3 days per week and the school covers 1hr per day the other 2 days of the week.

Miles is unable to sit at the table and complete the expected task without support, he is unable to socialise with his peers without directing them or not following the norms, he is unable to express his needs to his teacher which may result in him getting angry. He can display some behaviours that are rough, interrupting the class routine when he is overwhelmed in a large group.

Susanna, Connect's Keyworker (Early Childhood Specialist Educator) was requested to come into the classroom to observe, plan and provide coaching for the teacher and School Learning Support Officer (SLSO) to improve Miles' inclusion and participation in the daily routine and also curriculum tasks. Susanna also provided capacity building support to the family based on their questions about Autism.

Recess and lunch are the most challenging for Miles. He exhibits disruptive behaviour by hitting others, taking their lunch boxes, and not engaging in meaningful interactions with his peers.

Susanna introduced some general strategies in the classroom such as visuals, written instructions, broken down instructions and guidance alone or with small group rather than whole class. Within the term, the teacher observed Miles' classroom participation increase. Miles is very bright and can do all the work that is required by the teacher.

Introducing games, activities, and play resources at recess and lunch allows Miles to use appropriate toys, enjoy himself, play alongside peers, mimic others, and form connections.

After two terms of support, the teachers and SLSO feel more confident, have a range of specific tools to use to support Miles. His family feel that his school experience is like other children's. They are happy with his progress and so requested that keyworker support cease (allowing Susanna to work with another child on our waiting list for support). The family feel they have built capacity to support Miles and can partner with the school as needed.

*not his real name



Connect Early Education

Connect Early Education is dedicated to providing high-quality and accessible early childhood education and care services, focusing on creating positive outcomes for children, families, and the community. Our programs are designed to support children's development and learning from birth to five years old, ensuring they have the best start in life.

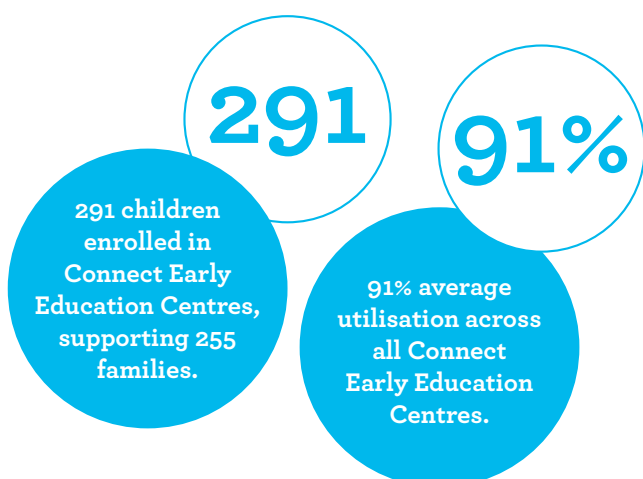
Educational Leaders Network

Every Connect Early Education Centre has an appointed Educational Leader. This position is distinct from the Centre Director, designed to ensure that the educational program remains a central focus amidst the busy operations of an Early Education Centre.

This position is still an emerging role with the Early Education sector and over the last few years at Connect, we've worked to add clarity and support for our Educational Leaders. Part of this support is the **Connect Educational Leader Network**.

Connect Educational Leaders meet every 6 weeks to share and connect, discuss challenges and being supported to be successful in their roles.

We've seen that well supported educational leaders leads to well supported educational programs in our centres.



Family Feedback (Nov 23)

- **85%** of families were happy with how much their child was learning at their Centre.
- **93%** of families believe that their centre had strategies in place to keep their child safe.
- **90%** of families were happy with the skills and abilities of the education team at their centre.
- **93%** of families supported the statement that educators interact with my child in a way that helps them feel secure, confident and included.
- **95%** of families believe that Centre staff are willing to listen to what they have to say about their child.



"This is my first time working as an Educational Leader and the structure and opportunities Connect have setup have been so beneficial as I learn from and with others in this role. The Educational Leader meetings have been particularly valuable as we are provided the time and space to come together and reflect on practice. Thanks Connect for these opportunities and continuing to invest in Educational Leaders!"

– Rachel – Educational Leader, Hazelwood ECC.

"I love having an educational leader community of practice. It's a shared space for discussing practice and pedagogy from simultaneous leadership and educator perspectives. Our role is complex, as are the challenges and contexts in which we operate. So, a space where we can reflect on these is invaluable."

– Alex – Educational Leader, Bunya ECC



“

“The educators do a wonderful job and create an inclusive and caring environment.”

(Family Feedback – Bunya ECC)

“What I like most about my early education centre is the quality of the staff and the care they provide. I am so happy I found Possums for my daughter.”

(Family Feedback – Possum ECC)

“I love that my child loves going to Preschool and talks about the staff and the amazing learning experiences with the family. I love that they know my child and their interests and cater for them individually, making the experiences very personalised.”

(Family Feedback – Lapstone Preschool)

“You feel it when you walk in; The educators, their kindness to all children and the sense of belonging created for the kids. “

(Family Feedback – Hazelwood ECC)

“All the educators are warm & friendly. My child feels so safe and secure that she loves going to school. I love that they prioritise outside play. “

(Family Feedback – Possum’s Patch)

Learning Programs and Family Communication

Feedback from our November 2023 family survey indicated that families wanted more information on the learning program and their child's progress.

This has seen the implementation of individual developmental summaries and the invitation for families to meet with educators to discuss their child's progress and any concerns. We've also seen teams review their approaches to practice and programming.

Bunya Early Childhood Centre have redeveloped their statement of philosophy to be the foundation of their educational program. This process sought consultation from staff, families and children and stakeholder quotes have been included in the final statement.

Possum Early Childhood Centre reviewed their approaches to documentation in January 2024 and have implemented the use of Floorbooks. Floorbooks are a highly inclusive recording style that aim to capture the perspectives of children when reflecting on their own learning.

Building Community Connections

Our Bush Kindy programs at Lapstone and Possum's Patch have continued to thrive, providing children with unique outdoor learning experiences and building respect for the local Country in their communities. These programs encourage children to connect with nature, fostering their curiosity and creativity. The success of these initiatives is evident in the positive feedback from families and the increased enrolment numbers.

All of our early education centres supported children to participate in local school transitions, either by bus or walking or having schools attend our centres. We know how important this support is for working families and appreciate the above and beyond attitude of our education teams to make this happen.

We've also seen our Early Education teams participate in a variety of community events to strengthen families connections beyond our centres. We recognise an early education centre is many families first experience of using a community program and that our connections to community enable families to build familiarity with other important services.



Governance

A Board of Directors govern Connect and they are elected per Connect's Constitution. The Chair is allocated a stipend and all other Directors are volunteers and come from the broader community representing academia, business and leadership and subject matter experts.

Our Board For FY24 Connect's Board Directors were Rosemary Bishop, Barbara Cuthbert, Andi Salamon, Mike Lee, Kush Bhatia, new members Peggy Ngai and Nolene Walker (joining in November 2023). Barbara Cuthbert stepped down from her position on the Board at the end of the financial year 2024. We acknowledge Barbara's contribution to the governance of Connect, including as Treasurer, and appreciate her always acting with the community's best interests in mind and with the up most respect and care for our Connect team members.

We maintained our registration and reporting requirements with the Australian Non for Profits and Charities Commission (ACNC) as Connect Child and Family Services LTD (ABN 54 617 948 231).

Finance

The 2024 financial year is the first full year of Bunya operations after the merger with Connect in February 2023. Whilst fees have been increased during 2024 to respond to increased wage and other costs, revenue shortfall for the year is evident and impacted Connect's operating result.

NDIS has continued to be an area of close monitoring for Connect. Whilst the investment in Nightingale software has improved insights on staff productivity the ongoing viability of this program has been hampered by lack of increase in NDIS Pricing.

The organisation has felt the increases in cost pressures in 2024, particularly staff and casual wages which has increased dramatically post covid. Significant efforts have been made to convert casual contracts to short term contracts to reduce wage expenses. In addition, we have responded, where possible, to increase fees for services (ECECs) to support struggling services and increased costs.

In the last quarter of the financial year, there was an increased focus organisation wide efficiencies in response to the organisations financial position.

There has been a significant amount of work undertaken to improve the net result in the 25FY budget and ongoing viability of Connect moving forward.

In 24FY, the Board of Directors approved a deficit budget to invest in strategic projects for long-term sustainability. Key factors contributing to the net deficit include:

- **Internal Improvement Projects:** Implementation of new software platforms (HR and Payroll, NDIS).
- **NDIS Operations:** Faced an overall deficit due to stagnant pricing not adjusted for economic pressures since 22FY. The organisation covering costs not met by the price guide.
- **Staff Recruitment Challenges:** Especially in the Allied Health sector, affecting service offerings.
- **Increased Employment Costs:** Higher remuneration and on-costs such as Superannuation, historical leave liabilities and Worker's Compensation, following Fair Work guidelines.



The sector is experiencing economic challenges, including downward pressure on revenue, increased expenditure, and growing community needs. Despite these challenges, Connect continues to support families with high-quality, affordable and accessible services, maintains adequate reserves, and is positioned to invest in the organisation's three-year strategy.

Thank You to Collaborators

We are grateful for the ongoing and continued support of our funding bodies, families and community stakeholders.

A big thank you to all our wonderful collaborators.

- Belong Blue Mountains
- Mountain Outreach Community Services (MOCS)
- Local Public and Independent Schools
- Blue Mountains City Council
- Hey Mel! Communications
- MCR IT
- Employment Innovations
- Kate McKinnon Design
- RoseyRavelston Books
- Gateway Family Services
- Thrive Services

Our funders:

- NSW Department of Communities and Justice
- NSW Department of Education
- Federal Department of Social Services
- Federal Department of Education
- Blue Mountains City Council

We very much appreciate the support from our State Member Trish Doyle MP and our Federal Member Susan Templeman MP and our Blue Mountains City Councillors, Cr Claire West and Deputy Mayor, Cr Romola Hollywood.





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Connect with us

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