

connect

Children and Families

FY26 Annual Report



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

Artist description of "Community"

"We have represented a whole community within this artwork and wanted to articulate the complexities and beauty that this means to us. Community circles are displayed with small arches representing people in the circles, we have also displayed very large arches outside of the circles that depict mountain ranges as they are significant elements of this region, they are decorated to show their sacredness and dreaming stories that they are often a part of. We have created a flowing river that surrounds and entwines through the artwork to depict one's journey on Gundungurra country, river systems are an essential part of life and often were a place to connect with others and be with community. We have depicted the gathering of lomandra and yams — this was often done by the women and children together and was a communal event.

We have added kangaroo and emu tracks to represent a complete community. We have also added the three Black cockatoos that travel in threes and call out together to bring warnings of rain. We have added eucalyptus leaves, waratahs, and bottle brush as they are often used in different ceremonies, and have medicinal purposes." **Artists: Krubi Creative; Clara, Emily and Sharon (2022)**

Photo by Sven Brandsma on Unsplash


Xavier at Possum's Patch

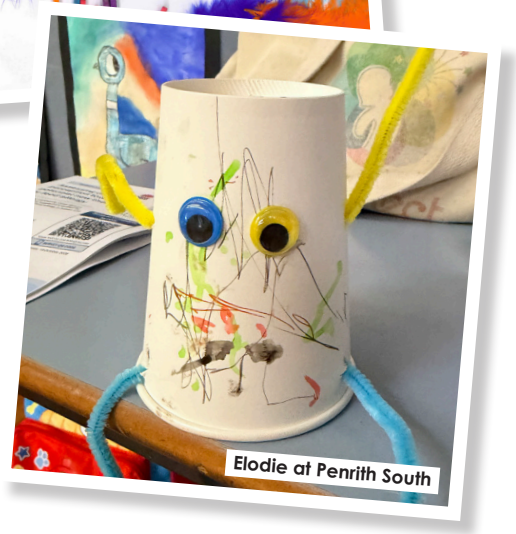
Elodie at Penrith South

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Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash



Chair's Message

2025/6 has been a challenging year and I thank my colleagues on our Board, our wonderful CEO Ann–Marie Ellott and all staff for their persistence and courage as we navigated complex changes together, ensuring that we always kept our focus on children and families first.

Connect inspires me because of our shared values that guide our decisions. I am so proud of our commitment to education and to the joy of play as we value each and every child within our service. This focus brings all of our team together and it has also stretched each and every one of us. As a Board we consider strategy and the direction for Connect in an environment that is underfunded and fraught with compliance requirements which interact with safety, cost and capacity to deliver. I am saddened by the sometime punitive focus of compliance rather than the understanding that children and educators are engaged in a dance that builds resilience and competence, acknowledging that children's risk taking is important. I also hope that the systems of compliance are engaged with the significant challenges that parents face as they balance the daily demands of life and seek the security and safety of Connect.

I am in awe of the way that staff lead the compliance requirements, educational care and family interactions and I am indebted to our Board for their analysis, care and effort to ensure that Connect meets the needs of our children, families and community now and into the future. I am confident in our strategy for the future, and I look forward to working with the Board, staff, families and most importantly every child, to ensure that next year is a happy, connected and adventurous time.


Photo by Aaron Burden on Unsplash

CEO's Message

Connect has always been an organisation with community at its heart. We began when a group of local women in Katoomba identified a need to support young children's development and the parents and carers learning alongside them.

While many aspects of childhood and the role of parents and carers endures through the generations, new opportunities and challenges emerge for each generation as technological, economic and societal norms and expectations evolve.

That is why listening, responding and adapting is essential to how Connect operates and evolves.

Like any organisation doing complex and deeply human work, we do not always get everything right. What matters is what we do next: acknowledging where we could have done better, learning from it, and making changes. When I look back on FY26, what stays with me most is not any single achievement or challenge, but the way our people responded to both — with honesty and care.

This care is reflected in the way families talk about the quality of our programs. They talk about how our people make them and their children feel welcomed, understood, supported and connected. These sentiments are reflected throughout this report.

I would like to thank the children for the joy they bring each day and the art work they have contributed to this report. I extend my thanks to families who work in partnership with us to create the best outcomes for their children and create the beautiful sense of community we share.

In FY26 we strengthened our child-safe practice, achieved National Quality Assessment and Rating outcomes, created environments designed around the needs of our youngest children and strong NDIS mid-term audit, demonstrating the quality of our Connected Abilities program. We established a new program offer for our community programs bringing play and creativity to the forefront of our practice. At 30 June 2026, 118 people along with our wonderful volunteers, contributed to these outcomes for children and families. I am deeply grateful for the care, skill and commitment they bring every day. I also want to acknowledge the federal and NSW governments' efforts to strengthen sector systems that support children, families and the people who work alongside them. We welcome all opportunities to improve the safety of children in our care. At the same time, operationalising new requirements is challenging in a cost-constrained environment where people's priorities and workloads are already clearly defined. Our teams have applied their professionalism, adaptability and heart to the challenge of maintaining focus on the priorities in front of us - the education and care of children - while adopting and adapting to these new ways of working.

To our senior team, thank you. Your leadership, teamwork and determination to keep improving how we work have been extraordinary. More than once, you found a way forward when the way was far from obvious. I feel fortunate to lead alongside you.

To our Board members, who generously give their time and expertise to support our community, thank you for your guidance, trust and stewardship, and for setting a clear direction for our next chapter.

Our FY27–FY31 strategy, *Play. Connect. Thrive.*, builds on what we have learned while keeping children and families firmly at the centre. We will engage constructively with Thriving Kids as it develops, while carefully considering what changes may mean for our workforce, our funding and the long-term sustainability of the programs families rely on.

The year ahead will be demanding, and our priority remains unchanged: every child will be safe, heard, included and treated with dignity and respect. We cherish childhood and we are proud to do this work together.

Ann-Marie Ellott
Chief Executive Officer



Photo by Gautam Arora on Unsplash

Who we are

Guided by our purpose and values, grounded in community and committed to children's rights and cherishing childhood.

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

VISION
Children and families thrive in safe connected communities.

Our values

- We Tune In
- We Connect
- We are Kind
- We Strive for Social Justice
- We All Walk Together
- We Celebrate.

Our programs

We bring together early childhood education and care, community-based early support, family support, transition pathways, developmental supports and programs for children with a disability. These programs share a purpose: supporting children and families in the communities where they live, learn and play.

Our community roots

Connect was born from community action. In Katoomba in 1981, local women recognised that young children with developmental delay or disability, and their families, needed more support close to home. They responded to a gap in their own community. That action became the beginning of Connect.

The story began with listening to families and recognising what was missing. More than four decades later, those beginnings still shape how we work: building relationships, recognising community strengths and responding to local needs.

What started as a grassroots response has grown into an integrated child and family organisation supporting communities across Lithgow, the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury and Western Sydney. Each community brings different strengths, challenges and hopes. Our reach has changed, but the connection between our beginnings and our work today remains clear: children and families need support that is accessible, connected and grounded in everyday life. Our role is to listen and adapt alongside community, staying true to the purpose that inspired those first local women to act.

> *"Everyone here is here for children, children come first."*
> ***Educator, Possum***

The Final Year of our FY24-FY26 Strategic Plan

Birth the three matters

Birth to Three Pedagogy

Connect's Birth to Three Years Pedagogy strengthens how all Connect teams understand, support and advocate for the youngest children in our care. It brings together three foundations: respectful relationships, emotionally secure practice and intentionally designed environments.

The approach draws on recognised frameworks, including Resources for Infant Educarers, the Family Partnership Model, Brain SET design, the Honeycomb Hypothesis and Circle of Security Classrooms. Together, they provide a shared practice language for warm, respectful and developmentally responsive care.

During FY26, teams focused on the everyday moments that matter for babies and toddlers. This included slow and connected care routines, free movement, uninterrupted play, sensitive observation, co-regulation, language-rich interactions and genuine partnership with families.

Professional learning also explored how calm, predictable and engaging environments support children's regulation, curiosity and learning. Teams considered safe floor-based play, open-ended and sensory materials, movement, autonomy and connection with nature.

This work recognises babies and toddlers as capable learners, values families as partners and supports educators to create nurturing, intentional and evidence-informed environments.

Birth to Three Pedagogy in Action

Creating a Space that Invites Connection, Discovery and Belonging

For more than a decade, Heatherbrae has provided a welcoming community space where children and families can connect, play and access support. During FY26, Heatherbrae underwent a significant refresh, creating an environment that more closely reflects Connect's Birth to Three Years Pedagogy and our understanding of how babies and toddlers learn.

The redesign focused on the needs of the youngest children. New low, open shelving allows children to independently access play materials, supporting choice-making, exploration and confidence. Soft play equipment, memory foam mats and comfortable gathering spaces encourage movement, sensory discovery and secure relationships between children and their caregivers.

Importantly, the upgrade was about much more than furniture. The project reflected Connect's commitment to creating environments that act as a "third teacher". Warm, welcoming and predictable spaces help children feel emotionally safe, supporting their ability to explore, communicate and build new understandings of the world around them.

Families have responded positively to the improved environment, with Heatherbrae continuing to provide a trusted soft-entry pathway where parents and carers can build confidence, connect with others and access support during the crucial first years of their child's life.



Reimagining Outdoor Learning for Infants and Toddlers

The completion of Hazelwood's outdoor learning space renovation marked a significant milestone in Connect's journey towards specialised birth-to-three-years practice. The project formed part of a broader vision to create environments that are intentionally designed around the developmental needs of babies and toddlers.

Drawing on principles from Brain-SET design, Childspace consultation and contemporary research into infant and toddler learning, the new outdoor environment was created to support movement, curiosity, sensory exploration and relationship-rich learning. The design includes natural materials, opportunities for safe risk-taking, varied textures and spaces that balance exploration with regulation and rest.

The renovation also addressed practical barriers that had previously limited how children accessed outdoor experiences. A larger and more developmentally responsive space now enables children to spend longer periods engaged in uninterrupted play, following their interests and building confidence through movement and discovery.

For educators, the project reinforced an important shift in practice. Rather than viewing the outdoor environment simply as a playground, the space is now understood as an extension of the curriculum, supporting children's sensory, emotional and thinking brain systems through everyday experiences. The result is an environment where children can participate more fully, develop stronger connections with nature and experience the joy and wonder of childhood through play.

> *"Working here has made me want to stay working in early childhood."*
> ***Educator, Hazelwood***



Photo by BBC Creative on Unsplash



Hazelwood Outdoor Learning Space Renovation

Possum's Patch Room Changes

Designing Environments Around the Needs of Children Under Two

At Possum's Patch, room groupings were changed from birth to three years and three to five years to birth to two years and two to five years. This change responded to higher demand for positions for children under two and prompted the team to reflect deeply on how learning environments and the physical environment could be better utilised to support children's development, safety and wellbeing.

The shift created an opportunity to consider whether each room was being used in ways that matched children's ages, routines and developmental needs. The existing layout created challenges for both children and educators, including limited play space for early learners, sleep areas vulnerable to noise and supervision challenges linked to the building's configuration. A review of the space identified opportunities to create environments that better supported both learning and wellbeing.

The redesign considered how active play, quiet exploration, care routines and rest could be organised more intentionally across the available spaces. Additional play areas increased opportunities for uninterrupted engagement, while proposed improvements to cot room locations, storage and room connections aimed to support calmer routines, stronger supervision and more responsive transitions throughout the day.

Importantly, the room changes reflected the core principles of Connect's Birth to Three Years Pedagogy. Children under two learn through movement, repeated exploration, close relationships and uninterrupted play. By matching room groupings, routines and spaces to these needs, Possum's Patch is helping babies and toddlers feel safe, connected and capable.

People, capability and culture counts

Our strategy recognised that children and families depend on a capable, supported workforce. In FY26, we continued investing in leadership, learning, wellbeing and the systems that support people from recruitment through their working life at Connect.

Investment in people supports the continuity and consistency that children and families need. Learning, shared reflection and practical wellbeing support are part of sustaining that work, particularly when services are responding to changing needs and funding arrangements.

$700k
Federal Wage Grant funding passed on to employees

Up to 15%
wage increase for eligible educators

Investing in our people

We passed Federal Wage Grant funding to eligible educators. This recognised their skills and contribution while supporting a strong, sustainable early childhood workforce.

Employee voice and wellbeing

Connect sought employee feedback through the 2026 Staff Psychological Safety and Values Survey, achieving a participation rate of 69%. The survey analysis identified areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, with priority actions informing ongoing people, culture, and organisational planning.

We placed a focus on supporting employee wellbeing through flexible workplace practices, early support for employees experiencing health, personal or work-related challenges, and return-to-work arrangements that promoted safe, timely and sustainable recovery. Connect strengthened respectful workplace practice and psychosocial safety by clarifying expectations for respectful behaviour, encouraging early identification of workplace concerns, and supporting managers and teams to respond constructively. Other initiatives included access to the Employee Assistance Program, provision of Flu vouchers, and an additional 1,449 hours of paid wellbeing leave for permanent staff across the year, in addition to their statutory leave entitlements.

2026 STAFF SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

A values-driven, supportive and purposeful workplace

69%
participation
66 employees participated across all program and service areas.

97%
purpose and meaning
Agree their work provides a sense of purpose and meaning.

95%
respectful and trusting relationships
Agree workplace relationships are respectful and based on trust.

94%
values reflected in practice
Agree Connect's values are reflected in everyday practice.

90%
safe to speak up
Feel safe to ask questions, raise concerns or admit mistakes.

+45
employee Net Promoter Score
A positive eNPS, indicating strong employee advocacy and a willingness to recommend Connect.

Workforce profile

At 30 June 2026, Connect employed 118 people across early childhood, disability, community and family support and corporate services. Recruitment was a strong operational focus throughout FY26, with 41 new starters appointed during the year. This reflected ongoing workforce demand, the need to fill vacancies quickly and safely, and a continued emphasis on attracting people with the right capability, values alignment and commitment to quality outcomes for children and families. During the same period, 28 employees exited Connect, some following completion of traineeships and others citing the pressure and intense responsibility of leading early childhood centres within the context of the safety reforms. This meant sustained recruitment activity, improved onboarding, and continued investment in workforce retention.

Connect continued to invest in workforce development through its trainee pathway with four new trainees commencing their Certificate III in Early Childhood Education during the year.

Leadership and Dare to Lead™

Connect strengthened leadership capability by clarifying expectations, supporting development and reinforcing accountability. Leadership forums, coaching and targeted development helped managers align priorities, monitor performance and risk, and lead constructive conversations.

Leadership capability remained a key focus throughout FY26, with Connect continuing its investment in Brené Brown's Dare to Lead™ program. A cross-functional group of 10 leaders and key staff participated in workshops delivered across four locations. The group included senior leaders, operational managers, centre leaders and practitioners, supporting organisation-wide participation and shared ownership. This work is assisting us to foster courageous conversations and strengthened accountability, collaboration, trust and continuous improvement across teams.

Organisational Excellence transforms

Our third strategic priority focused on the foundations behind safe and accessible services: governance, reliable systems, using evidence and financial sustainability. In FY26, we continued this work while responding to funding changes and preparing for the next strategic period.

In FY26 we strengthened the organisational Child Safe Framework, including policies, risk oversight, recruitment controls and participation. We completed the NDIS Practice Standards mid-term audit, with continued certification recommended for three registration groups. Work continued on cyber security, responsible artificial intelligence, information governance, document control, helpdesk reporting, policy ownership and administrative workflows, while careful monitoring of enrolments, expenditure and program performance supported revenue and long-term sustainability.

Workplace health and safety remained a priority, with an external WHS consultant reviewing our sites. The reviews identified improvements and staff training needs that now guide our work into FY27.

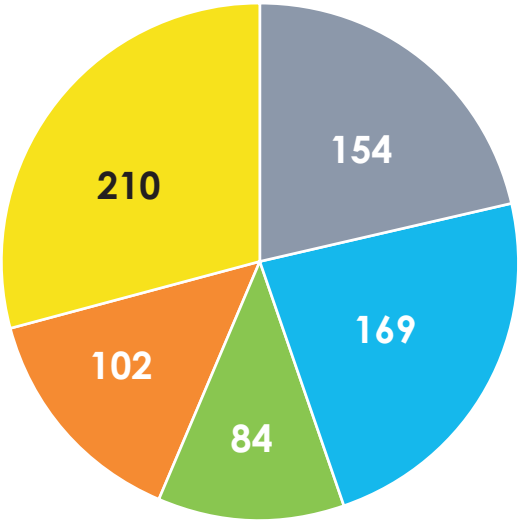
We closed FY26 with revenue of $9.46 million, a surplus of $110,331. The NDIS program deficit reduced from $45,286 in FY25 to $34,055 in FY26. Alongside the audit findings, these results show progress in our organisational foundations, while the remaining program deficit and reduced overall surplus underline the need for continued attention.

Sustainability requires ongoing work, not a single year's result. We carry forward workplace health and safety recommendations, system improvements, clearer accountabilities and stronger data stewardship, and the need for clearer outcome measures. These foundations support all three priorities of Play. Connect. Thrive. and help us assess new opportunities against our capacity, responsibilities and resources.

Our programs and impact: Early Childhood, and Family and Community Programs

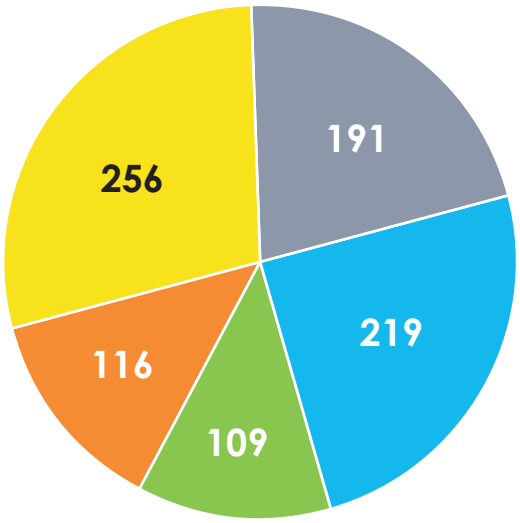
Supporting children and families
Across FY26, Connect Early Childhood Centres supported 719 families and 891 children. Each service created safe, inclusive and welcoming environments where children could learn, participate and belong.

FAMILIES ACCESSING CONNECT EARLY CHILDREN PROGRAMS
791 families across five centres



- Bunya Early Childhood Centre
- Hazelwood Early Childhood Centre
- Possum's Patch Mount Victoria
- Possum Early Childhood Centre
- Lapstone Preschool

CHILDREN ATTENDING CONNECT ECEC CENTRES
891 children across five centres



- Bunya Early Childhood Centre
- Hazelwood Early Childhood Centre
- Possum's Patch Mount Victoria
- Possum Early Childhood Centre
- Lapstone Preschool







Photo by Compagnons on Unsplash

Strengthening child safety

Every child has the right to be safe, heard, included and treated with dignity and respect.

During FY26, Connect strengthened child safety across its services. We aligned policies, practice and learning with national child safety reform requirements and emerging regulatory changes. This work kept children's safety, rights and wellbeing at the centre of decision-making.

Key improvements

- Mandatory child safety training for educators, managers, students, volunteers and people in positions of management and control.
- Progression through the foundation child safety training, building workforce confidence and capability.
- Stronger recruitment and screening, including prohibited person declarations and National Early Childhood Worker Register requirements.
- A consistent organisational Child Safe Framework, supported by policies, a code of conduct, a risk register and a statement of commitment.
- Regular child safety discussions in team meetings and leadership forums, reinforcing shared responsibility and accountability.
- Greater focus on children's participation, including listening to children, teaching protective behaviours and supporting children to raise concerns and seek help.
- More opportunities for families to contribute to child safety discussions, policy reviews and risk assessments.
- Careful use of digital images of children — no longer used in promotional materials.

Together, these improvements strengthened governance, workforce practice, family partnership and a child-safe culture across Connect.

> *"Really proud of how children with additional needs are included and supported."*
>
> ***Educator, Bunya***

> *"Warm, friendly staff. Lots of resources for the children to use. Child centred and focussed. Approachable staff and director. I feel safe and comfortable leaving my children."*
>
> ***Bunya Family Feedback, Oct 2025***





Assessment and Rating success

Assessment and Rating is the national process used to assess early childhood education and care services against the seven Quality Areas of the National Quality Standard (NQS).

Bunya, Hazelwood and Possum Early Childhood Centres achieved strong outcomes this year. Each service demonstrated high-quality practice, meaningful relationships and a clear commitment to continuous improvement.

Hazelwood Early Childhood Centre
In November 2025, Hazelwood achieved an overall rating of Meeting the National Quality Standard across all seven Quality Areas. The assessor highlighted the service's thoughtful educational program and the positive relationships educators build with children, including a strong focus on dignity and rights.

Possum Early Childhood Centre
In April 2026, Possum achieved an overall rating of Meeting the National Quality Standard in its partial assessment. Quality Areas 5 and 6 had previously been rated Exceeding the National Quality Standard. The assessor recognised the use of Floor Books and reflective practice to make children's voices visible and shape the educational program around their interests and emerging ideas.

Bunya Early Childhood Centre
In May 2026, Bunya achieved an overall rating of Meeting the National Quality Standard across all Quality Areas. A key strength was its community partnerships, including intergenerational programs with seniors and connections that enrich children's learning and wellbeing.

The Assessment and rating outcomes reflect the dedication of educators, leaders, and support teams across Connect Children and Families to delivering high-quality early childhood education and care.

"Possums has been a big part of our lives the last few years. It has a good relationship with local schools which is important for transitions. It provides to opportunity for kids to connect with those in their local area. The upgrades have been great and provided a fun playground and a nice indoor area. The environment facilitates lots of free play. The longer hours are great for families with working parents."

Possum Family Feedback, October 2025

"The educators make both me and my child feel seen, heard and respected and I can see this in the relationships that my child is making with her educators and the trust and comfort she has with them. I know she is safe and her needs — emotional, physical, educational — are all being taken into consideration."

Hazelwood Family Feedback, Oct 2025



Community Connections

Community partnerships help children build a sense of belonging, confidence and connection to the world around them.

At **Possum's Patch Mount Victoria**, the Bush Kindy program created rich opportunities for children to learn through play in the natural environment, fostering curiosity, resilience and a deep connection to their local community and surrounds. Beyond the centre gates, children have opportunities to explore bush tracks, observe wildlife, investigate natural materials and engage in imaginative play in ever-changing outdoor environments.

At **Lapstone Preschool,** partnerships with local organisations and schools extend children's learning beyond the preschool setting. Lapstone Preschools location offers many opportunities for the children to experience their local community, including tennis lessons with a professional coach encouraged children's active participation, wellbeing and the development of new skills. While the Buddy Program with Lapstone Public School supports positive relationships and a confident transition to school. Together, these partnerships strengthen children's sense of belonging, promote meaningful participation and create pathways for children and families to thrive within connected communities.

At **Bunya Early Childhood Centre**, children, families and community members were brought together through a meaningful intergenerational program that ran across two terms. The program was a partnership with Springwood Neighbourhood Centre. The program created opportunities for children to build relationships with older community members through shared experiences, conversations and play, fostering connection, empathy and a strong sense of belonging. Children developed confidence and communication skills while gaining an appreciation for different life experiences and perspectives.

> *"We've had a wonderful experience at Possums Patch, what a fantastic team!"*
>
> ***Possum's Patch Family Feedback, Oct 2025***

> *"We love all of it. The teachers, the centre is so lovely and perfect for children. It's such a big part of our lives."*
>
> ***Lapstone Family Feedback, Oct 2025***


Photo by Anna Mysłowska-Kiczek on Unsplash

Building quality educator practice

A strong workforce enables strong outcomes. Connect builds educator capability through professional learning networks, mentoring, coaching and continuous improvement. This approach supports safe, inclusive and high-quality practice across services.

Professional learning networks

Directors take part in leadership and quality improvement forums focused on service improvement, regulatory responsibilities, pedagogical leadership and shared practice. These forums support consistent decision-making and helped services embed child safety reforms.

Educational Leaders meet every six weeks to share resources, discuss research and strengthen leadership practice. They bring this learning back to service teams through mentoring, coaching and professional conversations. During FY26, the network collaborated on implementing the Australian Education Research Organisation Early Childhood Learning Trajectories.

Trainees receive weekly check-ins with Educational Leaders and take part in quarterly Trainee Network events. These opportunities build connection, confidence and professional knowledge while trainees complete their qualifications. Learning topics included play therapy, child safety, songs and finger plays, and planning for learning experiences.

Together, these networks strengthen leadership, shared accountability and collaboration. They help educators learn from one another and improve outcomes for children and families.

AERO Early Childhood Learning Trajectories

In November 2025, Connect began a staged implementation of the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) Early Childhood Learning Trajectories. The trajectories support evidence-informed assessment, planning and intentional teaching across five areas: executive functions, social and emotional learning, mathematical thinking, language and communication, and physical development. We use them alongside the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) to guide how we observe, document and plan for each child's learning and development.

This strengths-based approach recognises every child as a capable, competent and confident learner. It helps educators understand each child's individual pathway, recognise their growing knowledge, skills and capabilities, and plan meaningful, responsive learning experiences.

Implementation included

- Professional learning sessions and team discussions.
- Coaching and modelling from Educational Leaders.
- Integration into planning and documentation processes.
- Ongoing reflection and mentoring to build educator confidence and consistency.

From September 2026, children's learning and development will be assessed using the AERO Early Childhood Learning Trajectories. This next step will support a shared, evidence-informed approach to understanding learning and planning meaningful experiences.

> *"Being in this team, I have gained confidence as an educator."*
> ***Educator, Possum's Patch***





Connected Abilities

Participation. Communication. Learning. Wellbeing.
Connected Abilities provides developmental and disability supports for children and families across the Blue Mountains and Penrith. Its multidisciplinary model brings together occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech pathology and specialist education, with the key worker model at the centre of service delivery.

While NDIS participants remained the primary focus in FY26, the team also contributed to Connect's integrated service approach. This included working with the Pathways Program and supporting inclusion within Connect Early Education so children could participate across the places where they live, learn and play.

A strong NDIS mid-term audit result
Connected Abilities completed its NDIS Practice Standards mid-term audit in April and May 2026. BSI recommended continued certification for Assist-Life Stage, Transition; Early Childhood Supports; and Therapeutic Supports.

The audit found governance and operational management systems proportionate to the organisation's size, scale and supports. It recognised planning, consultation, continuous improvement, qualified staff, legal and regulatory compliance, participant-centred practice, privacy, diversity and supported decision-making.

The audit also recognised strong quality systems, including the use of Folio to manage risks, incidents, feedback, complaints and improvement actions. Participant and family interviews highlighted practical, caring and collaborative support, clear follow-up and the value of services delivered in homes, schools, preschools and day care settings.

> *"I feel proud when I have outgrown my usefulness, because a child has developed independence."*
> ***Practitioner, Connected Abilities***

The result reflected four best-practice indicators: strong governance and quality systems, person-centred and family-informed practice, skilled and well-supported practitioners, and continuous improvement through feedback, risk management and reflective practice.

LEGO®-Based Therapy groups
LEGO®-Based Therapy is an evidence-informed, play-based social communication approach. In structured groups, children work towards a shared build while practising listening, describing, negotiating, turn-taking, problem-solving and repairing misunderstandings.

After accredited facilitator training, Connected Abilities delivered groups during school holiday periods. The groups responded to family interest and supported communication, social participation, emotional regulation and collaborative play in an engaging setting.

Speech Space
Speech Space provided a welcoming and play-based pathway into speech therapy at West End Street, Katoomba.

Sessions were co-constructed with each child and family. By following the child's interests, therapy supported communication, interaction and confidence in natural and meaningful ways. Families participated alongside their child and gained practical strategies to use at home and in everyday routines.

What families told us

Practical impact in everyday life
Families described improvements in communication, emotional regulation, social participation, play, independence, literacy, movement, self-care and transitions into preschool or school.

They valued support delivered in natural environments and the team's coordination with educators and other professionals. Families also highlighted responsive communication, adaptable sessions, familiar therapists and strategies that could be used across home, early childhood and school settings.



Family and Community Programs

Connected. Confident. Supported.
Connect's Family and Community Programs portfolio brings together community engagement, early support, developmental and disability services. Across FY26, we focused on helping children and families connect early, access the right support, and build confidence through key stages of family life.

Teams strengthened a place-based and integrated approach across the Blue Mountains, Penrith and Western Sydney. Low-barrier programs, trusted local relationships and multidisciplinary expertise helped reduce barriers and created pathways between universal, targeted and specialist support.

FY26 also brought significant change. Teams commenced a new NSW Department of Communities and Justice Child and Family Support contract, developed new and refreshed program models, prepared for Thriving Kids opportunities and completed the NDIS mid-term audit. This work strengthened service design, governance and quality while keeping children and families at the centre.

The professionalism, adaptability and care of our teams made this progress possible. Their work reflects Connect's commitment to inclusive practice, meaningful relationships and strong communities.

> *"I feel that it is a fantastic program to provide support to families and connect vulnerable carers who may face social isolation otherwise"*
> ***Playgroup Family Feedback, FY26***

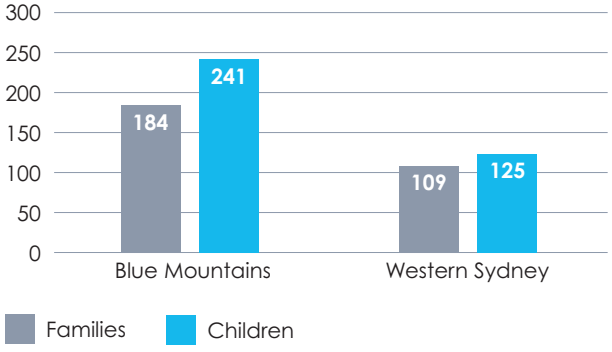
Connect Early

Early connection. Practical support. Strong communities.
Connect Early brings together community-based early support programs across the Blue Mountains and Western Sydney. Through playgroups, family support, transition pathways, and community partnerships, families can connect, build confidence, and access support when and where they need it.

A major FY26 milestone was the commencement of the new NSW Department of Communities and Justice Child and Family Support contract in January 2026. The transition concluded Connect's Transition to School programs and created an opportunity to reshape the community-based early support offer around current family and community needs.

Under the new contract, Connect introduced Creative Arts Therapy-supported playgroups "Create, Connect and Play", prepared for the relaunch of the much-loved Connect and Nurture programs, and strengthened supported playgroup delivery through a locally led model.

REACH AND PARTICIPATION







Locally led supported playgroups
Connect developed its locally led supported playgroup model during the first half of FY26 as part of NSW Department of Communities and Justice Child and Family Support program preparations. Rather than applying one fixed program, teams used family voice, practitioner knowledge, local partnerships and community need to shape welcoming and responsive programs.

Weekly playgroups, school holiday events and other accessible engagement opportunities supported participation across geographically dispersed communities. The flexible approach supported families experiencing isolation, transport barriers, long service waits, or difficulty accessing early childhood education and care.

Qualified facilitators, family workers, and educators balanced intentional planning with child-led play. Warm relationships created opportunities for early conversations about development, parenting, wellbeing, transition and family needs, followed by warm referrals when needed.

Create, Connect and Play
From April 2026, Create, Connect and Play, led by creative arts therapist, used shared art-making, sensory exploration, music, movement, storytelling and imaginative play to strengthen identity, belonging, communication and confidence.

The program offered a welcoming, non-stigmatising first point of connection. Children could discover and express ideas through play, while parents and carers observed strengths, shared experiences, received informal guidance and built confidence to support play, communication and emotional development at home.

The model aligns with supported playgroup outcomes and the themes of identity, belonging, connection, nurture, support, discovery, language and culture. It also created opportunities for early identification, timely referral and stronger links with community supports.

Start Strong Pathways
NSW Department of Education Start Strong Pathways funding supported Connect's partnership with Gateway Family Services at Winmalee Playgroup, Heatherbrae Playgroup in Lawson and the Pathways Program. Together, these initiatives supported participation, belonging and early learning while building family confidence and familiarity with early childhood and school settings.



Photo by Jerry Wang on Unsplash

Our Governance

Connect is governed by a volunteer Board whose members bring experience across community leadership, finance, strategy, technology, health, early childhood education, clinical practice, quality and risk. Together, the Board provides stewardship, oversight and strategic direction so Connect can remain safe, sustainable and responsive to children, families and communities.

Rosemary Bishop | Chairperson
Brings organisational development, business and community-sector executive experience, with a strong background in governance, service integration and sustainable delivery across children's services, disability and aged care.

Kushagra Bhatia | Deputy Chair
Brings more than 20 years of senior leadership in transformation, strategy and operations across public and private sectors, including large-scale change, governance and technology-enabled, human-centred solutions.

Peggy Ngai | Treasurer
Chartered Accountant with senior financial management experience across public and private sectors, bringing strong financial governance, commercial insight and community commitment.

Alan Crooks | Company Secretary and Director
Brings information technology, community-service and governance experience, including previous service on the Springwood Neighbourhood Centre Board.

Christine McLeod | Director
Retired clinical psychologist with child and family community-health experience in the Nepean Blue Mountains, complemented by community governance experience.

Louise Redmond | Director
Social worker and educator with experience in organisational development, community advocacy, environmental and refugee support, governance, early childhood development and work with Aboriginal communities.

Kelly Thompson | Director
Healthcare leader and researcher whose experience spans nursing, public health, clinical practice, research operations, academic leadership and strategic partnerships.

William David Thompson | Director
Registered nurse and senior executive with extensive experience in operations, quality and risk across aged care, retirement living and home care.

With thanks to Michael Lee and Andrea Salamon
During FY2026, Michael Lee and Andrea Salamon concluded their service as Directors. Michael brought medical, healthcare, regulatory, executive and governance expertise to the Board and its People and Culture work. Andrea brought deep knowledge of early childhood education, infant pedagogy, research and practice, including valuable insight through the Birth to Three Practice Committee. We thank Michael and Andrea for the time, care and expertise they shared with Connect, and for their contribution to better outcomes for children, families and communities.

Our Finances

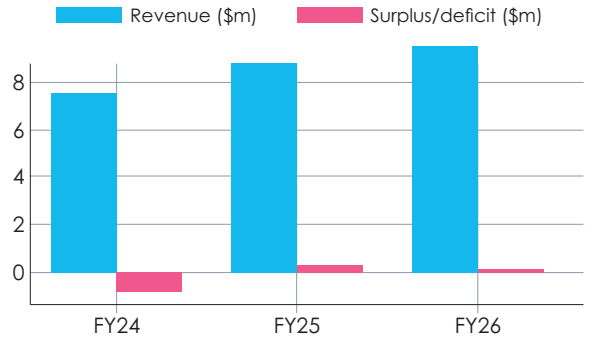
Connect remains well placed to support quality services for children, families and our community.

Where our funding comes from
Early Childhood Education and Care fee income remains our largest revenue source. Government funding partnerships also support services across Connect.

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

A strong foundation, with disciplined attention to financial sustainability

$9.46	$110k	$3.69m	$2.84m
revenue	surplus	cash and short-term deposits	net assets



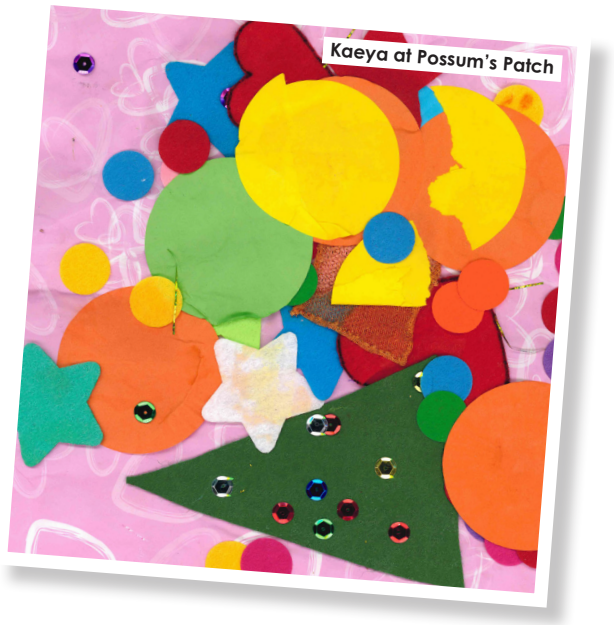
FY2026 at a glance

FY2026 was another positive year for Connect. We grew our services, invested in our people and carefully managed our resources. Revenue increased by 8.4%, and Connect finished the year with a $110,331 surplus.

$9.46m
REVENUE

OPERATING REVENUE BY FUNDING SOURCE

Funding source	Share of revenue
ECEC fee income	56.7%
NSW Department of Education	17.5%
NSW Department of Communities & Justice	8.3%
NDIS revenue	8.2%
Federal Department of Education	7.1%
Other income	1.9%
Other grants	0.1%

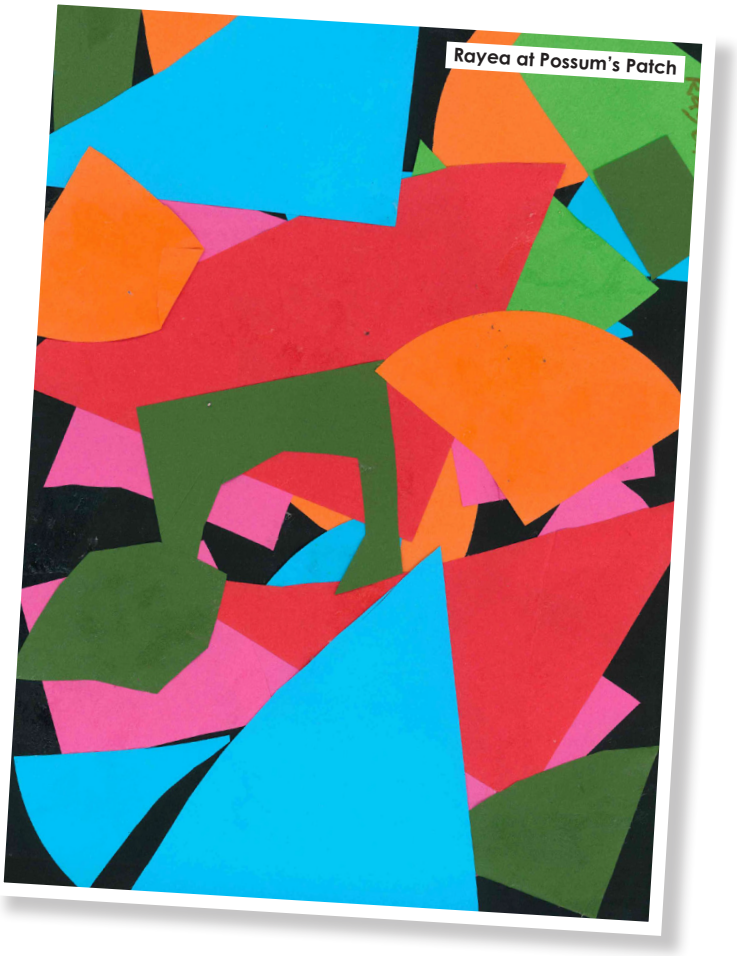

Kaeya at Possum's Patch


Rose at Possum's Patch

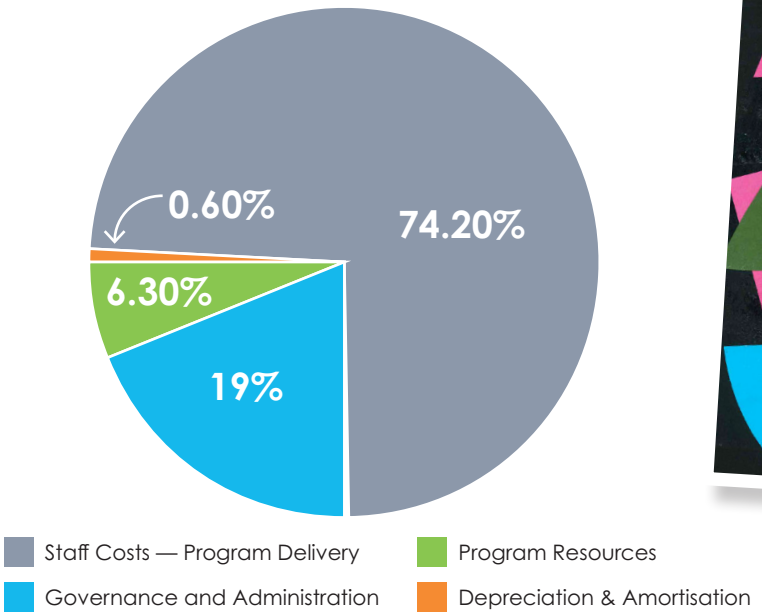

Lorelei at Possum's Patch

Our Finances

Monitoring enrolments and expenditure, alongside growth strategies at Possum and Hazelwood, supported stronger revenue in FY2026. The NDIS program deficit reduced from $45,286 in FY25 to $34,055 in FY26, but remains a sustainability issue requiring attention in FY27. Continued improvements to systems, automation and financial processes will support the careful assessment of future initiatives under our Play. Connect. Thrive. Strategic Plan.



WHERE OUR EXPENSES GO



Almost three-quarters of expenditure supports staff delivering services to children and families. Governance and administration includes Business Support,central ECEC support Senior Management/Board and other organisation-wide costs.

REVENUE BY PROGRAM

Revenue was distributed across Early Childhood Education and Care, community programs, the Connected Abilities (NDIS funded) and other activities.

21.5% Bunya ECEC	**18.6%** Hazelwood ECEC	**15.1%** Possum ECEC
11.1% Lapstone Preschool ECEC	**10.8%** Possum's Patch ECEC	**9.1%** Community Development & Transition to School
8.2% Connected Abilities (NDIS)	**3.7%** Flexible Initiatives Trial – Possum and Hazelwood Funding	**1.9%** Other income and finance activities

Accounting note
Change to accrual accounting for wages resulted in a one-off $203,894 adjustment to opening retained earnings. This affected reported net assets but did not reduce the FY2026 operating surplus.


Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash

Our Future

FY26 closed one strategic chapter and prepared the ground for another. Across FY24–FY26, our focus on the earliest years, people and organisational foundations shaped the work reported here: shared pedagogy and learning environments, investment in workforce support, and continued attention to safety, systems and sustainability.

Our Board and Senior Team met in February 2026 and in consultation with our whole staff team, we acknowledged the work still to be done: clearer outcome measures, sustained improvements across the employee lifecycle and ongoing responses to funding uncertainty. These lessons are part of what we carry forward.

These conversations have led to our new five year strategy Play. Connect. Thrive. It focuses our shared effort around three priorities:

- **Enable Every Child:** Every child has the right to meaningfully participate and belong.
- **Empower Families:** The first five years matter the most.
- **Enhance Team Impact:** A strong team enables strong outcomes.

It builds on the previous strategy while making the connection between children's experiences, family support and our team's contribution more explicit. Our purpose, values, commitment to children's rights and place-based approach remain the thread between these chapters.

While we enter FY27 from a strong foundation, we also recognise the need to carefully navigate uncertainty and change in government funding mechanisms, including the NSW Government's Start Strong and Thriving Kids reforms.

Our focus remains on keeping Connect sustainable, responsive and well placed to support children, families and our community into the future.

We also acknowledge that our world is changing rapidly and that having a shared clear direction and the capacity to learn and adapt will both be essential. From community action in 1981 to the work of FY26 and the direction ahead, our purpose remains grounded in children and families. We will keep listening, learning and working together — cherishing childhood and supporting communities where children and families can play, connect and thrive.

Photo by Stephen Andrews on Unsplash



PLAY. CONNECT. THRIVE

FY27-FY31 STRATEGIC PLAN

100 Languages

The Hundred Languages of Children

The child
is made of one hundred.
The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking.
A hundred always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.
The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.
The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and Christmas.
They tell the child:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.
They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.
And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.

Loris Malaguzzi *(translated by Lella Gandini)*

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connect
Children and Families

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