

Submission on the Early Childhood Education Funding Review

New Zealand Speech-language Therapists' Association (NZSTA)

6 August 2026

NZSTA supports in principle the proposal to introduce funding for additional needs based on individual children. Our submission is limited to ensuring that children with speech, language and communication needs are explicitly included and are not disadvantaged by funding settings that favour full-day or inflexible attendance.

About NZSTA

The New Zealand Speech-language Therapists' Association (NZSTA) is the professional association and self-regulatory body for speech-language therapists in Aotearoa New Zealand. Established in 1946, NZSTA has over 1,500 members.

NZSTA's comments are limited to how the proposed funding changes may affect the access and participation of children with speech, language and communication needs.

Scope of our submission

NZSTA recognises that this review concerns funding paid directly to early childhood education providers. Funding delivered through other channels, including curriculum and learning support, is expressly outside the scope of the review.

Our submission therefore does not address access to speech-language therapy or the wider provision of specialist learning support. We also do not take a position on the broader ECE funding system, teacher pay, fee assistance or certificated teacher funding bands.

Option 1e: individual funding for children with additional needs

NZSTA supports Option 1e—to introduce a funding stream for additional needs based on individual children—in principle.

NZSTA recognises that the Ministerial Advisory Group's recommendations must be fiscally neutral and that any increase in targeted funding will require reallocation elsewhere within the ECE funding system. NZSTA does not take a position on where those offsets should fall. However, the design of Option 1e should ensure that funding is sufficient to provide meaningful support and does not simply spread existing funding more thinly across a wider group of eligible children.

The consultation indicates that Equity B funding is currently allocated based on service-level characteristics. As a result, some services enrolling children with additional needs may not receive additional funding. Option 1e is intended to target funding more accurately to the needs of individual children.

NZSTA considers this a positive direction. However, the proposal does not expressly identify speech, language and communication needs within the definition of additional needs. Without explicit recognition, there is a risk that these needs may be overlooked, particularly where a child does not have a formal diagnosis or their needs are less immediately visible.

The Ministry of Education reports that demand for specialist learning support services has increased by 26 per cent since 2017/18. It attributes longer wait times, particularly for Communication and Early Intervention Services, to rising demand, workforce constraints and increasingly complex needs. In 2024/25, the average wait was 79.94 days for the Communication Service, against a target of 75 days, and 116.93 days for the Early Intervention Service, against a target of 90 days. A March 2025 Ministry briefing also identified 3,000 children on the Early Intervention Service waitlist. Children develop communication through their everyday interactions, relationships, play and participation in early childhood settings. Where speech-language therapists are involved, effective support often relies on kaiako and whānau being able to use agreed-upon communication strategies consistently in everyday routines. Individual additional-needs funding should therefore enable ECE providers to respond meaningfully to a child's functional communication and participation needs. This does not replace specialist learning support, which is outside the scope of this review.

NZSTA recognises that an approach based on functional need will require a clear and nationally consistent eligibility process. That process should be proportionate, avoid creating a new assessment bottleneck, and allow decisions to draw on information from whānau, kaiako and relevant professionals without requiring a formal diagnosis in every case.

NZSTA recommends that:

- eligibility explicitly includes speech, language and communication needs, including the needs of children who use augmentative and alternative communication or communicate in ways other than speech
- eligibility is determined through a simple and nationally consistent process based on the functional effect of a child's needs on access, communication and participation, without requiring a formal diagnosis in every case
- individual additional-needs funding is available wherever an eligible child is enrolled and is allocated according to the child's needs, rather than the socioeconomic characteristics of the service or any service-level equity index, and
- the purpose and permitted use of the funding are sufficiently clear to ensure that it supports the child's participation in ECE.

Access to suitable and flexible attendance

The consultation recognises that children with additional needs may require fewer hours of attendance each day, and that this can create an access barrier when services prioritise full-day enrolments, as these are more financially viable.

NZSTA is concerned that children with communication needs should not be disadvantaged by the need for additional support or a more flexible attendance pattern. Linking funded hours to individual children rather than to child places would mitigate any risks.

The design of any individual child-based funding should therefore:

- not depend on a child attending full days or a minimum number of hours
- support access to attendance patterns that are appropriate for the individual child
- avoid creating incentives for services to decline enrolment or restrict attendance because a child has additional needs, and
- support genuine inclusion and participation, rather than attendance alone.

Relationship with learning support

Any new direct-to-provider funding must complement, rather than replace, existing learning support and specialist services.

It should not be assumed that funding paid to an ECE provider removes the need for access to speech-language therapy or other specialist support. These services sit outside the scope of this review and must continue to be planned and funded through the appropriate learning-support channels.

Conclusion

NZSTA supports Option 1e in principle. Its potential benefit will depend on whether communication needs are explicitly recognised and whether the funding design enables children to access and participate in ECE in ways that are appropriate for them.

Our key recommendations are that individual additional-needs funding:

1. explicitly includes speech, language and communication needs
2. is based on functional need rather than diagnosis alone
3. does not disadvantage children requiring flexible or shorter attendance; and
4. complements rather than replaces specialist learning-support services.

Source document: *Early Childhood Education Funding Review Ministerial Advisory Group consultation, have your say on how the government spends money on early childhood education, 30 June 2026.*

Ministry of Education. (2025). *Annual report 2025 (pp. 32–33). Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga.*

Ministry of Education. (2025, 12 March). *Report: B25 package for submission to the Minister of Finance (METIS No. 1344301), Annex 4, p. 1.*