



# Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation

## 2026 Pre-Budget Submission

### Message from the CEO

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation welcomes the opportunity to make a pre-budget submission to the 2026-2027 Australian Government budget.

Having previously served as Chairperson of the UK's School Food Trust and the Children's Food Trust, I have extensive experience in food policy and in improving school food systems. This work was recognised with the honours of Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) and Deputy Lieutenant (DL). I was awarded a distinguished talent visa for this work by the Federal Government to secure entry to Australia in 2015.

I have recently joined the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, and firmly believe the Foundation is uniquely positioned to improve the lives of children and young people at scale.

For more than two decades, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation has been driving a national movement to embed lifelong positive food behaviours and attitudes in children and young people through fun, hands-on food education in schools, early childhood services and communities. The majority of our work supports children and families in regional/remote communities and those experiencing socio-educational inequities.

Our globally recognised Kitchen Garden Program empowers children and young people to build the skills, confidence and knowledge that underpin healthy, fulfilling lives to connect and feed communities. What began as a grassroots movement has grown to include over 1,000 early childhood services, primary schools and secondary schools across Australia.

Right now, close to 2,000 schools and early childhood services have submitted EOIs to join the Kitchen Garden Program. That's roughly 390,000 children – and their families – standing by to receive our advice, guidance and support around one of life's most critical enablers: Food.

Across Australia, educators report that participation in our Kitchen Garden Program improves student attendance and learning, bolsters school food relief and increases children's willingness to try fresh, healthy food. These benefits ripple outward – supporting our place-based projects, feeding families, strengthening community resilience, and creating food-based solutions at a local neighbourhood level.

Our national, scalable and place-based approach is not only aligned with Government commitments — it is a cost-effective, preventative investment that will deliver returns for decades.

Investment in the Foundation is a cross-sector solution, achieving impact across:

Area	Focus / Impact
Preventive health	Improving dietary behaviours and reducing lifetime risk of chronic conditions
Education and school engagement	Enhancing student wellbeing, attendance, and hands-on learning
Mental health	Supporting calm, sensory-rich, practical activities that help children self-regulate
Social cohesion and equity	Strengthening inclusion and giving all children access to essential life skills, regardless of background
Climate and sustainability	Embedding environmental stewardship through composting, food-waste reduction, and sustainable gardening practices

Australia is facing rising diet-related disease, alarming equity gaps, and growing pressures on families and school systems. The Government must commit to stable, equitable funding to ensure that every child — regardless of postcode, background, or school resources — can receive high-quality, hands-on food education and improved food access.

Thank you for considering this request and for your continued leadership in shaping a healthier, more resilient future for all Australians.

Rob Rees MBE DL  
CEO  
Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation

## Calling for multi-year investment

The Kitchen Garden Foundation has received no funding from the Australian Government since 2015. We're appealing to the Australian Government to support communities experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage by responding to our registered unmet demand across 1,976 schools and early childhood services across Australia.



Map of registered unmet demand for the Kitchen Garden Program as of January 2026

## Renewed federal investment will deliver:

- **Improved health, education and social outcomes for up to 390,000 children** through practical food education in schools, communities and early childhood services.
- **State-based coordinators leading place-based strategies** to address food insecurity, school disengagement and population-level health and sustainability challenges.
- **Expanded, national access for schools and early childhood services**, with a focus on communities experiencing disadvantage.
- **Stronger local partnerships and collaboration** across education, health and community sectors.
- **Authentic co-design with communities**, ensuring solutions reflect local needs, culture and priorities.

## Funding of \$350,000 pa over 3 years

1. **Equip 60 schools/early childhood services (20 per year)** with our hands-on food education program with wrap-around support, including curriculum-linked learning resources and professional development.
2. **Allocate a cash grant between \$1,500 to \$5,000** per school/early childhood service to boost kitchen or garden infrastructure to embed food education sustainably.
3. **Directly support 1 x Kitchen Garden Program Coordinator** to match 60 schools/early childhood services from our unmet demand and help them reach their self-determined goals.

## Funding of \$750,000 pa over 3 years

1. **Equip 420 schools/early childhood services (20 per year, per State/Territory)** with our hands-on food education program with wrap-around support, including curriculum-linked learning resources and professional development.
2. **Allocate a cash grant between \$1,500 to \$5,000** per school/early childhood service to boost kitchen or garden infrastructure to embed food education sustainably.
3. **Directly support 7 x Kitchen Garden Program Coordinators (1 per State/Territory)** to identify and coordinate 420 schools/early childhood services matched to our unmet demand.
  - We are leaders in community place-based projects that centre on food system solutions driven by local knowledge and priorities. Our approach has been proven 5 times more effective for community level change than areas without our support.<sup>1</sup>
  - This role underscores the growing evidence of investing in state-level leadership to ensure nutritious food is a fundamental part of preventative health.
  - Hiring dedicated coordinators for three years will support each State/Territory to expand and strengthen local food solutions to better meet the health and nutrition needs of schools and early childhood services.
4. **An annual in-person professional development day** in each State/Territory to facilitate community food education, peer-to-peer learning and educator training.
5. **Provide high quality, in-person support** to our existing Kitchen Garden Program educators.

## Funding of \$2m pa over 3 years

1. **Equip 7 x priority areas of need (one per State/Territory) with place-based support.** Our proven "place-based projects model" builds the capability of community leaders and provides hands-on food education for children and families in the places they live, learn and play.
  - Priority areas will be matched to our unmet demand in each State/Territory focusing on low ICSEA schools, low SES and remote locations with entrenched disadvantage and barriers to accessing fresh, nutritious food.
2. **Enable a minimum of 315 schools, early childhood services and/or community settings (approx. 15 per year, per priority area)** with our hands-on food education program with wrap-around support, including curriculum-linked learning resources and professional development.

3. **Directly support 7 x Project Leads (one per community project)** to partner with schools, community groups, and local organisations, to uncover, nurture, and mobilise change to improve the health, wellbeing and engagement of children and young people in the community.
  - We are leaders in community place-based projects that centre on food system solutions driven by local knowledge and priorities. Our approach has been proven 5 times more effective for community level change than areas without our support.<sup>1</sup>
  - We prioritise recruiting locally, so our ‘boots on the ground’ have deep local knowledge, an understanding of community needs and a passion for their local community.
  - This will be achieved through our evidence-backed place-based projects model which includes local consultation, co-design and practical, hands-on work at the community level.
4. **An annual in-person professional development day** in each priority community to facilitate hands-on food education, peer-to-peer learning and educator/community leader training.
5. **Provide high quality, in-person support to our existing educators** who already deliver the Kitchen Garden Program.

## The cost of food relief

While food relief plays a critical role in meeting immediate needs for individuals and families — it is a short-term response rather than a long-term solution. Food literacy and education are essential for long-term change, whereas relief alone does not build the capacity for families to make healthier food choices or manage food budgets sustainably. Food relief initiatives vary widely in quality, availability, and nutritional value and cannot guarantee children access to adequate, nutritious food every day.<sup>2</sup>

- In 2025 more than \$460 million over five years was committed to food relief and financial wellbeing support.
- The Federal Government announced \$14.4 million in additional funding for 2023–24, distributed across 192 Emergency Relief providers. Another funding boost of \$4.9 million was announced to help meet rising demand, including in regional and remote areas.

To genuinely address food insecurity, relief efforts must be paired with food education. The Kitchen Garden Program and our place-based work improve children’s nutrition knowledge, eating habits, and long-term health outcomes, build food literacy and agency, and improve reliable access to fresh, nutritious and culturally appropriate food — outcomes that food relief alone cannot achieve. By investing in education, skills development, and opportunities that empower people to participate in food systems, government can enable the shift from ongoing dependence on relief services toward sustainable, long-term health and wellbeing.

## The cost of chronic disease

Prevention-focused interventions deliver stronger economic benefits by reducing future demand on public health services. Schools have been identified by the World Health Organization as effective settings for population-level health promotion, offering a strategic opportunity for early intervention that shapes long-term health outcomes.

- A 2021 study by World Obesity and RTI International found the economic impact of obesity in Australia in 2019 to be \$24 billion, or 1.7% of GDP, projected to reach \$103 billion or 2.5% of GDP by 2060.<sup>3</sup>
- It is estimated that for every \$1 invested in preventative public health, \$14 is generated in return to the wider health and social economy.<sup>4</sup>
- Obesity and overweight are also correlated to cancer risk, with 30–50% of all cancer cases being preventable by following a healthy diet and lifestyle, according to the World Cancer Research Fund.<sup>5</sup>

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation delivers life-changing food education to improve nutrition literacy and food behaviours, presenting a ready mechanism for advancing government objectives to reduce chronic disease burden and minimise downstream health expenditure.

## The cost of school disengagement

School disengagement isn't just an education issue — it's an economic one. Failing to keep young people engaged in school leads to large national costs, both fiscal and social.<sup>6</sup> The long-term financial strain on individuals and governments includes accumulated costs across health, employment, welfare, and productivity. Research consistently shows that early intervention yields the highest return.

- The Mitchell Institute estimates that having 38,000 19-year-olds not achieve Year 12 costs taxpayers \$315 million every year, and more than \$12.6 billion over their lifetimes.<sup>7</sup>
- Early school leaving and disengagement create significant lifetime economic losses, including: lower earnings, higher private health costs and increased public expenditure due to reduced tax contributions.<sup>8</sup>

The work of our Foundation directly supports student engagement and sense of belonging. A community survey revealed that 97% of student respondents feel excited to go to school on Kitchen Garden Program day and 77% of parents/carers said that their child's enthusiasm is increased on program days. Independent academic research highlights that the program is particularly effective in engaging reluctant classroom learners and children with challenging behaviours.

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program is recognised by ARACY for wellbeing in education through demonstrated impact in all six domains of the Nest, and has been evaluated for inclusion on the ACER Wellbeing Program Guide, the Be You (Beyond Blue) Programs Directory, and State wellbeing in education panels and catalogues.<sup>9</sup>

# Enquiries

With more than two decades of demonstrated national impact and strong governance systems, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation has a trusted track record of managing public funds responsibly while achieving measurable outcomes at scale.

In alignment with the objectives of the National Obesity Strategy, the National Preventative Health Strategy, and the Productivity Commission's proposed National Prevention Investment Framework, an upstream investment in our evidence-based model enables government to support the holistic wellbeing of children and young people, reduce future demand on health and social services, and support resilient, food secure communities across Australia.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss our submission in further detail.

Contact:

Rob Rees MBE DL

CEO

rob.rees@kitchengardenfoundation.org.au

0417 660 227

Hayley McKee

Corporate Affairs Manager

hayley.mckee@kitchengardenfoundation.org.au

03 8415 1993

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation. (2024). *Healthy Kids Advisors Impact Report 2021–2024*. <https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/sites/default/files/Files/HKA%20Impact%20Report%202021%20to%202024.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Mossenson, S., Giglia, R., Pulker, C. E., Chester, M., & Pollard, C. M. (2023). Dietary risk of donated food at an Australian food bank: An audit protocol. *BMC Nutrition*, 9(1), 67. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40795-023-00719-8>

<sup>3</sup> Okunogbe, A., Nugent, R., Spencer, G., Ralston, J., & Wilding, J. (2021). *Economic impacts of overweight and obesity: Current and future estimates for eight countries*. *BMJ Global Health*, 6(10), e006351. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-006351>

<sup>4</sup> Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care. (2023). *Health protection, preventive health and sport – Budget 2023–24*. <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/health-protection-preventive-health-and-sport-budget-2023-24.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Kerschbaum, E., & Nüssler, V. (2019). *Cancer prevention with nutrition and lifestyle*. *Visceral Medicine*, 35(4), 204–209. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000501776>

<sup>6</sup> Lamb, S., & Huo, S. (2024). *The costs of failing to be inclusive: An analysis based on education in Australia*. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion in Education* (pp. 144–161). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003282921-11>

<sup>7</sup> Lamb, S., & Huo, S. (2017). *Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education* (Report No. 02/2017). Mitchell Institute. <https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/educational-opportunity/counting-the-costs-of-lost-opportunity-in-australian-education>

<sup>8</sup> Lamb, S., & Huo, S. (n.d.). *Cost of disengagement*. Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne. <https://education.unimelb.edu.au/industry-reports/report-1-those-who-disappear/report-child-pages/cost-of-disengagement>

<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation. (2025). *School belonging through the Kitchen Garden Program*. <https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/school-belonging-kitchen-garden-program>