



Who are we?

Bridge Darebin is a community-based, not-for-profit, social enterprise, neighbourhood house and adult learning organisation based in Preston and Thornbury, suburbs in the inner north of Melbourne. As part of our suite of community services, we have delivered licensed Occasional Care for the past 24 years. Initially operating 2 services, we were forced to close one in 2020 because it was no longer financially viable. We now operate one 20-child service from Thornbury.

What do we see as the problem?

Our Early Childhood and Education care system(s) has an inherent problem when the State and Federal bodies responsible for the services do not even understand or know about Occasional Care services in Victoria. Case in point; Occasional Care is not even mentioned in the first paragraph of the Call for Submission document. See below:

Page 3 - Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

The Australian Government has asked the Productivity Commission to undertake an inquiry into the early childhood education and Care (ECEC) sector, including centre-based day care, preschools, family day care, in-home Care and outside school hours care.

Where does Occasional Care factor in this description? It doesn't, which has been a problem for the past decade. With the erosion of Occasional Care funding between 2016 and 2020, this valuable service is in jeopardy of disappearing altogether. Without annual funding and a change in the eligibility criteria for State and Federal grants to enable infrastructure upgrades and support for children with additional needs, Occasional Care services will continue to close.

The last 10 years have seen the number of Victorian Neighbourhood Houses offering this service decline from around 150 in 2011 to just 88 today.

Why is Occasional Care so special?

Historically Neighbourhood Houses have been the largest provider of Occasional Care services within the state of Victoria. The primary function of occasional care services within neighbourhood houses (NH) is to offer affordable, short (3 hours) or long day (7 hours) Care for the children of vulnerable local families. Over the past 24 years at Bridge Darebin, we have provided this Care to support women studying our adult education classes, newly arrived migrants studying English, refugees and women who have just escaped family violence and need to deal with the Courts, Centrelink and other support agencies. If no short-notice care is available, children are forced to relive the trauma every time they sit beside their parent and hear the facts retold. Historically, Occasional Care such as this was provided free or low-cost to offer an inclusive service for those who do not qualify for any supported childcare. In other words, this free service is no longer available for the most vulnerable families in our local community.

Occasional Care such as ours also provides a valuable alternative to long-day Care for part-time working parents. Currently, 71% of our families use our service to enable carers to participate in part-time work.

What has gone wrong?

The government funding that enabled us to offer free or low-cost Care has been steadily eroding since 2016. It ceased altogether in 2020, and this funding was redirected to establishing the new Victorian Early Years Management system, which entirely leaves children from birth to 3 years of age out in the cold. Consequently, community-based organisations like ours had three choices; become CCS registered under National law and pseudo-long day-care to survive, become a funded 3- or 4-year-old kindergarten, or eventually close. All three choices, remove the original concept of Occasional Care. One look at the DET website best demonstrates the lack of Government knowledge about what Occasional Care really is: *"Occasional Care helps parents and carers with less formal needs, like needing 2 hours for an appointment or to rest every now and again."* No, it's not! Occasional Care offers an opportunity for community-based supportive Care that cannot be found anywhere else and often in times of crisis for the whole family.

The complexity of Occasional Care licensing renders us caught between Federal regulations as a Child Care Subsidy (CCS) registered service and Victorian Children's Services regulations as an Occasional Care (limited hours) service operating within Victoria. Our educator to child ratios cost us more in wages than every other State also, which is great for the children but places greater strain on our viability. All this in an industry where there is a chronic staff shortage. So ironically our unfunded type of childcare costs more to run through staff wages than any other type of Care in this country.

What does this mean for the future of our occasional care service at Bridge Darebin? We have become CCS registered, increased fees, offered minimum 7-hour bookings, no longer provide free childcare to those that need it most and alarmingly, without external funding within the next three years, we will close due to a lack of financial viability.

What does Occasional Care need to be able to survive?

It needs recognition and understanding at a State and Federal level that it is not only one of several licensed ECEC services but is uniquely placed to support some of the most vulnerable families in our communities. The eligibility for grants needs to be widened to enable us to apply for infrastructure grants. Currently, the eligibility for these grants requires us to be a "funded service". That is a bittersweet irony. We receive no funding to run our service. Because we receive no funding we are ineligible for both State and Federal infrastructure grants. Yet, we are governed by both levels of Government.

The current focus on 3- and 4-year-old kinder does not consider community-based ECEC services that support children from birth to 3 years of age. We are ineligible to have professionals attend our service to assess under 3 year olds who are not reaching their milestones and show evidence of learning delay. This eligibility also needs to change so children with additional needs can be assessed within the services and become eligible for one-on-one support to succeed in their education.

At a Federal level, CCS-registered Occasional Services in Victoria must be recognised as critical players in the ECEC space and become eligible for the same funding opportunities and support that 'funded' services are eligible for.

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