

Higgins Public Submission:
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Inquiry

15 February 2024

Dear Productivity Commission,

In my capacity as the Federal Member representing Higgins, I am submitting this letter to offer insights to help inform the inquiry in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in Australia. The comments provided herein were gathered from written submissions by residents of Higgins, reflecting their experiences and concerns regarding ECEC services. It is important to note that families in Higgins pay the highest childcare costs in Victoria.

I commend the Commission for its commitment to addressing the obstacles that families encounter in accessing affordable, accessible, and high-quality ECEC services.

Staffing and Management Stability in Childcare Centres

In their search for suitable childcare, one of parents' primary focus is on staffing stability and the longevity of staff within the centre. A concerned parent noted, 'staff turnover appears to be a huge issue in childcare, not only among the carers but also in management.'

The impact of inconsistent care due to changes in staff and management could be detrimental to the well-being of the children. Another parent shared their experience, saying 'we are now at our third centre after facing significant care issues with changing management.'

Financial Challenges

Perhaps the most pressing challenge for parents in Higgins with young children is the financial burden. A working parent expressed frustration, stating 'over 50% of my take-home salary is going on childcare fees.' The continuous increase in fees compounds the problem, with daily rates rising significantly over the years. Another parent shared their concern, saying 'our last centre increased their fees three times in 2023.'

The lack of incentives for mothers returning to the workforce is a prevailing issue, as high childcare expenses negate the benefits of employment. This financial strain is a substantial hurdle for families without a support network, making stable and affordable childcare elusive for many working parents.

Parents are calling for regulatory measures to address the escalating out-of-pocket costs of



childcare. One parent emphasised the need for restrictions, stating, "I would love to see restrictions placed on the amount ECEC can increase their fees, frequency of increase to fees, and prevention of increases when CCS benefits increase."

Despite these increases, 'there has been no corresponding increase to [childcare workers'] wages.' Additionally, there is a perceived lack of improved or enhanced services, prompting families to reconsider their childcare choices. The struggle for stability, consistency, and affordability in childcare is a shared sentiment among working parents, highlighting the need for limitations on fees and annual increases for the benefit of families.

The immediate absorption of CCS benefits by centres through fee increases has become a concerning trend for parents, and it undoes and undermines the Government's commitment to Cheaper Childcare. Parents asked for further Government intervention to ensure stability in childcare costs, with parents expressing a desire for limitations on the fees that centres can charge. The lack of such regulations contributes to the struggle for working parents in finding consistent and affordable childcare.

Importance of Quality Childcare and Educators

The impact of early childhood educators on children's social skills, learning styles, and behaviours is instrumental. Not only do these teachers inspire, encourage, and promote learning, but they play a role in nurturing children's sense of belonging. A central concern for parents in choosing childcare centres revolves around the quality of care and genuine dedication from educators.

A parent highlighted, "The most important things for me when choosing childcare is how the educators and staff interact with the children." Assessing this during short tours becomes challenging, leading parents to rely on word-of-mouth recommendations.

Indicators of quality include the treatment of staff by management and the size of rooms and centres. One parent emphasised their need for personalised attention to their children - "I want my children to be cared about, not just looked after."

Staff Parking

Parking constraints around childcare centres have emerged as an unexpected trend, affecting both educators and children. The implementation of strict parking rules result in educators setting alarms to move their cars every two hours. This routine places an additional burden on educators, and also introduces a disruptive element to the childcare environment.

A concerned parent observed, "The children in the babies' room can become distressed and unsettled with so much change throughout the day, and they are not getting the full attention of the



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staff." Suggestions were made to support educators with parking solutions to enhance the overall quality of childcare. Addressing this aspect not only serves the immediate purpose of improving parking conditions but also aims to enhance the overall quality of childcare by ensuring that the focus remains on the children's well-being and uninterrupted care.

In conclusion, the insights gathered from the Higgins Public Submission on the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Inquiry shed light on significant challenges faced by families in accessing affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare services. The concerns raised by residents of Higgins highlight key areas that require attention and reform within the ECEC sector.

In light of these findings, it is evident that there is a pressing need for comprehensive regulatory measures to address issues of staffing stability, financial challenges, and the quality of childcare services. The recommendations put forth by parents from Higgins underscore the importance of government intervention to ensure affordable, consistent, and high-quality early childhood education and care for all families. The Commission's commitment to addressing these challenges is necessary for the well-being and development of Australia's youngest citizens and their families.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr. Michelle Ananda-Rajah MP

