

May 30th May 2023

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

The Sutherland Shire Preschool Alliance consists of the following members:

Inaburra Preschool	Engadine Preschool	Mayflower Preschool
Jacaranda Preschool	Connect Preschool	Jannali Preschool
Uniting Preschool Caringbah	Heathdene Preschool	Kurnell Preschool
Como Preschool	Grays Point Preschool	Miranda Kindergarten
Cronulla Preschool	GyMEA Community Preschool	The Point Preschool

What we value

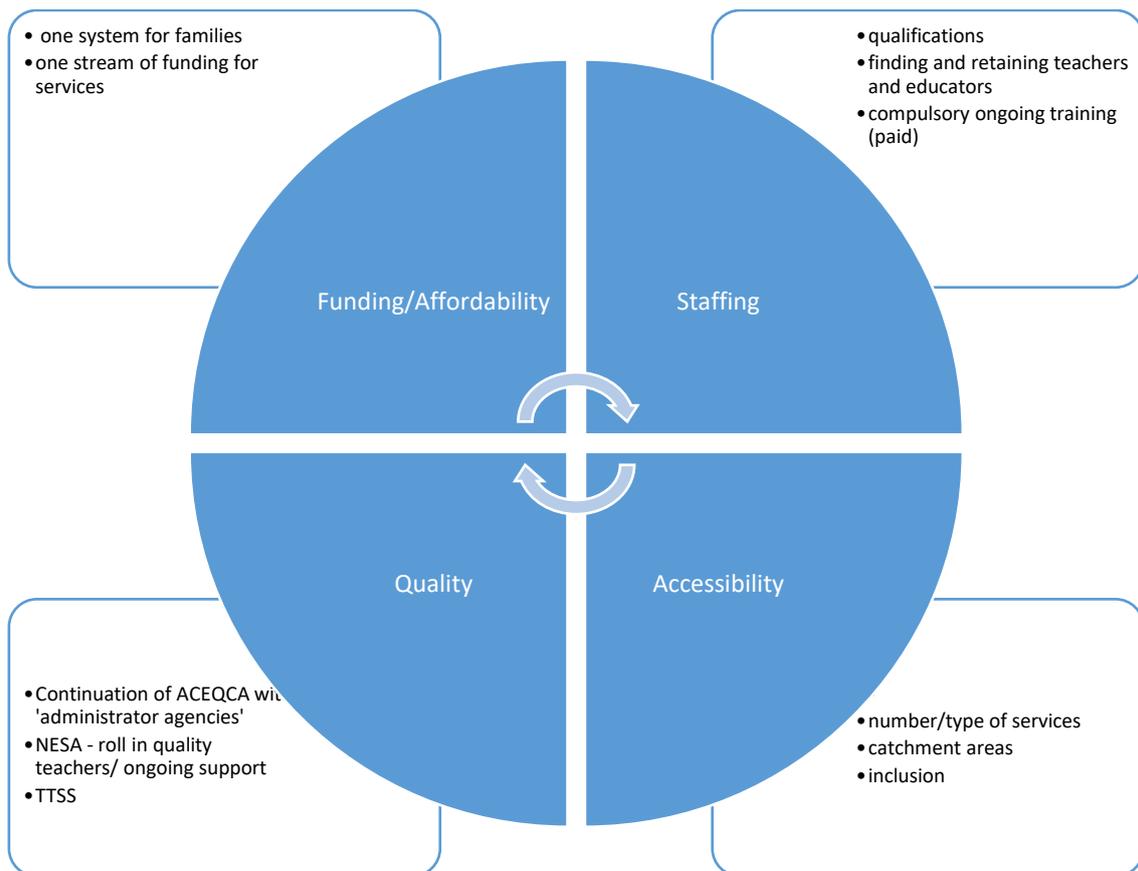
- *“Community Management and involvement through internal and external stakeholder structure which fosters strong and meaningful communication*
- *Relationships with children, families, community, member preschool colleagues, Federal State and Local Governments and Regulatory Bodies.*
- *Play Based Learning that enhances the child’s ability to experiment, problem solve, question, investigate and discover.*
- *Critical Reflection and Documentation that leads to high quality learning and greater outcomes for children.*
- *Advocacy – we strongly believe that positive change is affected by working together in the best interests of children.” SSPA Strategic Plan*

Firstly, we truly welcome the inquiry and are hopefully optimistic, that this supports our sector to continue to move forward. There are many issues that have been identified as ongoing challenges and barriers to enabling our sector to achieve the societal recognition it deserves and therefore as a consequence give all children a positive start to their learning journey. Throughout our discussion it was highly evident that all these issues were strongly interconnected. Focusing on each of them concurrently will certainly assist with a genuine and noticeable improvement overall.

The issues we would like to focus on include

- Quality
- Funding
- Staffing
- Accessibility

Key Points



Funding /Affordability

i) For families : Current funding model state/federal is highly confusing for families, currently made even worse by the shared 'fee-relief' portion. Families are confused not only by how but 'why' these different streams are in operation. Then there is the concern of what/which funding applies to them and how they access it. For various reasons at least 70% of our families are accessing a combination of both preschool and long day services. This in turn means two very different funding models for very similar education and care arrangements.

ii) For services : the funding has increased in recent years, however this has not been in line with the increase in costs of operating a high quality service , one that is well staffed and well resourced. Having funding that enables services to provide the quality that our children deserve is imperative to long term positive outcomes for children, families and our society. For preschools being paid 'in arrears' is a minefield to navigate when it comes to budgeting, especially if your enrolment numbers have increased but the funding is based on numbers from 6 months prior!

Recommendations:

- Increase funding per child , maintain proportional higher level funding for Equity eligible children
- Streamlined funding model – similar to Medicare and GP services arrangements: Where families register and individual services claim payments directly as the service is used each week , rather than each quarter.
- If there are changes to funding models give services at least a 6 month notice period including free compulsory training. This would ideally include having all details including required acquittal /account keeping requirements finalised prior to implementation and therefore covered as part of the training. Completion of training could be a requirement of accessing the funding.

- Funding provided to directly cover qualified teacher wages. These wages must be at pay parity to school teachers. Quality teachers getting quality pay translates to quality education (further evidence in staffing section below).
- For Profit Providers – there needs to be greater accountability for these services . Just as private schools do not receive the same level of Government funds as public school, this also should apply to ECEC services. The level of profit should be assessed and funding should not be able to obtain the same level of funding particularly if staffing/ high quality accreditation levels are not maintained

Quality Care

The Rights of the Child, Article 28, state that all children should have access to education <https://www.unicef.org.au/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child> and taking this a step further this education needs to also uphold all the other rights of the child. In essence this is the basis for our current Quality Assurance system. Quality Assurance(QA) has already shown to have had greatly improved our sector overall. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/resources/research/acecqa-annual-reports> .

This system continues to evolve with our sector and our country's ongoing commitment to ECEC. Families using our services also have an increasing awareness and knowledge of the QA system. This trajectory needs to continue to ensure that standards are not only maintained but improved. The current shortcoming is with timeframes and what appears to be a lack of action for services that are failing to meet these standards and therefore subjecting children, and families, to far inferior education and care.

Recommendations:

- Continuation of ACEQCA Quality Assurance program – annual submission of self assessment to ensure transparency and accountability
- Implement and Administrator Authority: The 'overseeing' agency would be required to step in and give directives to services that are not meeting the standard –linking this to funding would be another incentive to ensure that the funds received are continually attributed to quality improvement
- Compulsory Transition to School Statements for all children, again linking to funding. Once submitted an additional payment can be received . Similar to GP initiatives for immunisation of patients

Staffing

Research has been around for at least 10 years that recognised the correlation between qualified teachers in Early Years Education and positive outcomes for children. A summary of some of these findings is clearly evident in the 2019 CELA Amplify publication; <https://www.cela.org.au/publications/amplify!-blog/feb-2019/qualifications-lead-to-quality>. However the current deficiency of qualified and experienced teachers is having a major impact day to day for children and the wider community. Teachers are leaving the sector for better paid roles in the school system or leaving the sector all together because of the workload / pressures. Susan Irvine identified this in 2016 , <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/215025/> and this was prior to COVID, and unfortunately to date there is no improvement in sight. Sadly this is also an international issue as Hur.E.H acknowledged in 2021 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-022-09693-x> . Ideally Australia , should take the opportunity to lead initiatives and be at the forefront of addressing this concern.

ECEC Teachers are currently 'accredited' by NESAs, they pay their annual subscription and new provisional teachers are well supported. However that ongoing support for 'proficient' teachers is lacking and potentially contributing to the disconnect and discontentment felt by many teachers.

Recommendations:

- Review of pay and conditions in all ECEC services.

- Support for collective bargaining
- Review qualifications, particularly from independent RTOs
- NESAs to play a larger role in the support of EC Teachers. Having a dedicated team in NESAs for EC teachers as well as an increase in the number of ongoing professional development opportunities provided by NESAs for ECEC Teachers
- Compulsory annual professional development – again link to funding schemes.
- All ECEC services to follow quarterly pupil free days (just like schools) so that this compulsory training is completed in paid work time.
- Financial incentives for qualified and well performing teachers and educators. This may be similar to the police force initiative schemes, which also supports employment initiatives into high need community areas as well.

Accessibility

The Sutherland Shire Preschool Alliance preschool members have noted a significant shift in enrolments over the last 3-5 years. The introduction of StartStrong funding with 7.5 hour days, along with more families now working parttime and/or working from home has meant that the preschool model definitely suits their needs. Other benefits include greater staff ratios including qualified teachers, and the teachers and educators all work one shift, so the consistency of care for children is far greater and this in turn leads to more positive outcomes. These aspects in conjunction with the 'free preschool' initiative from the State Government during covid really put preschool in the limelight. Whilst there are 16 community based preschools in the Sutherland Shire Alliance, many 40 places per day or more, there are not enough spaces to go round. Families often travel from other areas to access our high quality preschool services.

Recommendations:

- Mandatory preschool only in the year prior to school. However the school start age needs to be reviewed as some families are taking advantage of getting priority for 2 years (ie. Child birthday Jan-July even though they have known they will not be sending the child until they turn 6).
- Consideration needs to be given to 'catchment' areas, similar to Department Schools so that every child within the direct community can be given priority.
- Continue with the priority for equity families, however this needs more accessible funding to have the staffing, training and resources to support not only the child but their family.
- Have more diverse qualifications such as speech, occupational therapists and psychologists directly connected/employed by services as this would be crucial to ensure the best support possible for these children. This would also alleviate some of the feeling of burnout of educators who are expected to take on all of these roles when supporting inclusive education, and it goes without saying that adequate funding would be needed for this.

In conclusion,

Once again, we would like to acknowledge the productivity commission for providing the opportunity to share our thoughts and views. We look forward to the government taking affirmative action from the review as we all wish for better developmental and educational outcomes for children.