



Productivity Commissioners
Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care
childhood@pc.gov.au

19 May 2023

Dear Commissioners,

Re: Early Childhood Education and Care

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this issue. Our submission will be relatively brief as we, like many agencies in the community sector, our staff are currently stretched trying to meet a surge in demand from single mother families struggling with rising costs of live. That said, this issue is critical to single mothers, and we are glad to be able to comment and to share the many comments from single mothers on this issue pivotal to their children's wellbeing, and the wellbeing and financial security of the family.

Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc. (CSMC) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1969 by single mothers to secure a better life for women parenting alone and their children. We achieve change by championing the agency, rights and needs of single mothers and their children and providing specialist support services.

In this submission we will draw on our experience talking with over 2,200 women each year through our support services and views expressed among our 5,200 members. A key source for quotations is our as yet unpublished report of our second national survey of single mothers undertaken in 2022.

I would be pleased to answer any enquiries arising from this submission.

Regards

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The purpose of early childhood education and care

We note in the call for submissions the phrasing that early childhood education and care “reduces barriers to workforce participation and supports children’s learning and development”. In attachment A - Background, these two themes are further commented on, in the same order and with clear bias to the first and to the cost and efficiency of reducing such barriers.

In our view, the focus on early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia as primarily an instrument to enable and enforce greater economic engagement of women is a fundamental flaw in what should be our commitment to the wellbeing of all children in the nation. That is, it now seen as an economic investment rather than an essential community service focussed first and foremost on helping every child to thrive.

In terms of economic benefit, we see much greater value in a commitment to ensuring every child has low-cost access to high-quality ECEC that makes the most of the extraordinary brain development occurring in the first few years of life. Such investment prepares children well for school. If school education is then similarly prioritised to be high-quality, which need not be high cost, Australia will greatly improve the intellectual and social capability of its citizens and better realise the benefit of diverse communities and abilities.

Single mothers are a cohort of women who have already sacrificed a great deal to ensure their children’s safety and opportunities to thrive. Recent evidence shows about sixty percent have experienced and escaped family violence,¹ often driven by a desire to improve their children’s safety, wellbeing and future even more than for their own safety. With this background, they are fiercely protective and view their child’s wellbeing as the first priority, not their own economic advancement.

This said, single mothers also need childcare almost more than any other parent. The sole parenting role, particularly for those with majority or sole care, creates additional barriers to paid work, in addition to greatly reducing time to run a household and tend to one’s own health, education, interests or wellbeing.

The experience of childcare by current day single mothers reflects social changes over the past fifty years. From a society that offered mothers and children a range of group activities (both organised and informal amongst local community, family and friend networks), we now represent a highly isolated cohort of pared down nuclear families with very reduced support networks. Within this broad picture, we also encompass a wide range of income and education levels and engagement, and cultures and cultural experience, along with migration, dislocation or local establishment.

Government responses this century have prioritised ‘welfare to work’ strategies for women receiving government income payments, and encouragement for other women to take up or increase paid employment. Simultaneously, they have altered the model of childcare from the earlier community-service model to a user pays commercial model. Increasingly, it seems no one is satisfied with these changes. We are certainly not.

¹ Anne Summers: The Choice – Violence or Poverty, July 2022. Accessed at: <https://www.violenceorpoverty.com/>

Affordability & access

Single mother headed households are the family structure most likely to live in poverty in Australia, with 37% living below the poverty and many more in financial duress.²

They constantly raise the issue of childcare affordability with our frontline staff. Many worry that their inability to afford childcare and the social and educational benefits that accompany it will disadvantage their child long term.

For women who are dependent on some form of income payment from government, this concern is accompanied by high levels of pressure from job providers and government services to seek paid employment.

Many of these women live in rural or remote areas or in new, outer metropolitan areas with lower rents but also fewer services. They report that the accompanying stress provides exactly the opposite effect that would be achieved by low-cost and easy access to high-quality ECEC.

Comments from our 2022 national survey of single mothers reflect mothers' needs and opinions on childcare:

- *“Single mums lose so much income, super and savings by being the main caregiver after separation. Cheaper childcare really helps.”*
- *“Forcing single parents to work then making them pay for care so they can do said work is insanity.”*
- *“Help us mould the next generation into being more secure, happy and motivated. Give all families the support they need. The retirement age keeps extending, women are working, we no longer have villages to rely on to help us raise this generation, no grandparents to provide free childcare. In my town childcare is currently full and people are driving half an hour to the next town for childcare. This is a crisis.”³*

We consistently find that childcare costs are a major inhibiting factor for single mothers wanting to work or study. This tends to be true regardless of education level or work background. We find it particularly true for three groups of women:

- Those who have little family support or close community networks, often due to their having had to move themselves and their children to escape family violence.
- Those who work in hospitality, emergency services and other roles requiring work over weekends or at night. Indeed, for these women, the cost of the childcare required to comply with their work hours becomes a largely impossible financial burden, with many then unable to continue working in that field.

² ACOSS, Poverty in Australia 2020 Part 2 – Who is affected

³ Council of Single Mothers and their Children: Unpublished second national survey of single mothers. 2022. Respondent comments

- Those who have a child with a disability that requires the child remain in their own home.

We have previously sought government understanding of the critical importance of subsidies that make in-home childcare an affordable reality for all the families that need it.

During COVID restrictions, particularly in Victoria where we are based and which experience significant periods of lockdowns, we saw explicit examples of where this model failed both children and their parent/s.

Briefly:

- It became evident that ECEC in Australia does not have children's wellbeing front and centre, even into primary and secondary school levels. This led Anne Hollonds, National Children's Commissioner to call for political change and to remark that:
*"Had there been a national child wellbeing framework that was overarching all the disparate, siloed strategies across the different government portfolios, it could have been our guiding star on child wellbeing... The answers would have been in there."*⁴
- The oft-cited imperative of women contributing to the workforce led to single mothers – in addition to partnered parents – simultaneously home-schooling, caring for infants, and working. For many of these mothers, paid work was their only income, and they were forced to continue to do so, even as their own and their children's mental health disintegrated.

"Working full time without access to childcare had a very detrimental impact on my mental health, as did the very knowledge that law-makers could not see what they were asking of single mothers. I was incredibly lucky that the head of my son's childcare recognised my impossible situation and found a way to classify my son as vulnerable, in order that he could attend."

*"Single mothers have had an incredibly hard time during Covid. We are some of the hardest working people there are. Our children and society as a whole would benefit immensely from increasing support such that mothers could afford to spend more time with their children, and such that there is affordable and accessible childcare for all."*⁵

"Incredibly stressful to have all my option for a break during lockdowns to be taken away. No choice because I didn't want to have any (COVID) exposure but I couldn't control how many other families a paid sitter was working with. My parents - I didn't want them to accidentally get sick!"

⁴ 12 February 2023: 'Children were invisible': commissioner calls for national kids' minister as part of COVID recovery. Sydney Morning Herald. Accessed at: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/children-were-invisible-commissioner-calls-for-national-kids-minister-as-part-of-covid-recovery-20230207-p5cil7.html>

⁵ Council of Single Mothers and their Children: Unpublished report of our second national survey conducted in 2022. *Comments by single mother respondents.*

Interestingly, this comment from 2018 before the pandemic expresses in a more visceral way, the desperation some single mothers feel in the work/childcare conundrum, particularly where their income is low:

“Today I’m struggling to block out the struggles like I normally do. I have 2 kids, no friends or family close by for support, I work fulltime and my salary only just pays our rent, daycare fees and food. I drag my 3-year-old to daycare at 6:45am and I feel so guilty for that. I am just so upset that this is where I’ve ended up, it’s not supposed to be like this. I just wish I could catch my breath. Rent is late and I feel defeated. I feel like running away.”⁶

Eva Cox, a single mother who established the first Commonwealth-funded childcare centre which provided a model for 1970s government childcare policies, has written commentary we find useful and commend to the Commission. Some examples are cited in footnotes below.⁷

Our second national survey of single mothers asked respondents what they would like to say to the government. The following quotations express a range of views on childcare, and embedded within them are a number of issues relating to childcare per se and to childcare and paid work:⁸

- *“In the UK mothers get 30 hours free childcare. This allows mothers to plan for the future and secure a job where they have opportunities to go up the career ladder. Australia caps all this if you earn too much, so mothers choose to stay home and sacrifice a career.”*
- *“Finding an employer who will understand the unpredictable nature of chronic illness is hard. Even without a chronic illness childcare and before and after school care are only open 2-3 hours outside of school. Many parents start work at the same time, if not earlier than school and still have to travel minimum 1 hour before starting work.”*
- *“Safe housing and subsidised childcare mean single mothers can better access their communities and opportunities.”*
- *“It’s really challenging to continue a normal life in a good job as a single mother of 3 children escaping from DV. Childcare is hugely expensive but necessary and housing is unaffordable alongside that. Eating healthily becomes impossible on Centrelink payments while navigating your way through recovery from abuse. It’s SO hard to get back to a good job that allows*

⁶ Email from a single mother to Council of Single Mothers and their Children. 2018

⁷ 9 May 2021: *Feminism needs to oppose neoliberal economics to move forward* in Pearls and Irritations, John Menadue’s Public Policy Journal. Accessed at: <https://johnmenadue.com/a-nearly-useless-government-appeal-to-women-voters/>

2 December 2015: *Feminist childcare fight comes full circle as job-based policy fails children’s needs* Accessed at: <https://theconversation.com/feminist-childcare-fight-comes-full-circle-as-job-based-policy-fails-childrens-needs-51464>

3 April 2020: *Free childcare is too good to be true. But could this start a revolution?* Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/03/free-childcare-is-too-good-to-be-true-but-could-this-start-a-revolution>

14 March 2015: *Forget the Productivity Commission. This is what childcare should look like.* Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/14/forget-the-productivity-commission-this-is-what-childcare-should-look-like>

⁸ Council of Single Mothers and their Children: Unpublished second national survey of single mothers. 2022. Respondent comments

Council of Single Mothers and their Children: Early Childhood Education and Care

recovery financially and mentally and keeps the family going. Please help single women get back to work by helping with care options. Having a good job is key to us thriving as families.”

- *“... weekend care should be started for single parents to get a mental break. Working full-time and getting child to school and after school care is a busy life. When you have a hyperactive kid it's hard to get sleep at night and you just get worn out. No family close by to help... Saturday care would definitely help.”*
- *“Pre covid, employers pushed for me to stay "just 5 minutes longer" because employers thought it's okay the kid is with a carer not caring that every minute after a certain time incurs a late fee.”*
- *“If I was in a 2-parent household and one of us worked while the other stayed home, that's perfectly acceptable. But as a single parent it isn't socially and governmentally acceptable for me to stay home with my kids (even when they're older). Nor is it financially viable. And yet my kids are better off if I stay home.”*
- *“I want both the option of affordable childcare that is fantastic for my child.”*
- *“Secure permanent employment that is flexible for single parents with reduced childcare fees. No constant casual work, more security.”*
- *“I have multiple disabilities and a child with a disability as well as another child. The only way to access affordable childcare is to declare I pose a risk of serious abuse and neglect to my children (ACCS⁹ child 'wellbeing').”*
- *“I need to travel for work but have no overnight childcare options - am scared of losing my job.”*
- *“Our children are the future of this country. How much longer will we as a society fail them by cutting public education, creating private investment run childcare, cutting public health and jobs for their future. Governments should think about both now and the future.”*
- *“I have requested flexible work conditions to be able to collect children from childcare and it has been denied and I have been told to find other employment.”*
- *“I'm self-employed so need to focus on growing but if I don't work, I don't get paid. I need children in school or care to work, and holiday care isn't available or accessible. Feds approach to childcare destroyed my in-home care arrangement which was protecting my children.”*
- *“Childcare is a major barrier to greater levels of employment participation and also study. Childcare needs to be funded better. Even with 85% rebate more than 2 days a fortnight becomes unaffordable given new increases and greater pressure on cost of living.”*

⁹ Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS)

- *“Our nation’s children are our future!”*
- *“Single parent households do it really tough. And school hours make it really hard to work. And paying childcare fees and before and after school care fees and everything else costs just the same as two parent households.”*
- *“The CCS¹⁰ favours typical, nuclear families. They now receive a discount on childcare for their 2nd child, regardless of their family’s combined income. I don’t see the same childcare affordability being offered to single working mothers. It should be free and universal. We have so many more inherent challenges in our lives.”*

Remove the activity test

This test is in many ways nonsensical.

We don’t have a parental activity test to enrol children in school and given the evidence about the value of quality ECEC is now so well established, we consider the activity test a brake on the overall benefits.

Our reasoning is thus: if the wellbeing of the children is the focus, then ergo, the wellbeing of the parents is a critical factor. If parents who are not yet ready for paid employment for whatever reason are nevertheless able to access a minimum of two full days ECEC per week, they and their children will benefit. Time to themselves plus less stress equals better parenting plus happier and healthier children and parents.

Key to our thinking is that parenting is work. Those who are parenting alone need time to rest and recover and to consider their options and plan their way forward, whether that is informally or formally through engagement with pre-employment/ work readiness supports. The Price Waterhouse Cooper study¹¹ found that:

“The value of unpaid childcare makes it Australia’s largest industry, larger than any in the formal economy.”

Given this, we believe the approach of the Productivity Commission in this inquiry, should be one of great respect for the unpaid industry the government is now seeking to formalise. Parents, and mothers in particular, deserve such respect, with the option to take up paid employment offered in the context of regard for their choice, coupled with high quality care for their children.

“Free or heavily subsidised childcare for ALL pay brackets. Affordable and available childcare for those working outside normal hours i.e. shift work/night shifts. Give more support to lower income earners, but don’t give nothing to higher earners.”¹²

¹⁰ Child Care Subsidy (CCS)

¹¹ PWC: *Understanding the Unpaid Economy* March 2017

¹² *ibid*