

Submission to Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare & Early Childhood Learning

Description of Remote & Isolated Children's Exercise Inc (RICE)

RICE is a multidisciplinary, non government, not for profit organisation providing holistic integrated health, welfare, preschool education, child care and resources to children and their families in the remote and isolated areas of outback South Australia. RICE is funded by both the state and commonwealth governments to provide the services. The core business is with children 0 to 5 years and 0 to 12 years for child care. RICE has been in existence since 1976.

CHILDCARE PROGRAM

The childcare program is a mobile childcare program to provide care and activities for children age 0 to 12 years generally in the family home and consists of the following components:

- In home placements
- Remote crèches
- Play days/sessions
- Activity days

In home placements

The goals of this component are to:

- Provide a flexible, high quality child care service suitable to the needs of families in remote areas.
- Meet work related care needs of parents who have no access to existing child care services (e.g. at time of shearing, mustering etc.)
- Assist families in crisis and to provide respite

Families access care generally in two week block. Fees are charged based only on the families capacity to pay (condition under BBF funding agreement)

Remote crèche

Weekly service provided free to the Orroroo and Hawker communities and surrounding areas.

Specific purpose crèches are provided for children across the area e.g. for siblings of older students and parents attending School of the Air Port Augusta Campus activities.

Activity Days

Provided at outback community events e.g. William Creek Races to enable parents to be involved in the organisation of such events, provide activities and socialisation for children and to promote RICE and its programs.

Play days/sessions

Held at central locations in the outback such as a community hall, family home or other suitable building. Play days bring together families from a district, providing opportunities for parents and children to interact, play and learn together in a safe and positive environment.

Attending a play day provides opportunities for children to play with and relate to other children, experience being part of a group, develop independence and self confidence and learn to share and take turns.

Other staff e.g. Wellbeing worker, attend play days with child care staff.

Funding for the child care program is from the BBF program Commonwealth Department of Education. This funding level is inadequate and has not increased in line with inflation, that alone increased needs. Currently RICE are using reserves to maintain the level of services – this is not sustainable in the long term.

PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

The RICE Early Childhood Teacher provides a preschool program as well as educational activities on home visits and at play days. Three centre (internet on air) lessons are also provided each week. Kits are also prepared and forwarded to families for completion and return. The RICE preschool program is based around the Early Years Learning Framework to ensure children receive quality education programs in their early childhood setting.

This program is integrated with the other RICE programs and funded by the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development.

Specific comments relating directly to what the Commission has been asked to specifically report and make recommendations on.

Contribution of childcare to workforce participation and child development

- RICE's in home placement program specifically relates to workforce participation and allows parental involvement in the many operations of station life, e.g. shearing, mustering. Whilst the parents may not be paid specifically this process effects positively the financial viability of the stations.
- RICE families are extremely isolated with children having no access to schools or childcare centres. The programs undertaken such as play days, crèches, etc provides greater opportunity for child development.
- The preschool program is unique with a Early Childhood Teacher offering a kindergarten service for children at their level of development.
- All programs focus on the development of the children.

Current and future need for childcare in Australia, particularly given changes in work patterns, early learning needs, childcare affordability and government assistance.

- There is no doubt that children living in the remote and isolated areas of South Australia are disadvantaged because of their geographical location. There are no services other than the services offered by RICE in these areas.
- Government funding allows this to occur and should be increased to enable programs to be increased and further developed, e.g. the Early Childhood Teacher conducts home visits and the children may receive only 2 visits for the whole year. This should be substantially increased, however funding does not allow. It should be pointed out that due to the isolation of some families the home visit may require 8 plus hours travel just to reach the station. The children development outcomes are affected by the limitation of home visits.

The capacity of the childcare system to ensure a satisfactory transition to schools, in particular for vulnerable or at risk children.

- One of RICE's focuses is the preschool program to ensure a satisfactory transition to school, in this instance with the majority of children transition to the School of the Air – Port Augusta. RICE works with SOTA to ensure a smooth transition. Generally the children are not a risk but are disadvantaged due to the isolation and remoteness.

Alternate models of care, including those overseas, which could be considered for trial in Australia.

- The RICE model is unique and totally different from centre based education and care facilities. The RICE model was initially developed in 1976 and has been improved over time, it was developed “to provide a range of appropriate, integrated childhood services and facilities in those areas of northern South Australia which are disadvantaged by their remoteness” (excerpt from The History of RICE 1976 – 2001).

Options – within existing funding parameters – for improving the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of childcare for families with diverse circumstances.

- RICE is funded under the Commonwealth Department of Education Budget Based Funding Program and the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development
- The Government stating “within the current funding parameters” limits in our opinion the scope of the commission should it find that there is a significant shortfall. The inquiry issues paper is dominated by cost driven arguments and do not address children outcomes, it is in our opinion not a balanced paper and should have addressed both the learning aspects and development outcomes for children and the affordability and financial aspects.
- Affordability perhaps should also start with the Government. Many BBF services across Australia are using reserves to maintain services or implementing massive service delivery cutbacks. RICE is using accumulated reserves to maintain our level of services; this is not sustainable in the long term. RICE has received only a total of 6.7% increase from the Department of Education over the past 7 financial years 2007/2008 to 2013/2014, wages and other increases have been substantially more.
- In the RICE context, affordability is generally not an issue for individual families as all programs are provided free or at very low cost. The agreement with the Department of Education states that “fee setting and collecting policy are based only on families capacity to pay “. In this RICE sets it fees for in home placement relative to Family Tax Benefit Part A. The amount of fees collected is minimal and only amount to 0.70% of the total budget.
- The majority of families could not afford any substantial increase in fees.
- It is impossible to charge any fees for the majority of RICE's programs.

- The available funds only permit 6 weeks per annum of in home placements, families are seeking more care but the current level of funding prohibits any increase – there is a need for increased care.
- The remote crèches at Orroroo and Hawker are limited to one day per week during the school terms, again the need is greater but this is limited by available funds, this also applies to play days .
- All of the programs undertaken by RICE should be increased to improve development outcomes for children, however any increase is limited by funding or lack of.
- It should be noted that relative to nearly every other sector the wages paid to the child care staff are low. This has an impact on staff recruitment, moral and retention and directly has an impact on the outcomes for children. RICE has in the past and still have difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified experienced staff.
- The industry and governments are seeking increased qualifications but generally are not prepared to paying commensurate wages.

The impacts of regulatory changes, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework, on the childcare sector over the past decade.

- RICE is “out of scope’ in the National Quality Framework.
- The central focus of the NQF is to improve the outcomes for children. RICE seeks to provide best practice in its services and has adopted as policy to comply to the NQF as far as possible. RICE does not operate in a centre setting and can not comply with all the standards.
- As RICE “complies “ costs are increased, e.g. RICE accept that the ratio of children to educators in the standards is best practice and has implemented these ratios at the RICE remote crèches. Although there has been cost increases no increased funding has been offered.

Rob Kay
Executive Officer
17 January 2014