

Woden Community Service Inc. Submission to Productivity Commission Inquiry into Child Care & Early Childhood Learning.

Woden Community Service Inc. (WCS) is one of 5 regional community services within Canberra. WCS is a not-for-profit organisation that has been providing a broad range of services to people who live or work in the Woden Valley since 1969, and which plays an active role in developing, supporting and maintaining social and cultural diversity in the Woden community. WCS provides a range of children's services, including 2 children's centres, school age care programs in 6 schools, an employed-model Family Day Care scheme, and collaborates in providing Paint and Play activities.

WCS wishes to address only some of the terms of reference.

- The contribution that access to affordable, high quality child care can make to increased participation in the workforce, particularly women; and optimizing children's learning.

The introduction of the National Quality Standard (NQS) has commenced the process of ensuring high quality care in children's services. The benefits of high quality care have been supported by research showing that improving early childhood education quality reduces educational, economic and health disparities (Yu, 2013; Bradbury, 2011, Engle, Fernald & Alderman, et al., 2011; Nores & Barnett, 2010)(1). It is important that this process continues with the ongoing rollout of the National Quality Framework (NQF) & Standard in all states and territories, including qualification requirements and ratio implementation. A consistent national system will ensure every child in Australia using children's services receives the same quality of care and education.

The NQS and NQF are also encouraging educators to continue professional development and discussions, with the additional documentation and evidence now expected to support their work. The Frameworks give a structure for educators to work within and focus on, and provides ideas, terminology and direction to their work. The flow-on from the increased collaboration amongst our educators to the children is evidenced by children increasingly engaging in the programs and activities, as they are child-focused and interest-based.

Demand for our programs is rising, especially in School Age Care. This indicates greater participation in the workforce, as well as satisfaction from families using our programs with the service provided.

RECOMMENDATION : Full implementation of the National Quality Standard and National Quality Framework to continue to develop high quality children's services.

- The accessibility of affordable care.

Demand for children's services continues to increase, in all our service types. WCS has waiting lists in School Age Care (SAC), Family Day Care (FDC) and for places in our



Children's Centres. Our Children's Centres close their waiting lists each year and expect parents to annually contact the service to ensure a place on the list the following year. This ensures that children on the list still require a place, as some families place their child's name on multiple lists and do not cancel when care is found. In SAC we have increased the number of places available in 3 programs in the past year.

Permanent care in our Children's Centres is also in demand, although most families request full day care for part of each week rather than full time care. Demand for longer hours of care also continues, with children staying in care longer than in the past, on average 9 or 10 hours a day. This has had a flow-on effect with staffing in our Children's Centres. Traditionally the early shift staff left as children also left, but this is not occurring now, so additional part-time educators are required to accommodate the higher number of children still in attendance, and the need to maintain ratios of educators to children.

FDC is a choice of care for those parents requiring longer hours than in a centre, or needing weekend, after hours or overnight care. FDC provides great flexibility to families, and great continuity for the children, which research shows is better for children, their wellbeing and social development (Margetts & Raban, 2011) (2).

Demand in all our programs tends to be slightly less on Mondays and Fridays, possibly explained by the prevalence of flexible working hours in the ACT through the Public Service. There is also the fact that there are a large number of public holidays on Mondays and some Fridays. New families entering children's services often commence care on these days until more days become available.

WCS also offers occasional care which fluctuates in usage, particularly around holiday periods when it is not utilized fully given families are away. Most families who use occasional care use it as a point of first contact with care, placing their children in care for short periods initially and increasing as the child, family and educators become familiar with each other and surroundings, and relationships are built. Sometimes families use occasional care as a stepping stone to long day permanent care, particularly if they are not able to access permanent care initially. The drawback of this is that families can only book care a week in advance, and are therefore not guaranteed care. It does however allow families and the centre time to establish familiarity with each other, before a long term arrangement is in place.

Fees for children's services continue to rise. WCS children's services work extensively with families who experience disadvantage. These families need not only child care but also other support, such as housing, transport, parenting skills, employment, etc. The availability of Child Care Benefit (CCB), Child Care Rebate (CCR) and Special Child Care Benefit (SCCB) are all essential to affording childcare to most of our families. All of our children's services programs have used SCCB for families using our services. Other government support programs such as the Jobs, Education & Training (JET), Grandparent Child Care Benefit (GCCB) and Priority of Access (POA) have ensured that a wide range of personal and family needs are met within the range of children's services.



CCR is an inequitable mechanism to reduce out of pocket expenses for children's services. It should be means-tested, so that the most economically disadvantaged receive the most assistance. In instances when users have not made the payment of fees themselves but a third party has done so, the rebate should be able to be made to the party which has made the fee payment.

The government subsidies need to continue, although a more simplified system and a more equitable system is needed. Combining CCB and CCR is one option, and made payable to either parents or providers. Simplifying the application process for Customer Reference Numbers with Centrelink is also recommended. It is a complicated and convoluted system even for tertiary educated English speaking people, so for people who speak English as a second or third language, have a different cultural background and/or experience of working with a bureaucracy, and only a moderate formal education with limited literacy and numeracy skills, the system is difficult at best and sometimes overwhelming.

Alternatively, the whole funding system could be altered. At present a large amount of taxpayer funds go towards making children's services affordable to families. The funding could be refocused away from the user and to the provider – government grants/funding would go to services not the families. The government funding would need to be focused so that quality care is being provided in an equitable way. Tied grants for use only on qualified educator wages and staffing on-costs are suggested. This would ensure accountability. It would also encourage providers to employ qualified staff, at least at the minimum requirements of regulation. The employment of qualified staff has been demonstrated to raise the educational, social and physical development of children (3).

In FDC, the operational funding through the Community Support Program (CSP) is essential for the ongoing running of our scheme. Attracting and keeping our employees as FDC educators is difficult, which means our ability to place children is reduced. The demand for FDC is high particularly for infants, as families like the home-based care option, the smaller group size, the more flexible hours of care on offer, and the relationships built up with the individual educators. The support for educators by our co-ordination unit is a necessary part of operating a scheme, and with the introduction of the NQF and NQS this has become even more important. CSP funding allows for this.

RECOMMENDATION : Existing government support such as CCB, CCR, JET, POA, SCCB, GCCB and CSP funding must either be maintained or an alternative similar system introduced.

RECOMMENDATION : Introduce means-testing of CCR.

RECOMMENDATION : Simplify the Centrelink enrolment system for Customer Reference Numbers.

RECOMMENDATION : Combine the CCB and CCR payments. Make these payments either to parents or to child care providers. The payments should be based on a percentage of child care costs.



RECOMMENDATION : Overhaul the child care payment system and remove all payments to families and divert the money to the provider as a tied grant, to be used only for staff wage costs which are related to qualifications and experience.

- The benefits and other impacts of regulatory changes in child care over the past decade, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework in States and Territories, with specific consideration given to compliance costs, taking into account the Government's planned work with States and Territories to streamline the NQF.

The ACT has developed a regulatory and licensing oversight system which is very supportive of delivering quality care. The Children's Policy and Regulation Unit (CPRU), which combines both regulatory and assessment functions, is quick to respond to queries, has knowledgeable staff, provides relevant information and resources to the sector, and communicates well within the sector.

The NQF and NQS has introduced minimal additional reporting processes, and the increased documentation within programs has been of benefit to educators, children and families. WCS service providers (centre directors, FDC educators and SAC co-ordinators) are like the 78% of respondents to the ACECQA survey "The best start in life: report on the national quality framework and regulatory burden", and they support the NQF despite perceiving a significant level of burden associated with ongoing administrative requirements (4). Documenting their work, making it accessible to families for mutual discussion and interpretation, collaborating with colleagues to write observations, programs and reflections have all increased the professional dialogue and learning in programs. This is to be encouraged, and continuing to implement the NQF allows this.

The cost of paying educators more time in preparation and documentation has resulted in fee increases. WCS is a not-for-profit organisation so aim to keep our fees as low as possible. On average our fees increase in line with the CPI, however in 2013 this was 2% higher than usual. This was to accommodate more staff time in planning, and additional staff meetings and training. These costs will be ongoing, as it is important to support educators to provide high quality care to our children. Parents seem to appreciate the changed focus in programming at services, are happy with the care provided to their children, and have paid the higher fees.

The NQS requirement for increased levels of training amongst educators has led to WCS staff continuing to enroll for and participate in training and education. The quality of training however is a concern as it is uneven. Greater accountability and oversight of the organisations which provide training is required. Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) provide a large proportion of sector training and the quality of training is varied. Graduates in children's services are not all receiving current information, sufficient oversight in workplace experience, support to complete academic requirements and ongoing supervision during the training period. RTO staff turnover is possibly partly responsible for



this, as this leads to lack of continuity and dispersed responsibility. Review of RTOs is needed, in order to support the needs of the children's services sector.

The employer subsidies provided by the Australian Government is a great incentive to both employer and employee to continue to engage in tertiary education in children's services and education. WCS encourages our educators to complete their studies by refunding the student fees upon completion of their qualification. Measures such as this, plus generous study and preparation time assist WCS to maintain a relatively stable workforce. The ACT has an ongoing issue with the benefits of working in the Public Service (flexible working hours, higher rates of pay, increased working conditions, etc) drawing employees out of children's services on a regular basis, thus draining resources, training and skill from the sector. Until children's services and the education sector are on a level industrial playing field there will continue to be this drain and tension.

RECOMMENDATION : Maintain present Australian Government financial support for training incentives in the children's services sector.

RECOMMENDATION : Review the RTO sector, and ongoing greater accountability and scrutiny of RTOs to ensure high quality training and relevant work experience during training is provided.

References

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- (2) Margetts, K & Raban, B (2011) Principles and practice for driving the EYLF. 71-74.
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- (4) Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (2013) Report on the National Quality Framework & Regulatory Burden, 11.

