



Northern Sydney Council of P&C Associations

Out of school hours (OOSH) care Call for Action

(also known as Before & After School Care - BASC)

Summary

Inadequate OOSH facilities have become a serious issue on the Lower North Shore in Sydney. Problems have been exacerbated by student population growth and overcrowding in schools. Similar problems exist elsewhere, and are having an impact on the ability of parents (particularly women) to work, and on Australia's productivity. Government policy and institutional arrangements need to be addressed urgently to enable more efficient and effective solutions.

The situation

Australia has long recognised the need for OOSH care. OOSH is a basic requirement for working families, as most hours of work do not coincide with school hours. OOSH is particularly important to the welfare of our youngest and most vulnerable children. Children alone in the home or left to their own devices after school are at risk of injury and worse. OOSH is also vitally important to meeting the National objective of increasing the workforce participation rates of women.

The Lower North Shore of Sydney is experiencing a severe overcrowding in schools which has been well publicised through the media. This has had a number of negative consequences including a growing shortage of OOSH places with some schools already experiencing 2 years waiting lists for care. This impacts our youngest and most vulnerable children and means parents are turning to imperfect alternatives such as activity based programs which are not accredited childcare, further adding to the risk young children face.

Although OOSH facilities are available in the Lower North Shore, they have been overwhelmed by the changing demographics of the area over the last decade. NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages data shows Mosman, Lane Cove, Chatswood, Cremorne and Neutral Bay were among the state's top baby boom suburbs in 2011. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show the number of children under five increased 54 per cent between 2001 and 2011 in North Sydney, and in Willoughby they increased by 32 per cent. The reasons for these increases are related to birth rate spikes in people from higher socio-economic backgrounds and trends in the pre-school groups indicate that this trend will continue for another decade. (Source: Upwardly mobile inundate North Shore schools; SMH September 27, 2012). These huge increases in the school age population have apparently caught the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) unawares and has led to serious overcrowding in Lower North Shore Schools. It has also led to a crisis in OOSH facilities. The following table show the number of OOSH places as a percentage of children enrolled in the school for a range of schools in the Department's Middle Harbour Network.

Public School	2012	After School Places (both onsite and offsite by private providers)	% of Student numbers
Willoughby	939	75	8%
Artarmon	858	79	9%
Chatswood	823	75	9%
Lindfield East	738	75	10%
Roseville	568	60	11%



Northern Sydney Council of P&C Associations

Lindfield	729	105	14%
Neutral Bay	845	120	14%
Lane Cove	815	135	17%
Lane Cove West	533	90	17%
Camberley	767	170	22%
Greenwich	432	109	25%
North Sydney Dem	709	200	28%

There are up to 2 year waiting lists for OOSH places in these schools.

Sources: <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/statistics-and-research/key-statistics-and-reports/enrolments-feb12.pdf> and places sourced by phoning each provider Oct/Nov 2012

The well documented baby boom has occurred across Australia so while this paper is focusing on the Lower North Shore, consultation with other P&C's in the Sydney region and media articles suggest this issue is more widespread and that the Lower North Shore is the burning platform for change.

There have been significant reforms and focus on the childcare industry by the Federal Government in recent years including trialling 'around-the-clock' childcare but this has focused on early childhood centres. There has been a large gaping hole in the focus on care for school aged children.

The National Quality Framework is a catch all for childcare but has actually created regulations which are applicable to younger children and improve their care but actually for school age children are onerous and impede the provision of suitable care because they are so regulated and indeed are contradictory. A school that can house 800 plus children between 9am and 3pm cannot have equal numbers of children in OOSH because of the space ratios applied under the NQF. This is wildly contradictory particularly when a child can possibly be in OOSH care for a maximum of 4 hours and is definitely in the care of a school for 6 hours a day. In addition from 2014 OOSH staff at least 50% of the OOSH staff required to meet ratio requirements must have or be working towards at least an approved Diploma level qualification. All other staff must have or be working towards at least a Certificate III level qualification. This is significant overkill for children who have spent all day at school learning and really need time to play and unwind.

Our economy has over the last 50 years increasingly relied on women's involvement in the workforce. Our businesses rely on women and so does our GDP as participants in the workforce. The current situation on the North Shore means that families and women in particular have to withdraw from paid work in order to care for their children after school at a time when many women are expecting to re-enter the workforce in a fuller capacity because their children have reached school age. It is very difficult to find employers who are happy to allow you to work half days so you can leave work and get to a school by 2.45 to pick up a kindergarten child; part-time work is generally considered to be a full day, so even part-time working parents are impacted by this situation. We have a strong economy and near full employment which relies on these women to be able to work. Significant shortages in OOSH care are impacting our economy.

The critical shortage of OOSH availability is exacerbated by a number of factors.

- 1) The first is caused by a lack of clear ownership of OOSH. OOSH is currently run by local councils, parent run facilities, and private providers on-site where a principal permits or off-site IF there are suitable facilities.



Northern Sydney Council of P&C Associations

- 2) The NSW Department of Education has policies which refer to OOSH but which are unequally applied because of the variation in approach and the discretionary use of public buildings like schools. This has resulted in services being provided in a patch work fashion across the North Shore. Some schools have onsite OOSH run by parents or private providers in a dedicated building, or some Principals are willing to let classrooms be used, some are transporting children off site to private providers and some have a combination of all. So while there are many parties delivering OOSH services there is no one organisation which appears to have accountability for the care of our school age children and which is responding to this crisis.

Where schools have dedicated space for OOSH this is at risk as schools grow because the Department can take back such spaces for classrooms if they need them and given the increasing enrolments this is likely to happen. Where schools have insufficient OOSH spaces they are actively encouraging parents to use unaccredited childcare such as activity based programs. These include things like sport, drama, language lessons and do not fall under the National Quality Framework (NQF) standardsⁱ that were introduced with the objective to ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of children attending education and care services. While sport, language, and cultural activity programs may appear attractive as an interim option and offer alternatives to accredited child care they do not replace the need for a fully operational OOSH facility.

Activity based programs do not qualify for the child care rebate. Activity based programs are therefore on average double the cost of OOSH and are not available currently BEFORE school so only resolves part of the problem. The children most impacted by the lack of places are the youngest and most vulnerable in the school therefore we must ensure they have fully accredited care for their safety. Families with older children have been in the system longer and a larger proportion have the before and after school care places they desire and in addition their younger siblings have priority of access as places become available. As the numbers of students rise and so does the demand for OOSH the lack of ownership means that solving the problem falls to individual schools, their Principals and the parents of those schools.

The second factor is the failure to use valuable buildings like schools for shared community use in a consistent manner. At present the use of school buildings for OOSH is at the discretion of the Principal. Some are willing and interested in making school buildings available for OOSH and some are not. It should be noted that there is a burden on principals to support an OOSH onsite but also it should be understood that there are potential financial returns for a school through fees charged to a provider. This discretion means that there are many school buildings which remain empty when the children leave the school gate and this contradicts policies at both State and Federal levels.

- The DEC policy paper 'Community use of School Facilities' states - *The Department of Education and Training encourages members of the community and education groups to use school facilities for appropriate purposes, when they are available. This is a way of sharing a significant resource, and strengthening the partnership between schools and local communities.* And specifically identifies BASC (OOSH) as an example of appropriate purpose in the Priorities for Community Use section.
- The Building the Education Revolutions Guidelines make it a legal condition of funding that 'the school must agree to provide access at no, or low, cost to the community to libraries and multi-purpose halls funded under this element of BER.' (P6 Ver 6- 15 March 2011).
- The PWC report NSW Infrastructure : Education Infrastructure Baseline Report, June 2012, lists the following strategies for improving infrastructure provision: *Increase community use of facilities out of schools hours and through shared facilities where common needs can be met e.g. libraries, co-use of open space*
- A recommendation from the Infrastructure NSW in the report First Things First, State Infrastructure Strategy 2012-2032 report delivered on the 5th October 2012 states, *"Infrastructure NSW supports ... greater community use of facilities out of school hours i.e.*



Northern Sydney Council of P&C Associations

libraries and, co-use of open space. These recommendation could be delivered through the Local Schools Local Decisions policy.” To achieve this DEC could provide support to Principals with procedures and policies to facilitate greater community use and OOSH would be an excellent place to start.

What P&Cs are calling for:

That State and Federal governments act immediately to -

1. Put strategies in place to eliminate long waiting lists and ensure that sufficient OOSH places are available for students in schools in the lower-mid North Shore and other areas where school enrolments are rising significantly.
2. Provide a clear and consistent policy which can be applied on the shared use of community buildings such as schools which promotes and supports onsite OOSH. Onsite OOSH facilities are the most practical and safest options for young children and make use of public buildings which lay empty once children go home.
3. Review the NQF regulations to ensure that regulations apply that address the specific needs of OOSH and recognise that some of the guidelines while appropriate for young children are not appropriate for school aged children. For example requiring kitchen facilities for children who are in care for a couple of hours and can be given fruit and a drink is unnecessary,. and that the space ratios which are applied during school hours contradict the NQF guidelines.
4. Allocate one level of government which takes ownership and is responsible for planning for and the provision of OOSH facilities to remove the burden from parents, councils and schools for interpreting and arguing about how services should be provided; and for ensuring the safety of our children at all times.
5. For the DEC to undertake a review of OOSH and
 - a) Identify all the impediments that are preventing OOSH being conducted on site in schools, and the concerns and issues faced by Principals, and to take steps to address and remove impediments and put in place appropriate policies and guidelines to facilitate on site OOSH in all schools.
 - b) To facilitate shared use of classrooms for OOSH in schools with capacity issues that prevents separate OOSH facilities on site. This is the way of the Future!
6. A review by the Productivity Commission into all aspects of OOSH. OOSH is too important to the Australia economy to be left to run in a haphazard way under a range of regulations from all levels of Government, and the long waiting lists in some schools need to be addressed and eliminated as a matter of urgency. There needs to be some strategic thinking and co operation at all levels of Government to resolve these issues, but either the State or Federal Government need to assume full responsibility for regulation and planning and provision of these vital OOSH services.
7. To remove the situation where volunteer parents and volunteer P&C Presidents are being left to shoulder the huge responsibility and liability for OOSH services. Whilst these services can work well when there are good, experienced and knowledgeable staff in place, nowadays there is a huge amount of additional regulation, work and onerous liability and responsibility on P&C Presidents and other volunteers, This deters people from



Northern Sydney Council of P&C Associations

volunteering for these positions. Unlike long day care, many OOSH centres are forced to rely on working parents with no expertise in the area to run OOSH services because there is no other option. If key staff leave, or the P&C gets sued (as is presently happening in NSW!) then volunteer P&C Presidents are left to shoulder the burden of any legal action and liability with little help or support from Government, the DEC or P&C Federation of NSW (when many decisions for OOSH are made with DEC involvement via Principals.). Whilst some schools have highly capable and motivated volunteers to run OOSH services, in many schools there are not the people with the knowhow and expertise or the time or inclination to run these services. It should not be left to volunteers, and liability for volunteer P&C Presidents as 'licensee' needs to be eliminated.

8. Comprehensive instructions to make it easy for P&Cs and schools to lease out their OOSH! The DEC has all the contracts and knowledge about what is required to lease out our schools at a profit to the school and the Nprth Shore Councils are willing to play a role in in setting up and managing community boards to administer onsite OOSH which reduces the risk and liability to parent run facilities and reduces the impact to Principals.

ⁱ A service principally conducted to provide instruction in a particular activity (for example, a language class or ballet class) is excluded by the National Law and is not within the scope of the National Quality Framework and are unlikely to be brought into the National Quality Framework in the future.