

Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Child Care and Early Learning Issues Paper

IACC

Illawarra Area Child Care Ltd (IACC) is a not for profit community owned organisation. IACC was established in 1984 to research the need for work based child care services in the Illawarra and was incorporated in 1985.

The Board comprises of parents from IACC early childhood services and up to three Board Members nominated from the community having an interest/expertise in the provision and development of early childhood education and care.

IACC manages 12 ECEC services across the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions, including the Early Learning component of the new Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, which opened in East Nowra in 2014. We also manages ECTARC, a community owned RTO specialising in early childhood training and professional development across Australia.

IACC provides support, training information and advice to its services, employees and families. A key objective of IACC is to work collaboratively with associated organisations to provide excellence in early childhood and training services.

Our Vision

Our vision is to be a provider of choice in accessible, dynamic, affordable and engaging early childhood settings and training services.

Government involvement in childcare and early learning

The Government has a significant role to play to ensure that expenditure on early childhood education and care (ECEC) is targeted to deliver optimum learning environments for all children. This can be achieved through a nationally consistent system supported by the continued implementation of the NQF. We strongly recommend that the NQF continues as planned, including a commitment to maintaining the current strategies and timeframe to 2020. If cost is a barrier to implementation then funds should be directed to support this agenda – investment now will support positive long term outcomes for children in the future.

There is extensive research to support the link between qualified educators and quality outcomes for young children. Government support is required to recognise and improve wages for early childhood educators. This would acknowledge of the importance of the crucial learning and development that takes place in the early years. The role of the early childhood professional has become more complex and the level of responsibility has increased, current financial remuneration is making it difficult for the sector to recruit and retain skilled and experienced educators, particularly those with an early childhood teaching degree.

IACC believe adoption of a best practice model of ECEC by all state and territories would deliver:

- Every child's right to high quality learning programs – Increased investment to support quality provision of ECEC across all settings
- A consistent system which will drive improved education and learning outcomes for children
- An investment in long term outcomes for children
- A consistent funding model across Australia

- Combined funding for early education (eg national partnership on universal access for ECEC and state and territory government preschool and education funding) and child care into one funding pool
- A system where there are no gaps in service provision for children with additional needs, including babies, children in remote areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, economically disadvantaged and other vulnerable and at risk children
- Financial support to facilitate the full inclusion for children with additional needs without causing economic disadvantage to the service
- Comprehensive strategies to resource and support current out of scope services to become in scope.

National Quality Framework

Government regulation ensures there is a commitment to the provision to high quality ECEC supported by an increase in the qualification of educators and improved educator:child ratios. The benefits of the NQF are to provide better outcomes for children and an investment in Australia's future.

We applaud the emphasis on improving educator:child ratios so that high quality interactions between children and educators occur. We see that the same benefits will apply when the improved ratio is due to commence in January 2016.

It is important that all services are in scope and comply with an approved learning framework to support quality and drive continuous improvement and consistency in ECEC and school age care. This will improve the educational and developmental outcomes for children in these settings and facilitate successful transition to formal schooling and lifelong learning.

As with any new system, when the NQF was first announced it was necessary for all of us working in the sector to take responsibility and familiarise with the EYLF and the NQS and the new National Regulation to ensure compliance with all requirements. It is now 2014, and all services should be familiar with the requirements. In terms of additional workload following the introduction of the NQF, the main increase in documentary workload for our organisation is in regard to the reporting of serious incidents to the regulatory authority. Additionally, as a provider of both in scope and out of scope services, it adds a level of complexity to ensure that we adhere to the different regulations for both service types. It would be easier if all services were in scope. IACC Occasional Care services that are out of scope have adopted the EYLF and follow the NQS.

Maintaining the NQF will fulfil children's rights to have environments where their identity, ability and culture are valued and respected; environments where positive relationships with educators and peers provide children with the confidence and agency to explore and learn about their world.

Educators need to keep abreast of changes regarding current trends and theories in ECEC, therefore formal training and qualifications are of utmost importance. There needs to be flexible, relevant and targeted training available that is funded to support educators to improve their qualifications and access other professional development.

Increased ratios provide educators with the time to establish and maintain positive relationships with children and their families. This gives children a sense of belonging and the relationships formed with children and families have a significant effect on children's involvement and success in learning. In addition, increased ratios allow for better supervision of children, thereby reducing the risk of harm or accidents.

Qualification requirements ensure educators have knowledge of early childhood care and education which contribute to a high quality learning and care environment.

To date IACC have had five services undertake the assessment and rating process. Four services have achieved a rating of Exceeding the NQS and one service achieved the rating of Meeting the NQS.

Demand for and expectations of childcare and early learning services

It is our view there is need for a more targeted approach to provide and fund services to minimise the risk of gaps in service provision for families and community. Some communities would benefit from a multipurpose service (LDC, Preschool, Occasional Care, OSHC) delivery approach providing flexible delivery in line with community demands, rather than being funded for a specific service type.

A more targeted approach to the planning of new services would assist with issues of gaps in ECEC options, eg. shortages of places for birth – 2 years and oversupply of service provision.

Since the introduction of government subsidy programs in 1991 there has been a rapid increase in the number of for profit providers across Australia. Access to funding mechanisms for community based providers to establish and expand, would increase the number of non profit providers to level the market place for families.

There is an increased demand on ECEC services to act as a triage for families with high dependency needs, eg mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and lack of parenting skills. In some communities these can be the majority of families. Where the majority of families have these issues, services may require funding to provide additional human resources to support families and ensure sustainability.

Availability of childcare and early learning services

Affordability can be an issue for families. All services should have access to a universal fee subsidy system. IACC would encourage the government to consider moving from the current system of parental subsidy of CCB and CCR to a system which funds services directly.

Families with additional needs have difficulty obtaining care as some services will not incur the additional cost between the educators' wages and the ISS/ISP funding available. Services need to have the capacity in both finances and human resources to support the changing needs of families in the workforce, eg shift workers. Currently all operational costs including wages are covered by parent fees, providing a service outside of ordinary working hours would incur penalty rates therefore these fees would be significantly higher. The government needs to offer additional subsidies to services offering extended hours/24 hour care so they maintain an affordable fee for families.

In some rural and remote areas there is a lack of ECEC and OSHC service provision. Families often have to rely on a limited mobile service in their area and may have to travel long distances to access this service. Funding arrangements that encourage multipurpose service provision in these areas would provide flexibility in meeting the needs of families.

Regional, rural and remote services often experience difficulty in operating due to the shortage of qualified and experienced staff in these areas. Ongoing, flexibly funded training options for people

wishing to enter the sector, or for existing workers wishing to upskill, is a critical factor to address this issue.

IACC have worked hard to meet the needs of communities to increase accessibility by:

- adjusting hours of operation and/or extending care with additional services eg OSHC
- increasing approved numbers
- extending nursery areas to cater for high for birth – 2 places
- utilising state government funding to reduce fees in preschool services for 4 – 5 years olds and for children from Indigenous and low income families to make access to ECEC services more affordable
- participating with DEEWR and other organisations through round table discussions to promote the value and importance of all children being able to access an ECEC setting
- using funding grants to extend and improve services
- referring families to other services if we do not have the required care available – this involves developing positive, professional relationships with other services in the area
- Developing partnerships with other early childhood agencies to support children and families.

Services for additional needs and regional and remote areas

With a strong emphasis on equity and accessibility for all socio economic groups, the NQF promotes the inclusion of children from a diverse range of background and abilities. In order to meet the needs of children from disadvantaged, vulnerable families, or with other additional needs it is important that educators have the skills and expertise necessary to support the inclusion of these children. This is necessary to facilitate a positive sense of agency, developing skills and confidence, thereby enriching each child's learning.

There is a recognised shortage of qualified Aboriginal educators and we need to ensure that flexible, accessible training pathways and professional development opportunities are provided. In terms of the government's commitment to 'closing the gap' it is important that Aboriginal children and families have access to Aboriginal educators which will encourage them to use ECEC settings. We understand that employing Aboriginal people and in particular the local community fosters a sense of connectedness and understanding with Aboriginal families and promotes an environment where they are comfortable to share their views and have input into the program.

High quality ECEC services do their best to utilise specialised services to appropriately cater for the needs of children with additional needs. It is recognised that identifying that a child has an additional need in the early years is best, as getting attention and specialist support at the earliest opportunity will support the best possible outcome. Unfortunately funding is limited and further funds need to be directed to support children with additional needs so they have the opportunity to meet their full potential.

There is limited funding to resource services to support children with additional needs and limited availability for early intervention agencies or support services to work with educators at the ECEC service. It takes time for educators to work with families, other professionals including therapists, and review research for children with additional needs. Current funding levels do not allow for this. A more integrated approach at a service level will have benefits for the child, family and educators. Further investment of pilot programs such as the *Kids Together* program, managed by Noah's Ark in the Illawarra region would strengthen successful inclusion, and achieve better outcomes for children with additional needs.

ECEC Workforce

Government support is required to recognise and improve wages for early childhood educators in acknowledgement of the crucial learning and development that takes place in the early years. The role of the early childhood professional has become more complex and the level of responsibility has increased, current financial remuneration is making it difficult for the sector to recruit and retain skilled and experienced educators, particularly those with an early childhood teaching degree. There is extensive research to support the link between qualified educators and quality outcomes for young children.

This review should consider the issues that impact on the sectors ability to maintain a qualified and professional workforce including:

- continuing to fund/subsidise the cost of obtaining early childhood qualifications to attract new educators and upskill existing educators, and in particular fund training pathways that encourage indigenous people to become qualified educators.
- facilitating professional wages to attract and retain more educators to the ECEC sector. This needs to be funded directly by the Government because families and services should not be expected to carry this additional financial burden – school teachers are funded by the Government and early childhood degree qualified teachers deserve the same recognition of their skills and qualifications.

To help maintain our qualified and experienced workforce, IACC policies allow employees to access any IACC service for ECEC including the service where they work. Employees follow the IACC waiting list and enrolment procedures and pay the same fees as any other parent. At this point in time 9 of our 12 services have either the children or grandchildren of the educators working there enrolled.

Cost of childcare and early learning services in Australia / Government regulation of childcare and early learning

As a community owned provider IACC continues to strive for an affordable fee for families. In terms of the NQF, given the length of lead-in time frames, we have been able to have a planned approach to accommodate the required improvements under the NQF into our budgets. We have now commenced planning to accommodate the additional costs of the increased educator:child ratios that will take place in 2016.

It is possible to provide a high quality service and to maintain affordable fees that are extremely competitive in the market place. Our services have always had higher educator:child ratios and a higher number of qualified educators than required by the NQF or the previous NSW regulation. This meant our services already met the Government requirement for all educators to have, or be actively working towards a qualification at Certificate III level or higher by 2014.

At IACC, we have found the NQS and EYLF were very much in line with our practice and we have welcomed the increased emphasis around reflection in all aspects of our work. Our educators have embraced the NQF, they have engaged in a variety of professional learning opportunities to foster new skills, strengthen service delivery and encourage reflection and deeper thinking about how we drive forward quality in practice. In 2013, our educators attended 1460 hours of professional development and 49 internal network meetings, all designed to support their engagement in reflective practice across all aspects of the NQF.

In terms of children's learning, we have not found the documentation to be too onerous, rather, using our qualifications, skills and experience, we record what is relevant and practical. We

understand it is about the quality of documentation, not the quantity, and we use the information we record effectively to guide our planning.

We agree that staffing is one of the highest costs to ECEC services (for our services it equates to 80% of operating costs), however, the benefits of the NQF and regulation of the sector for children and families clearly outweigh other impacts, including costs; children must come first and early education should be valued.