

Background: We are a rural children's service aspicied by a small rural council in southern NSW offering both family day care and in home care. We have educators in a large regional centre but predominantly in a large number of rural towns and villages. We have in the past 12 months expanded our service into Victoria. Our coordination unit is in a central location with educators up to a 2 hour drive away.

Family Day Care Educators: 40

In Home Care Educators: 12

Children in Service: approximately 600

Family Day Care and In Home Care services are tremendously dynamic and flexible. The service has a small number of approved In Home Care Places and Family Day Care and In Home Care educators work under the same policies and procedures and expectations. The majority of educators within the scheme have an extremely accommodating attitude to the provision of services to their families and try extremely hard to accommodate the individual needs of families around work and other commitments and ensure their service is not too expensive. The professionalism of educators has risen significantly over the past couple of years with educators with high level qualifications including early childhood teachers registering as educators. The pressure is mounting however to raise the cost of fees to ensure they have a viable business model that is sustainable.

The scheme itself is heavily reliant on FDC/IHC operational support funding and in comparison to other family day care services in the region has very high levies and charges. Its success is largely due to an exceptional team of experienced, committed and passionate staff with a tremendous work ethic who continually work hours in excess of what they are paid.

1. **National Quality Standard** we believe has been a tremendous success. Our service was assessed in June 2012 approximately the 2nd week of implementation in NSW and exceeded the standard in ALL 7 AREAS. We feel the benefits to the growth and development to children under the NQS have been significantly improved. Our service believes the NQS is manageable and puts the focus on children and less on compliance. Educators and staff are very satisfied with all aspects and delighted to receive recognition from peers. In Home Care at this time is not required to operate within the 2011 Education and Care Services National Regulations but within our service we make no differentiation and all educators have the same expectations.

Recommendation: In Home Care is included in the Education and Care National Regulations and National Quality Standards.

2. **In Home Care:** is a very valuable service particularly for geographically isolated families, families with often severe special needs or illness, and those who need childcare and education outside of mainstream provisions. In Home Care is currently tightly constrained by approved places. The places are approved by state. We currently have no vacancies in NSW during vacation periods but places in Victoria unused that cannot be flexible. It is frustrating to experience this lack of flexibility and to turn families away when they need support.

Recommendation: In Home Care places are uncapped.

3. **Higher Qualifications for Family Day Care Nominated Supervisors.** Family Day Care is making tremendous leaps in being recognised at the same level as other early childhood services but it is being let down by the necessity that they are not required to have an early childhood teacher in any capacity to guide the quality of the service.

Recommendation: Family Day Care Services have a requirement for an early childhood teacher to guide the pedagogy in a similar capacity to requirements for centre-based services.

4. **1:4 ratios in NSW.** Educators and staff within the service in general understand and support the link between smaller ratios and quality education and care outcomes for children. Over the past 2 years have worked towards the transition from 1:5 to 1:4 and are now ready and looking forward to the lower ratio. FDC costs have risen but the service when at its best can be exceptional and offer many advantages in smaller groups which we aim to have parents recognise. Our service also recognises the link between higher qualifications of educators and better outcomes for children. We also have educators licensed in Victoria and can see the 1:4 ratio - where it has been in action for some time - successful and working well. However where educators have diploma level early childhood qualifications or above there is a strong case to argue that educators are able to fully implement high quality education and care services for 5 under school age children.

Recommendation: Educators with early childhood diploma qualification or higher are able to have a ratio of 1:5

Educators with certificate III 1:4 ratio

Educators not yet completed cert III 1:3 ratio

5. **Educators Own Children.** Educators own children are the invisible children within Family Day Care. They have little recognition and are largely ignored. We would be pleased to see educators own children as equally valuable and entitled to educational input to reach their full potential. Educators who have their own under school age children should be entitled to claim CCB and CCR for their own service. In rural areas educators are often not able to register their children in any other childcare service – they are the only childcare service in the community. This is a huge disincentive to recruit educators in rural communities – with their own

children not entitled to CCB or CCR it is not viable. Coordination units are also stretching resources (especially in rural areas) and would receive the additional Operational funding to monitor educators own children.

Recommendation: Educators receive the same CCB and CCR entitlements for their own children.

- 6. RTAG:** From January 2014 the regional travel assistance grant for “Inner Regional” services will be revoked. Our service does not think the current system is equitable whereby services such as ours are classified in the same funding bracket as regional cities. Currently we receive 70c per childcare hour Operational support. Our service received approx. \$12 000 per annum RTAG which provided a little extra assistance to cover costs.

Case study: Our service is critical in Urana (approximately a 2 hour drive from the coordination unit). We have one educator who works 4 days per week. She provides care and education for parents who work in: the primary school, the high school, Urana Shire, the police force, the medical clinic - the local Doctor, not to mention working mothers on properties who are as entitled to the same services as any other family. It would appear the town could not function without her. Due to economic rationalisation our service could have to cease supporting this valuable educator – in the future we may not be able to afford the required resources.

7. Costs to Support Rural Educators.

Rural educators cost more money to support. **Our service has significantly more stress upon resources than our regional centre counterparts.** Some factors that contribute to the greater cost include:

- Travel costs: vehicle expenses and travel time to recruit, train, provide regular support, run play groups, meet with parents to let them know the role of the coordination unit, conduct parent interviews and collect required paperwork.
- Greater cost to establish educators: in general in rural areas homes have larger backyards; are older; have dams and more hazards in vicinity and are more expensive to bring up to the required safety standards.
- Educators often have lower levels of formal education and less access to education. They have less confidence to complete certificate III in Children Services and need more support to do so.
- More effort is required to recruit educators. Advertising is across many different small and local print mediums and it is difficult to have a physical presence in the town.
- Coordination units are required to form partnerships in communities to provide a high quality service. This is a strain on resources. E.g. our service has educators across more than 17 towns and villages and 7 Shires. They have many schools, many pre-schools, many Child and Maternal Health Nurses, many toy libraries; many support agencies, many interagency groups. We are unable to form the vital community partnerships at the desired level.

- Educators in rural communities often wish to work less days and less hours as the demand is often for part-time children's education and care.
- Small towns can be a difficult environment in which to establish Family Day Care. Many times we have worked hard to recruit, register and licence an educator who does not get the required support from a community that hags back. Educators may not be able to persevere long enough to make their service a success.
- It is harder to recruit educators as it is not seen as worth the effort and expense for prospective educators.
- Often no other childcare services exist to allow them to place their child in a service to claim CCB and CCR and free up additional spaces for other children. Educators should be able to claim CCB/CCR for their own children.

Fact: Our service has More Educators with Less EFT than our regional based neighbours.

Recommendation: an educator start-up grant is available for rural educators to attract potential educators and assist with the start-up costs.

Recommendation: the Operational Support funding to family day care and In Home Care classifications are revised to reflect distances to isolated educators and the real cost of support to educators.

8. Burden of Administration. From 1 January 2014 Education and Care services across NSW are required by law to collect recognised documentation to show children are immunised or have an exemption or conscientiously object. In addition they are required to maintain current documentation for every child in the service. This is a huge burden on our service with approximately 600 children. We cannot understand why we are required to do this when there already exists a checking mechanism with CCB and CCR payments linked to keeping immunisations up-to-date.

9. In Venue Care. Many opportunities exist in rural communities where this model could provide a great boost. In many of our small towns there is a huge need for before and after school care but not enough demand to support an OOSH service. Lots of pressure is being placed on Family Day Care educators. Many primary schools love the idea of In Venue Care on their premises and in principle are willing to help to meet safety requirements and regulations but the big problem is finding an educator. **Recommendation: as above a rural educator start-up grant.**

10. Unethical Family Day Care Operators. We are aware of at least one service in our area operating outside of regulations.

Recommendation: More stringent checks and audits for service operators.

Provide more checks and audits for services applying Special Child Care Benefit to ensure it is not rorted. Ensure fraudulent operators are not able to continue and are held accountable. Special CCB is an excellent provision allowing services to approve up to 13 weeks per financial year of child care at no cost to families in extenuating circumstances and when children are at risk of harm however it is reliant on the ethics of the service to manage it appropriately. It is far too easy for operators to abuse and rort.

11. **Multicare:** Within our In Home Care service we are able to offer "multicare" where families can join together to use In Home Care. This provides for a more cost effective option and the high cost of IHC is split between the families. Also in many cases we are unable to find enough educators to meet the need of IHC. Unfortunately this must be individually approved by the Australian Department of Education every 6 months. This creates uncertainty and significant additional paperwork.

Recommendation: Multicare needs no additional approvals beyond the existing criteria for IHC.

12. **Inclusion Support Funding:** Inclusion support is difficult to obtain, involves significant paperwork and viewed by many as not worth the effort. Recently an educator in our service cared for a very high needs child over the Xmas Holidays to give his stressed out parents a break. Our service contacted the CCMS helpdesk to seek advice about special child care benefit. We were told that it was "respite care" and categorically could not be applied in this instance as it is not the intended purpose of SCCB. We then contacted the ISS area facilitator and completed all requirements to apply for some ISS to help reflect the care and dedication of the work by the educator. Regrettably this also was unsuccessful. There are significant problems with supporting families with a child with a disability in mainstream early childhood services. Very few services are available to cope with some very special children and in our case when it was available the educator basically did it for love!