

Established in 1930, Churches of Christ Care is one of the largest, most diverse not-for-profit organisations in Australia, operating more than 150 care services throughout Queensland – from Townsville to Tweed Heads and west to Cunnamulla – and Melbourne, Victoria, with the support of approximately 3,000 staff and almost 650 volunteers.

A division of Churches of Christ in Queensland and working with Churches of Christ in Vic/Tas, Churches of Christ Care is active in the areas of early childhood services, child protection, community housing, retirement living, community aged care, residential aged care and dementia care, providing Christ-inspired care and compassion to vulnerable persons at different stages of their life journey.

Churches of Christ Care is built on a foundation of Christian values, commitment to quality care, trust, and respect for clients and the community. Services are offered to all those in need regardless of religious background.

The organisation is incorporated under Letters Patent under the Religious, Educational and other Charitable Institutions Act. Services are funded by a mix of government subsidies, grants, fundraising activities, and fees and charges for services such as early childhood, retirement living and residential aged care. Community housing projects have been made possible through funding from the federal government's Nation Building – Economic Stimulus Plan.

Child, Youth and Family Care

Churches of Christ Care's Child, Youth and Family Care area encompasses early childhood programs and the child protection service. The organisation also provides parenting support and education programs for families using the services. Support is based on the interests and needs of families in local communities.

Churches of Christ Care is one of the leading not-for-profit providers of high quality, approved child care services in Queensland, operating 22 services for children aged 0-16 years, which are both in-scope and out-of-scope under the National Quality Framework.

Churches of Christ Care is also one of the largest non-government providers of child protection services in Queensland, providing foster/kinship care, respite care, and residential and supported independent care to approximately 2,800 children and young people each year, with services at Mt Isa, Townsville, Bowen, Mackay, Bundaberg, Maryborough Fraser Coast, Caboolture, Brisbane, Ipswich, Logan and the Gold Coast.

Executive Summary

Churches of Christ Care is one of the leading not-for-profit providers of high quality, approved child care services in Queensland, operating 22 services for children aged 0-16 years.

The organisation's early childhood services were developed with the child, family and educator in mind and include centre-based care, kindergarten, occasional care, limited hours care, family day care, outside of school hours and vacation care, in-home care, a family support service, and a rural mobile children's service based at St George.

Churches of Christ Care is also one of the largest non-government providers of child protection services in Queensland, providing foster/kinship care, respite care, and residential and supported independent care to approximately 2,800 children and young people each year who are under the care of the Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services or at risk of being taken into care. A further 750 children and families are supported through its assessment and intervention services.

As the organisation is at the forefront of Child, Youth and Family Care service providers, we are in a position where we can see the difference early intervention can make in the lives of children and young people. Early Childhood Services are frequently the first places where problem or issues are noticed.

Funding for Early Childhood is about more than educational outcomes or allowing parents to return to the workforce; it is about developmental milestones and intervention to support the family to maintain care of their children. It is about outcomes more than outputs – individual outcomes for individual children regardless of their postcode – and offering a level playing field to achieve this.

Funding is about appropriately qualified and monitored educators who are paid at a level that recognises they are the difference in creating these outcomes for children. Working under the National Quality Framework reassures parents and families that their children are in more than just a safe place; they are in an environment where they will learn and develop and be ready for transition to school. We feel that although it is challenging to ensure quality trained staff for all services, it is our obligation to go the extra distance to value all children and families we work with.

Churches of Christ Care has purposely written this to include stories from our services. These are real and demonstrate that this is about real families trying to provide the best for their children.

Introduction

Churches of Christ Care welcomes the opportunity to address some of the issues raised in the Terms of Reference for the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning. We are of the view that the breadth of the issues means we are not able to respond to all areas but we are interested in addressing the critical issues that are particularly relevant to the services we support across metropolitan, regional and rural Queensland.

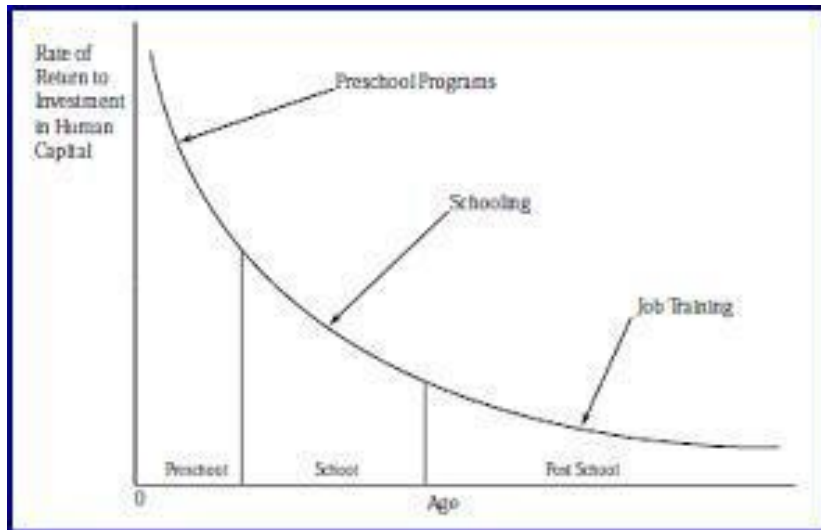
We are aware that government is in an economic environment that must consider the 'Return on Investment' of money spent "across the board", but we would encourage this Inquiry to frame their deliberations on a balance of social returns coupled with financial returns.

In its paper entitled "Investing in High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care", the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) clearly outlines that:

"There are three broad rationales for putting public resources into high quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). First, it has significant economic and social payoffs. Second, it supports parents and boosts female employment. Third, it is part

of society's responsibility to educate children, to combat child poverty and to help children overcome educational disadvantage".

Interestingly, this particular paper goes on to say that a dollar, euro or yen spent on preschool programmes generates a higher return on investment than the same dollar, euro or yen spent on schooling.



Source: www.heckmanequation.org

This is of particular relevance to our submission as we wish to address the following areas:

1. How does Government Support to families and childcare providers impact on flexibility and affordability of childcare?
 - a. The needs of vulnerable or at risk children. This is discussed with particular relevance to the non mainstream funded services mentioned.
 - b. Where funding is paid directly to operators of ECEC Services, what conditions should apply?
2. Services for additional needs and regional and remote areas, and the particular needs of rural, regional and remote parents, as well as shift workers. This is also discussed under the area of non mainstream funded services.
3. Initiatives of providers to address their workforce shortages and skill needs, including the cost and effectiveness of these initiatives.
 - a. Particular locations and areas of skill for which it is hard to find qualified workers

Key Questions Covered

How does government support to families and childcare providers impact on flexibility and affordability of childcare.

Churches of Christ Care works very closely with communities throughout Queensland and in Melbourne, Victoria. We provide services in communities that have an absolute right for their children to be given similar opportunities to children that live in more largely

populated areas. Without government funding, services would close. In a small service staffing costs barely match income. These are not commercial models that can be bought and sold on the open market. Community-based providers are the backbone of these communities, often being one of the larger employers in a town when a range of services are being provided by the one organisation. For communities to continue to stay alive they need to have access to non-mainstream services that are funded at a basic level.

Community-based services are not profit motivated, but do not mistake that for meaning that such services are any less motivated because they are not-for-loss as well! It is about giving back to the communities that they operate in. Without the support of government funding, families would be even more penalised by their postcode and children would, in effect, be at an educational disadvantage.

The nature of services like our Mobile Children's Service in St George and In Home Care service, provide flexibility that is essential for communities in rural areas. The size and remoteness of places where some families live and work make this the only option. These services are still about quality outcomes for children, both developmentally and educationally, in the time before school. Funding makes these services affordable for families.

The experiences of providing more flexible Early Childhood Services

Churches of Christ Care supports and monitors two budget-based services that operate in the west and far west regions of Queensland. Churches of Christ Care is also funded under the Community Support Program, which provides payments to In-Home Care (IHC). These are considered under the banner of Non-Mainstream Funding with the following conditions:

- Non Mainstream Services (NMS) are child care services where the Australian Government provides the majority of the operational funding for the service by directly funding that service. NMS have been established to provide child care and early learning opportunities where the market would otherwise fail to deliver childcare.
- NMS are generally provided by not-for-profit organisations and are located mainly in regional, remote and/or Indigenous communities. These services are often in areas where a mainstream childcare service is not viable or sustainable. Many NMS are the sole provider of childcare in their community.
- NMS are generally not approved for the purposes of administering Child Care Benefit (CCB). Families using NMS are, therefore, not eligible to claim CCB or the Child Care Rebate (CCR). The cost to families in using these services, however, is minimal, as the Australian Government meets the majority of the costs involved in providing these services through operational funding grants.
- While the majority of NMS have an Indigenous focus, services are open to all children in the relevant community and are tailored to the needs of the whole community.

NMS are funded to address the following issues:

- The failure of the market to deliver mainstream child care (for example, in regional and remote areas)
- The need for culturally competent services, in particular Indigenous-focussed childcare services (across all geographic areas, from metropolitan to remote).

The common objectives of all NMS are:

- to deliver quality childcare that enhances the cultural, physical, social, emotional and linguistic learning development of all children
- to provide flexible early childhood education and childcare services that meet the needs of all families in the community
- to foster individual children's strengths, abilities and interests through the provision of developmentally and culturally appropriate play and learning experiences.

Churches of Christ Care Mobile Children's Service at St George

Based at Churches of Christ Care Warrawee Aged Care Service, Churches of Christ Care Mobile Children's Service at St George delivers a high quality, mobile early childhood service to families living within a radius up to approximately 135km from St George.

With a specially outfitted and equipped van, educators from the Mobile Children's Service visit local communities (Boolba, Teelba, Thallon, Bollon and Surat) and utilise a range of community venues to deliver kindergarten-age programs and supported playgroups. The range of venues currently includes a wool shed and playground at Boolba Showgrounds, the Gun Club at Teelba School, the shire hall at Thallon, the old preschool building at Bollon, and the supper room off the shire hall at Surat.

Approximately 48 families access the service across the five locations, with the mobile service travelling over 1000kms per week. Some families from Bollon travel up one hour to attend the mobile session, which has been affectionately dubbed 'the bush kindergarten' to differentiate between it and E-Kindy (kindergarten online, accessed by these same families).

For some families it is recognised that the opportunity to attend the mobile program with their young kindergarten-aged children is an important point of social contact, not only for their children but for parents and families as well. Because of the geographic challenges involved in linking with other families and community events, the mobile service provides a valuable opportunity for social connection and peer support.

The Mobile Children's Service at St George, in addition to providing the play-based program for children, further supports the families in these communities through providing early assessment and intervention.

The service acts as a facilitator, connecting families with other professionals and support agencies that may assist their children's health and education needs, such as speech and occupational therapists. In some instances, monitoring and assessment by educators or the service manager has positively assisted in the early identification of children's additional needs. The service manager and educators have then been able to piggyback off their positive relationships with families to introduce them to other support agencies.

The support therapists communicate with educators at the mobile service directly around what additional strategies and activities can be implemented to further support the individual care and health needs of the children accessing the mobile service, further improving the efficacy of the service.

Communication and feedback with families is maintained largely through verbal communication at venues, phone calls to the office and emails to the service manager. An annual “Mobile Family Meeting” is arranged to further support two-way communications and access some direct feedback from those using the service. This feedback helps to inform further improvements at the service. Whilst the venues are diverse and attendance can sometimes be impacted by weather and road conditions, the need to connect with others is a constant driver and incentive to deliver a quality face-to-face program for these rural and remote families. This is highlighted in their positive feedback about the service.

Despite currently being outside of National Quality Framework scope, the budget-based programs within Churches of Christ Care continue to implement the suite of policies and procedures available to all of Church of Christ Care’s Early Childhood Services. This helps to address the Seven Quality Areas in the National Quality Standards and ensure a quality improvement approach is adopted.

Stories from the service

1. A little girl who regularly attended the mobile service was observed by the service manager during her play. The service manager noticed she was rubbing her eyes a lot, particularly when using puzzles or doing detailed work. It was noticed that she did this on more than one occasion, so not necessarily due to tiredness. The service manager spoke to speech therapist who was attending the program that day and she said she had also noticed but not commented on this action.

The service manager talked to the mother that afternoon, then later rang an occupational therapist to find out who the mother could touch base with to make an appointment in town. There was a discussion about how this was particularly important, given that the three-year-old was transitioning into prep in the new year.

The service manager followed up with the mother again who has made an appointment in Dalby to get her eyes checked.

2. The mobile service works closely with the speech therapist and occupational therapist from St George, especially at Bollon and now Thallon. It has enabled families to access these services for important sessions and crucial assessments before going into Prep. The occupational and speech therapists would discuss concerns for children with the educators and appreciated not only us giving them the space and time during the sessions to carry their work out, but the feedback that as professionals we could provide.

Teelba also has a clinic nurse who uses the mobile service on a playgroup day once a term. This allows parents and children to gather in a friendly and stimulating environment whilst accessing a service they would have to travel more than an hour to obtain.

Churches of Christ Care Youth Vacation Care at Cunnamulla

Operating out of Churches of Christ Care Kindergarten and Early Childhood Centre at Cunnamulla is another crucial support for this far western community, Cunnamulla Youth Vacation Care. The service provides a high-quality Youth Vacation Care program for school aged children, for a minimum of seven weeks over a 12-month period.

Educators who deliver the program hold recognised early childhood qualifications and current First Aid certification.

There are currently seven families (13 children) regularly using the service for each Vacation Care period and another five families using the service casually.

All families have working parents, working at the police station, court house, council, petrol station, community businesses, retailers, shops and Churches of Christ Care's Early Childhood Centre.

All these services are considered vital to delivering goods and services in the Cunnamulla community, with the majority of these families identifying that they do not have extended family to fall back on if this program were not available. Most could not safely take their children to their workplaces, or would need to take additional leave or unpaid leave to look after their children if the Youth Vacation Care program was not available, which might jeopardise their employment.

The Youth Vacation Care program is delivered with age appropriate equipment, in a venue for the primary age child, separate to the under-5s. Parents are very happy with this arrangement and comment positively on both the program and activities provided, such as cooking and craft. They noted in verbal feedback to the service manager that they appreciate the children are also able to go safely off-site on excursions to the library, tourist centre, police station, post office and so on.

The service manager is part of a regular community meeting attended by key representatives from the education and care services, health and community groups, and police and youth groups. This meeting enables these key community stakeholders to share all relevant information about the services and activities provided to children and families in the community. This in turn helps to facilitate a holistic approach to caring for the whole community.

Churches of Christ Care In-Home Childcare Wide Bay

Churches of Christ Care is also funded to operate an In-Home Childcare service in the Wide Bay region that operates from a base in Maryborough but supports families across central and south west Queensland. It was through the "greater flexibility and choice in childcare" element of the Australian Government's Stronger Families and Community Strategy, announced by the Prime Minister in April 2000, which included making In-Home Childcare available to families in special circumstances.

Funded by the Australian Government for almost nine years, In-Home Childcare is a flexible form of childcare where the care is provided in the child's home by an approved carer. To ensure quality outcomes for children, the care is monitored and supported by an approved agency, such as Churches of Christ Care, as the service provider.

In-Home Childcare is not available to everyone, but limited to families who have no access to existing childcare services, whose circumstances mean that an existing childcare service cannot meet their needs, or who meet one or more of the following criteria:

- The child has, or lives with another child who has, an illness or disability.
- The child's guardian (or guardian's partner) has an illness or disability that affects their ability to care for the child.
- The child lives in a rural or remote area.
- The work hours of the child's guardian (or guardian's partner) are hours when no other approved childcare service is available.
- The child's guardian (or guardian's partner) is caring for three or more children who have not yet started school.

Stories from the service

1. One of the families accessing Churches of Christ Care In-Home Childcare in Wide Bay is a family of seven children aged 15 months to 12 years, and one on the way. The father has mental health issues and the family had been struggling as the mother was not able to deal with the stressful environment, physically or emotionally. This was a classic case where without some timely intervention these children would have entered the child protection system with little hope of reunification. The father removed himself and Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services staff went to see what was needed.

Churches of Christ Care In-Home Childcare in Wide Bay is helping the family work towards rebuilding their family unit. This includes assistance with behaviour management, teaching the children how to manage their behaviours in the family unit, and connecting them together as a team.

2. "Joe" is a single father with four children under five, including a set of twins. Through accessing Churches of Christ Care In-Home Childcare, he was able to stay in his home and keep the children who would otherwise be in foster care. It has allowed him to study and be able to go back to work. The future care of the children will be shared between Churches of Christ Care In-Home Childcare and local Family Day Care to ensure the family can stay together and that dad can manage the hard times when all four children are home.

The Inquiry is seeking evidence on the effect of different types of ECEC on children's development and preparedness for school. The information we have provided is intended to paint a picture that is not dry facts and statistics. This Inquiry is about the children and families in the community and shouldn't just be about preparedness for school, as this is only a part of the developmental milestones for children.

Funding for children's services is also about access to early intervention before a child or a family comes to the attention of the Department. It is about picking up developmental issues as early as possible to ensure that intervention is at the right time to actually make a difference at this crucial stage in a child's life.

Initiatives of providers to address their workforce shortages and skill needs, including the cost and effectiveness of these initiatives

Churches of Christ Care is committed to thinking proactively about how to support staff within our services. We have a number of strategies developed to ensure staff feel valued and share our commitment to providing high quality ECEC.

We have:

- salary sacrifice arrangements
- negotiated discounts for all staff on private healthcare
- negotiated discounts on car servicing and tyres
- negotiated discounts on travel and leisure
- an Employee Benefit System that supports staff with free counselling and support services
- a staff assistance fund to financially support staff in times of crisis
- Enterprise Agreements that mean we remunerate our staff above award rates in the areas of pay and conditions.

More specifically we have considered what we need to do in the more challenging staffing areas:

- In Cunnamulla, south-west Queensland, the issue is finding sufficient numbers of suitably experienced and qualified staff to staff Churches of Christ Cares' Kindergarten, Early Childhood and Vacation Care programs. Again, we have adopted an innovative whole-site/ whole-service stream approach, enabling us to either use an educator from one of our other Early Childhood Services – located hundreds of kilometres from Cunnamulla – or the more recent adopted approach of using kindergarten staff in out-of-term times.
- Where educators have driven or flown in from out of town, Churches of Christ Care has supported travel and accommodation costs, plus meals, to ensure that the benefits for staff in experiencing the different culture of a rural/remote service are not outweighed by the cost involved.

This has provided additional benefits in connecting experienced senior staff with their peers in another service type or location and the opportunity for educators to extend their professional growth through coaching/mentoring others.

Particular locations and areas of skill for which it is hard to find qualified workers

The biggest challenge facing the Approved Provider in delivering these much valued services continues to be recruitment of suitable staff. There is the ongoing critical issue of a lack of accommodation available in rural and regional centres such as Chinchilla, St George and Cunnamulla. This is common in both mining and non-mining towns across the state. Churches of Christ Care has supported innovative arrangements, such as covering the accommodation costs for an interim qualified educator, to deliver the program throughout a

term of 2013, at an approximate cost of more than \$8,000 - including 10 weeks accommodation, plus \$1500 in recruitment cost.

Stories abound across the sector of the difficulties in both recruiting and retaining staff. We have included a couple of examples below. Sadly these are not unusual and reflect the poor level of pay versus the high responsibility of doing these roles. The constant refrain is that, "I can earn more money with much less somewhere else". We know that a majority of staff do the role because of their commitment to the children and families, and the love of what they do. However, this is not sustainable in a society that does not recognise the value of these types of roles.

These stories are relevant and specific because they document a number of social issues found in small towns that are struggling to keep school leavers from moving to larger centres. There are thousands of stories like these. They reflect the challenges of finding and keeping qualified workers in these places:

- A case where a staff member in regional Queensland (about 1000kms west of Brisbane) working towards a Diploma Qualification, was approached by a local retailer whilst she was at work! This gentleman entered the service and walked up to her and offered her a job working for him for in excess of \$35 per hour, compared to the \$23 per hour she is paid by the service. *
- Another staff member in regional Queensland (more than 800kms west of Brisbane) was receiving calls from the local service station offering a shift and said that if she could "come now" she would be offered much more money there. Just to emphasise this point, she walked out of the service because she could earn \$8 more per hour at the local service station.*

The challenge for us in both these cases was that we had no alternative availability of suitably qualified staff to replace either temporarily or permanently.

* Please note Services not identified due to privacy concerns.

Where funding is paid directly to operators of ECEC services, what conditions should apply?

As indicated earlier in this submission, it is common knowledge that government is looking for return on investment. The challenge in the future is to look at social impacts as well as financial ones. What differences can we as parents, educators and the community in general make in a child's life in the vital years before and the transition to formal schooling?

This does not mean driving formal schooling down; it means seeing the holistic view of the opportunities offered by services in the formative years and encouraging all the very best in specialised ECEC.

The services that receive funding from the government are all bound by the acquittal processes that attempt to measure outputs: how many children, for how many days, in how many venues.

Where are we attempting to set outcome measures? How do we determine lead and lag indicators?

The National Quality Framework is being used by 'In Scope' services as a measure of quality and continuous improvement. Churches of Christ Care believes that this needs to be extended to 'Out of Scope' services as well. As a provider that has both types of services we do not see that there should be any differences in expectations between the two different areas.

Much work has been done in Queensland gathering data for the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). Data is collected nationally every three years that provides a snapshot of how children are developing by the time they reach school. The AEDI can be used by educators and service providers to:

- understand children's learning and development needs at a community level
- address National Quality Standard Quality Areas and assist in developing Quality Improvement Plans
- advocate for new programs and services for children in the community
- act as a platform to form collaborative community partnerships.

(From <http://deta.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/about/news/aedi.html>)

We propose that there are opportunities to better use this data in preparing acquittals to validate the use of funding.

In Closing

Churches of Christ Care has purposely used stories that are real in an attempt to demonstrate a more representative picture of the places and families that we interact with. We would be pleased to speak further with the Commission should it be felt that we can add value to the deliberations.

References

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). "Investing in High Quality early Childhood Education and Care".

<http://www.oecd.org/BFFCB837-E3DD-4C7F-83EA-0BBA9E42A5E3/FinalDownload/DownloadId-602BD47944BC833B941630C70C2D5BB8/BFFCB837-E3DD-4C7F-83EA-0BBA9E42A5E3/edu/school/48980282.pdf>

[Australian Early Development Index \(AEDI\)](http://deta.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/about/news/aedi.html)

<http://deta.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/about/news/aedi.html>