

I currently own/operate two child care centres in Sydney's north western suburbs in Epping and Baulkham Hills. My family has been in the Child Care Industry for over 50 years and I have personally owned a centre for the last 10 years. Both of the centres within my management and control have achieved Exceeding ratings in the National Quality Framework in the last 18 months.

Current and future need for childcare in Australia, particularly given changes in work patterns, early learning needs, childcare affordability and government assistance

It is very clear that the need for child care currently and in the future is very high. Work patterns are changing and the need for flexible care arrangements is increasing. In recent years improvements to ratios in child care centres, increased demand and quality improvements and increasing regulations have forced service providers to increase fees.

It is without doubt that increased staff ratios and qualification requirements results in more positive and higher quality outcomes for children. Our service has not had any issues with implementing the new staffing ratios under the NQF. There is a strong case for greater recognition and assessment of competencies as an alternative in some cases to additional formal training and qualifications. This is already an option for many existing educators and more funding should go into supporting this model. There is significant evidence to suggest that increases to staff ratios and qualification requirements has increased the cost of employing ECEC workers. Increased staffing costs have been passed on in higher fees charged to families.

Child Care Centre affordability

It is often lamented that in the busiest areas of Australia that there is also very high prices for child care. Often this is due to the fact that operators pay high costs for rent and land to set up and pay ongoing expenses to establish and maintain premises. It holds true that if demand for land is high and expensive then it will be the same for child care centres where current floor space ratios dictate the number of children any service can have at any time. Perhaps it's time to revisit the current floor space determination and allow services to have more children in the same space? If this was done across all services nationally it would allow existing providers to offer more care under the existing models of the quality framework. This could be one measure to ease the pressure and burden on the child care industry.

I'd also recommend that for services who are already providing care that 'meets' or 'exceeds' the National Quality Framework that the government seek to fast track those operators to grant new licences to operate new child care centres.

Government Assistance

Through the current model of CCB & CCR is a good one but is quite onerous and cumbersome. Often families can wait long periods of time to have any funding applied through the family assistance office. It is not straightforward to determine how much financial assistance you will receive. Perhaps it should be an option for families to get an annual tax deduction for child care costs in their tax return rather than tying it to services or carers. It should be up to a family to determine what kind of care suits the needs of their families, rather than the government dictating how and what care should be funded.

Government support is important for families to be able to seek child care and return to the workforce. The level of overall government support for ECEC should be maintained or increase.

It is confusing and costly to deal with the large number of programs and agencies administering ECEC support. We use qikkids to administer our fees and find it difficult to track child/family payments for CCB/CCR and ISS specifically from payments to our bank to specific children. We do find that existing arrangements for delivering support present difficulties for ECEC providers in assisting families with resolving eligibility or payment issues. With payments frequently delayed. We have had many families which have had issues with the FAO providing incorrect information about timing and eligibility of payments. The FAO has told families that we are withholding payments from families, which is incorrect as they are automatically applied through our fees system as they are received from the government.

I believe funding for child care should be given directly to families and not left to services to manage. The income and tax of each family determines the level of funding that a family should receive, not the service or the quality of the service. Why should a family be penalised if the only available service is one that can't receive child care funding?

I don't believe that not-for-profit services should receive greater funding from the government. It encourages them to become inefficient and operate at a level which is unsustainable for the industry. If there is a pay increase it should be given to all in the sector not a small minority who manage to negotiate it with the unions or their heavily funded community organisations. All services are trying to achieve quality outcomes for children and the funding should reflect that some of the best services are privately owned and operated.

Long Day Care Centres are currently heavily regulated through local, state and federal government agencies. All of these place an administrative burden

Local government

Various local governments have differing requirements with regard to the establishment of childcare centres across Australia. We need to have uniform and standard regulations with regard to the planning and establishment of centres. For example some councils make the establishment of services prohibitive by demanding the following:

- unnecessary numbers of parking spaces for child care centres
- a prescribed number of under two year old places in the establishment of a service.
- Other onerous planning and controls

Options for improving the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of childcare for families with diverse circumstances

Currently care for children aged 0-2 is the most expensive and difficult to find care for. This is due to the fact that the current ratios of 4 children for each carer make it unprofitable for many child care centre operators to provide places for this age group. The high fees are in place to ensure that operators actually make a profit on this group. Many families need care from 6 months – 18 months and the positions simply are not available and cost prohibitive.

Many families are prescriptive with regard to the care that they need and unfortunately the services don't have flexibility to provide the care on the days that families need it. For example care might become available for one day per week on a Friday but a family may need 3 consecutive days of care.

There are limited positions available for this age group and perhaps another viable option should be to allow qualified nannies to provide care. I would suggest that anyone providing care needs to have a minimum of a Certificate 3 in Children's Services before they can obtain child care funding for children in their care. This could also assist families that need care outside normal care hours by providing a more flexible funding model to various types of care. However, it needs to be understood that by funding care from individuals it is difficult to regulate the quality of care provided and monitor the various issues surrounding child protection.

Another option may be to allow child care centre operators to manage a network of nannies under their existing licence. Existing operators already have the knowledge around regulation and quality standards and could hire nannies and monitor their placement directly with families.

Long Day Care Centres and out of school hours services significantly contribute to workforce participation and child development. Preschools only provide short care to families who work restricted hours i.e. 9am-3pm. Long Day Care Centres and out of school hours enable families to continue contributing to the workforce for longer each day and for more weeks of the year. More licences should be granted for extended care providers and extensions to existing operators should be offered to existing operators.

Workforce Shortages

We currently find workforce shortages for Early Childhood Teachers (from university). We often have to pay above award to retain these teachers. In NSW we have more ECT's on staff than required as NSW regulation provisions do not allow ECT's to have holidays and not be replaced to meet the qualification requirements. NSW should not be under specific provisions that require the replacement of ECT's with ECT's when they are on holidays. However, they should be allowed to be away from the service for sick and annual leave without replacement. This would reduce the burden to replace these Teachers through casual teachers and agency staff who are very expensive. Teachers in early child care are paid less than teachers in the primary school system and are required to work longer hours and for more weeks of the year. This results in many ECT's leaving the industry to work in the school system. Overall Child Care Workers are not paid well and this impacts many as to whether they work in the industry. My services have lost educators to other professions due to the low pay and conditions.

Impacts of the National Quality Framework & changing regulation

Changing regulations and frameworks in the industry over the last decade have been resulted in positive outcomes for children and made some significant improvements for the quality of care provided for children. However, the NQF and regulations in place for long care services are also onerous and place upward pressure on the industry to provide more administrative time in complying with all of the changes. This increase in time in implementing the ever evolving environment means that more money must be invested by services to comply. Ultimately this cost of compliance is passed onto families through a fee increase for the care provided. I would not suggest unravelling the new regulations in place but I would suggest simplifying and bring the focus back on:

- providing quality care and interactions and health and safety for children
- having a recognised early learning curriculum
- identifying those children with additional learning needs and providing support to families to ensure that additional resources are funded.

I also believe that the NQF should be weighted around these top outcomes for children, not just on administrative functions of services and factors such as environmental sustainability.

The National Quality Framework can be ambiguous and difficult for services to navigate. While both of my services have achieved 'Exceeding' ratings this has been through a lot of hard work and determination to meet these standards. I was informed that a rating of 'Meeting' is Best Practice, and a rating of 'Exceeding' is beyond Best Practice. It can be fairly challenging for many services who are providing excellent care environments for children to find the time to go beyond best practice in everything that they do. I believe that the requirements for each rating need to be clearer and more prescriptive. I believe that most services are trying to do their best. If they are given more guidance around what that is meant to be rather than each service re-inventing the wheel it would be better overall for the industry. More sharing from agencies around services that are doing the right thing to provide inspiration and insight for those who really don't have any idea would be helpful.

Capacity of the childcare system to ensure a satisfactory transition to schools, in particular for vulnerable or at risk children

Currently both of my centres provide a comprehensive preschool programme in the year prior to school. Some families believe that they will receive a better preschool readiness programme by sending their children to a specific preschool with hours of 9-3pm. The same level of education can be provided in a long day care setting and families need to be educated that 'preschool' education is available in this format. Again I would recommend that the curriculum for a preschool program is prescribed nationally. Currently we have fairly broad recommendations from the Early Learning Years Framework and I believe that this needs to be clearer so that services can implement a program that will ensure a satisfactory transition into school.

My services are also part of the STaR programme which integrates children with additional needs into our service. I believe that there needs to be more government funding to assist additional carers within services for children who have additional needs or learning delays.

Everyone in the industry is striving to achieve quality care and outcomes for children. I do hope that this review will result in positive outcomes for the industry.