

Communicare Inc.: Submission Re: Child Care and Early Childhood Learning

3 February 2014

Communicare Inc. is a dynamic not-for-profit organisation which helps more than a quarter of a million Australians every year. Supported by a staff of over 280 and a strong base of volunteers, Communicare's philosophy is one of local people helping local people. Since 1977, the organisation has grown rapidly establishing a reputation for innovation, leadership and professional excellence in Children and Family, Community and Cultural, Accommodation, Therapeutic, Education, Training and Employment Services. Communicare Inc. is forwarding this submission on behalf of our Children and Family Services Department.

Question 1: The contribution of childcare to workforce participation and child development:

1A: The contribution of childcare to workforce participation:

- Significant reduction of available people in the workforce if parents cannot access quality child care options.
- Ability of parents to focus on workforce tasks with confidence knowing that their child/ren are attending quality education and care services.

1B: The contribution of childcare to child development:

- Quality learning environments outside the child's own home (extend on the learning opportunities provided by parents/carers by engaging children in new and unique experiences).
- Builds attachments with other significant adults to foster social and emotional skills to effectively manage transition to school.
- Develops social emotional skills with peers and develops ability to build relationships and effectively interact with others.
- Supports pre-literacy and numeracy skills.
- In areas where the AEDI is showing high vulnerability - child care can assist to improve children's outcomes through quality learning experiences.
- Child care can connect families to other services and information in the community to support child development. This is particularly relevant to FDC as the FDC educators reside in the local community and have extensive knowledge of the local schools and other community services in their local area.
- Government approved Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services have access to Inclusion Support Agencies that can provide support and additional funding to ensure a child with an additional needs is included successfully into a program.

Question 2: Current and future need for childcare in Australia, particularly given changes in work patterns, early learning needs, child care affordability and government assistance:

- Needs - Flexible hours to cater for both standard hour and non-standard hour workforce as the Australian workforce (and working hours) are changing. FDC is

an effect model to meet these needs however, some Local Government areas place restrictions on the hours the FDC service can be provided thus limiting flexibility of hours for families. FDC also provides for emergency care situations (including DCP requests) and parents changing jobs and/or work hours (often at short notice).

- Occasional Child Care is a model that can cater for short term and emergency child care arrangements needed by many families however, funding is limited for these service types.
- WWC Checks should be available for occupants of the FDC residence who are over 18 years of age (in addition to the National Police Clearance). Currently these occupants are not considered to have contact with children (according to one of the 19 categories in the Working with Children WA legislation) therefore, they are not eligible to apply for the Working with Children Check in WA. In the best interests of children, we believe that that WWC Checks are an essential safety measure for all adults residing in an FDC residence. From 1 August 2012 FDC WA of which we are members have constantly addressed this issue with the WWC Screening Unit WA, Department for Local Government and Communities WA, Minister for Child Protection WA and Minister for Police WA. To date, there has been no action to rectify this issue.
- ECEC services and educators need appropriate remuneration for their role but parents also need affordable fees - need more subsidy from Government to make this happen.

Question 3: The capacity of the childcare system to ensure a satisfactory transition to schools, in particular for vulnerable or at risk children:

- It must be recognised that transition to school starts from conception. We need mothers to have good health and medical support during pregnancy for children to be born healthy and have the best possible start in life. From birth, families need support to ensure that they can provide a warm and responsive environment for their child/ren, an environment where strong attachments are formed and age appropriate learning experiences are continuously available. ECEC services play a vital role in supporting families, they can provide stimulating environments that extend children's learning experiences beyond the home environment and provide referral pathways to other essential services for both the parents and child. However, satisfactory transition to school involves collaborative partnerships with families, ECEC services and a diverse range of other support services such as playgroups, health services, early intervention services (if required) etc. to ensure that all children's needs are appropriately met.
- All ECEC services provide learning opportunities based on the individual needs of the child and their families. FDC should be recognised for its strength in providing small group education and care settings, this enables more one to one interactions with the educator.
- As mentioned in 1B, ECEC provides good opportunities to connect with community.
- ECEC service can cater has the capacity to cater for vulnerable and at risk children (including children with additional needs), especially FDC. Many of these children do not cope well in large environments as they become overwhelmed with the noise level, staff changes (during daily shifts and staff turnover) and busy routines. However, in a smaller setting such as FDC, it may be more suited for

meeting their individual needs due to the smaller group size and the consistent presence of one familiar educator. It must be noted however, that the Inclusion Support Subsidy (a subsidy to assist the inclusion of children with additional needs in Aust. Government Approved Education and Care Services) does not suit the FDC model, this needs to be reviewed in consultation with FDC Peak Bodies and Inclusion Support Agencies.

- ECEC services under the NQF are supporting a satisfactory transition to schools for all children (including vulnerable or at risk children). Strategies such as individual planning, portfolios and observations shared with the families can be passed onto schools prior to the children commencing to provide background information.

Question 4: Alternative models of care, including those overseas, which could be considered for trial in Australia:

- Need to consider that Australia already has a range of child care models including centre based services, Occasional Child Care, FDC and In Home Care (IHC).
- FDC and IHC need to be recognised as flexible models of high quality care (implementing NQF and CCB approved).
- Occasional Childcare services need to be recognised as an alternative for parents requiring high quality part-time and casual child care also implementing NQF and CCB approved.
- Qualifications - since the introduction of competency based training the quality of graduates in the Cert III and Diploma has significantly reduced - need to raise skills and knowledge of educators in all models of care (further information on qualifications is included in the response to Question 6).
- Proposal for CCB being made available to Nannies and Babysitters - who will monitor these services and ensure that they are implementing the NQF?

Question 5: Options - within existing funding parameters - for improving the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of childcare for families with diverse circumstances:

- Vulnerable families may not be able to access quality and affordable childcare, models need to be equitable for all families.
- Funding for FDC services to implement additional recruitment strategies and support additional educators to provide FDC in areas of high need would improve accessibility for families.
- Occasional Childcare Centres cater for families requiring part-time and casual childcare. The flexible nature of this ECEC service makes it more accessible and affordable for parent who do not require full time care. However the operational costs associated with this type of service are high and the small amount of operational funding provided to assist with these cost is no longer sufficient in assisting to maintain the services. Without adequate funding we risk losing a valuable community service.
- Parents currently using Occasional Childcare Centres are unable to use the multi-child percentage reducing the cost of care if they have another child attending another childcare service. However if a parent uses long hour childcare service for one child and OSHC service for another then the two child percentage will apply.

The current system is not equitable and disadvantages parents who use Occasional childcare because they only need/want part-time/casual childcare.

- Inclusion Support Subsidy and Flexible Support Funding for children with additional needs attending ECEC and Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) services should be increased reducing the “gap” for employers paying for an additional educator. The “gap” has been growing larger over the 6 years the program has been in operation thus increasing the financial hardship for services who include all children. Some services have limited the hours that a child with additional needs can attend a service in an attempt to address this issue.

Question 6: The impacts of regulatory changes, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework, on the childcare sector over the past decade:

- Changes have been constant – the sector has not had any time to reflect on changes before another change is introduced.
- Additional responsibility for FDC services such as Assessing Fit and Proper with no additional funding to undertake these duties has stretched resources.
- Changes in the best interest of children are welcome.
- Changes increasing red tape that do not benefit children and families should not be implemented e.g. multiple data systems between Government Departments.
- Challenges recruiting the right people for the job due to low pay and lack of acknowledgement for the work undertaken.
- Increased documentation taking time away from children.
- Changes to qualifications are in the best interests of children however, we are concerned Re: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The RPL system for qualifications needs to be robust. Currently the system with some Registered Training Organisations is concerning, people are gaining their qualifications but they cannot demonstrate additional skills and knowledge.
- FDC Services need financial recognition for the support role that they undertake Re: Educators.
- Services have valued opportunity for feedback/consultation Re: NQF, it is important to consult with peak bodies such as FDC WA.
- Inclusion Support Agencies (ISA's) have an opportunity for feedback/consultation Re: NQF, ISA's support ECEC and OSHC services to successfully include all children in a program. They work closely with the services to build the capacity of educators ensuring best outcomes for all children in the service

Please do not hesitate to contact me (contact details below) if you wish to discuss this submission further.

Kind regards
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