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Commissioner
Childcare Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2600

Sent Via Email: childcare@pc.gov.au

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Dear Ms. Craik,

RE: Inquiry into Childcare & Early Childcare Learning

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Having reviewed the Productivity Commission “Childcare Inquiry & Early Childcare Learning” Issues paper published on December 2013 (“the Issues paper”), I would like to provide some comments to describe practically the difficulties I have experienced as user of these services and also provide some suggestions for further analysis and consideration by the Productivity Commission.

Comments

1- As a female, migrant, educated, single mother who has cared alone for my son for the last 9 years without any close or extended family support or ongoing assistance from my ex-husband in respect of the care of my son, I have utilised the following childcare services: long day care, family day care, before/after school care, vacation care, registered care, nannies and also the enormous goodwill and kindness of friends that on occasions assisted me, so I could maintain some kind of professional, intellectual and business life.

2- On the basis of my experience as a user of childcare services, I have experienced the following issues:

a- Great challenges in participating in the workforce at a level that my qualifications, skills and experience are able to provide as there are no many flexible options available to parents working full-time and having to undertake occasional overtime duties (as many childcare centres close at 6pm), attending early morning business breakfasts/ meetings, travelling overnight interstate and conducting very short overseas trips

b- Difficulties in securing a suitable place for my son in long day care centres and vacation care centres. To illustrate I would mention that in one occasion, I had no option but to enrol my son in 3 different places of care each week (2 long day care centres and 1 family day care) in order to satisfy work commitments. On that occasion we spent 2 very distressing months as this particular “solution” was not suitable to my child or me. Luckily after two months we finally found a place in one of the long day care centres

c- Substantial reduction of income given that although childcare rebate, family tax benefits and childcare benefit are important in reducing costs incurred in caring after a child, the cost of maintaining appropriate child care for single parents who want, like and enjoy working is high. When considering that many single parents find it difficult to engage in high paid positions given the matters rose in point a and b, issues related to cost become very important

3- On many occasions I have asked myself, How could the system deliver a better outcome to working parents overall and to persons placed in similar position to mine?

Given that 27%¹ of Australia's population has been born overseas and that according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics ("ABS"), "Labour Force, Australian labour Force Status and other Characteristics of Families, June 2012"² *"In June 2012, there were 961 thousand one parent families, making up 15% of all families. About two-thirds of these one parent families (67%) had dependants living with them.*

There were 780 thousand single mother families in June 2012, making up the vast majority of one parent families (81%). In June 2012, there were 641 thousand one parent families with dependants, and most (84%) were single mother families. In half (50%) of one parent families with dependants, the age of the youngest child was between 0 and 9 years old"

Taking into consideration the two paragraphs above, quoting statistics from ABS, the suggestions I propose below are the end result of my previous thoughts in respect of these issues, observation of current demographics and workforce indicators and the placing of all these factors into the perspective and terms of reference of this inquiry.

Suggestions:

- 1- Create central district hubs that deliver 24 hours overnight and extended care outside standard working hours (including weekends) and provide the facility to pick-up and drop-off children attending school
- 2- Consider trialling additional transport services for children attending schools.
- 3- Creation of a relative childcare visa valid for up to 3 or 4 years of continuous temporary residence and with part-time study rights
- 4- Extending school hours and providing sports, languages and artistic/creative activities during afternoons as part of the core school curriculum and hours
- 5- Progressively extend the hours of pre-schooling children formally undertake during the previous 2 years to full time school

¹ Australia Bureau of Statistics, Year Book, 2012

²

1- Create central district hubs that deliver 24 hours overnight and extended care outside standard working hours (including weekends) and provide the facility to pick-up and drop-off children attending school

Given that the Issues paper indicates that in the past there was low demand for long day care services providing 24 hours and extended hours care, and noting that some of the submissions presented to the Commission also mentioned lack of high demand for those services in previous years, perhaps by localising providers and clustering adjoining areas it is possible to meet the existent demand for those services without substantially increasing costs, available workers and existent facilities. This type of model could assist the system in catering for occasional and permanent use of this type of care.

The idea of making centre or school buses available to pick-up and drop-off children from school to the hub centre is proposed on the basis that sometimes an overnight interstate trip requires a parent to be away for more than 24 continuous hours and it is many times difficult to organise transportation to and from school.

Results of the current trial on flexible care model could perhaps enhance and further refine this suggestion.

2- Consider trialling additional transport services for children attending schools

Could the implementation of a school bus service that picks-up and drops-off children to their homes encourage greater workforce participation and productivity by minimising commuting time for parents and increasing the time available for work?

3- Creation of a relative childcare visa valid for up to 3 or 4 years of continuous temporary residence and with part –time study rights

The Issues paper notes that as March 2013, 12% of care was provided in family day care/ home care and 49% of care in long day care. On the basis of these statistics, could the creation of a temporary visa allowing migrants and Australian citizens from a migrant background to sponsor a relative to assist with children care be considered as a strategy to reduce excess demand for childcare places, increase parents availability for work, make the system more affordable and place less demand on Government rebates?

For many years since I become a parent I often thought about this idea as a strategy that could assist residents from a migrant background and with no family support to dedicate more time to work and study. It is probably simplistic to note that if parents are relaxed knowing that their children are being looked after by a trusted relative and they don't have to rush out of the office to make it on time before a childcare centre closes, parents will probably be more productive, focussed and engaged. While there is currently a temporary visa that allows some parents of migrants and Australian citizens to gain extended temporary residence it may be possible to tailor a specific visa stream to provide greater options.

It is my humble view that from a productivity and cost perspective this strategy could assist managing demand for services and workforce planning issues (as the Issues paper indicates there is currently difficulties in hiring and retaining workers) while also minimising costs incurred by the Government in providing childcare services as families utilising this option would, ideally, undertake not to utilise other forms of approved or registered care during the period the relative is providing assistance, unless extraordinary circumstance required so.

Furthermore, noting that perhaps some young adult relatives could be willing to visit family, help their family with the care of children and also study in Australia, perhaps granting rights to undertake part-time studies at any level could ensure a win/win outcome is achieved for families, young relatives and Australia.

4-Extending school hours and providing sports, languages and artistic/creative activities during afternoons as part of the school curriculum and hours

The Issues paper indicates that as March 2013, 30% of children used outside school care (Figure 2. the Issues paper).

Given that currently parents invest a lot of time in attending after school activities; could the provision of some of these activities be provided after 3:00pm as part of the core curriculum and school hours?

While extending school hours for very young children may not be desirable, perhaps as children progress in age, extending school hours could be a strategy to ensure after school care places are available to meet the demand of younger children (which according to Figure 2 of the Issues paper has a larger demand for services) while also ensuring parents have greater flexibility and time for work and study related matters as children grow.

Could programs like the “Active after School Communities”³ which provides primary school children with free sports and other activities between 3:00pm and 5:30pm be used as a model to implement in all schools?

Anecdotally, I would mention that a few weeks ago I had the opportunity to entertain 2 young Chinese students attending “Junior School”. Speaking over dinner they told me that in their city, students attending “Junior School” attended school from 7:00am to 5:00pm as part of the normal school day. I was told this system assisted in controlling traffic congestion and applied to children attending “Junior School”

5- Progressively extend the hours of pre-schooling children formally undertake during the previous 2 years to full time school

Based on my past experience using services of long day care centres with no internal pre-schooling as part of their permanent services, I have observed that children that attended structured and formal pre-schooling were better prepared to meet school routine and the academic curriculum.

Noting also the submission of Caboolture Montessori School regarding identification of issues in children with special needs, the burden placed on primary school due to late identification of their special needs and the benefits of early intervention, I am of the view that extending the period of formal pre-schooling could assist in delivering better learning outcomes for children with special needs, better engagement with school peers and help primary schools adopting suitable learning strategies.

Finally, I would also like to indicate my support for the following ideas mentioned in the Issues paper and some of the submissions I have been able to read.

- Consideration of the Canadian models adopted in Quebec (Stop over Centres) mentioned in Issues Paper at Page 7
- Extending full childcare rebate and entitlements to in home care such as nannies and Au pairs

Kind Regards

Giovana Arrarte