

# Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning from the Queensland Children's Services Alliance

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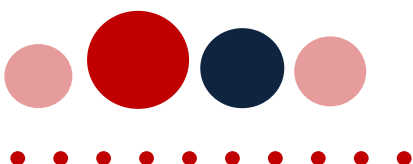
## Introduction

The Queensland Children's Services Alliance (QCSA) is an independent and integrated alliance of peak organisations and large service providers that reflects the diversity of children's services in Queensland. Membership of the Alliance currently spans all types of education and care services (e.g. Centre-based Childcare, Preschool/Kindergarten, Family Day Care, Outside School Hours Care, Playgroup), private and community-based service providers, and a number of related professional organisations (e.g. inclusion support, education and training institutions) (See Appendix A for full list of member organisations). While acknowledging and respecting differences in missions and interests, we have established a set of shared aims to drive and inform the work of the Alliance. These are:

- To continue to promote the wellbeing of all children in children's services;
- To strengthen the status of the children's services sector and promote the identity and integrity of children's services professionals in Queensland;
- To facilitate collaboration between the various children's services stakeholders;
- To provide a forum for discussion and debate;
- To work toward a more informed and more cohesive voice around collective children's services issues.

QCSA commends the ongoing policy focus on building an accessible, responsive and quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) service system that supports positive outcomes for children, families and the broader community. We welcome this opportunity to share our views and experiences with this aim in mind.

This submission is the product of two group meetings of QCSA members, and a broader email conversation. The topics and questions raised in the Issues Paper prompted considerable discussion and debate, and this submission draws together key points from this exercise.



## Overarching principles underpinning this submission

- Queensland Children's Services Alliance (QCSA) believes investment in high quality ECEC provides individual and shared benefits in the short and longer term.
- Australia needs a strong platform of universal ECEC services to ensure the nation's educational, social and economic prosperity for the future.
- These universal services need to offer quality inclusive programs, promote integrated service delivery, and attract top-up funding to support access and provide additional services and support for children and families from areas of low socio economic status.
- A system built on universal services that offer targeted additional services and support is non-stigmatising, inclusive and cost effective.
- When high quality ECEC is provided, it provides families with the confidence to re-enter the workforce and supports employee productivity.
- High quality is also necessary to promote early learning and successful transition to school. Our experience is that families expect ECEC services to provide both early learning and care.
- For this reason we query the separation of childcare and early childhood learning and have adopted the international term *Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)* to capture the integrated nature of education and care.
- QCSA supports the National Quality Framework. While we recognise the challenge of implementing a new system and transformational model of quality assurance, our research indicates the sector is successfully managing this transition. Assessment and rating data is indicating that the new framework is supporting services to deliver high quality education programs, necessary to support children's learning and successful transition to school. We do however note, as a new system there is room for fine tuning of current government processes to ensure accessibility of the ECEC sector.
- QCSA acknowledges the emphasis on school readiness and preparation (as an example) for Early Childhood services is not the same focus for School Age services and supports a strategy which ensures leisure pedagogy underpins the practice of school age programs and that children's learning and development in Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) is positioned within a relevant and appropriate context.
- We challenge what seems to be a deficit focus on the current service system and note the capacity of current service models to provide flexible, responsive, quality and affordable ECEC for children and families. For example, Family Day Care and In Home Care provide flexible education and care outside of traditional hours including overnight and weekend.
- We challenge the perception that quality care, and, in particular, the employment of qualified educators, is unaffordable. We note that Queensland has had regulated minimum qualifications in long day care services and coordination unit staff in FDC for a decade yet continues to offer some of the lowest average fee's per day nationally.

- QCSA believes investment in the ECEC workforce is critical to realise the national objectives for ECEC (i.e. to support workforce participation and to promote early learning). Research is unequivocal in identifying qualifications and the quality of educators as the key determinate of quality educational programs and positive outcomes for children, families and society.
- QCSA believes that the provision of high quality ECEC is a public good and strongly opposes a self-regulated system.
- We believe that Government needs to play a leadership role to ensure children and families have equitable access to high quality ECEC services.
- We believe that Government has a responsibility to ensure regulatory and funding programs are in place for the delivery of high quality education and care services
- Government also has a responsibility to recognise and promote the professionalism of ECEC and the workforce.
- Finally, we view the provision of high quality ECEC as a shared responsibility, and believe that collaboration with all stakeholders (children and families, communities, the sector, business and industry) supports informed policy decision-making and implementation of reforms.

### **Focus of this submission**

- In this submission, QCSA is focussed primarily on approved ECEC (e.g. Family Day Care - FDC, Outside School Hours Care - OSHC, Long Day Care -LDC, Preschool/Kindergarten). This focus links to the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry and is because research demonstrates that formal programs led by qualified educators are required to realise the noted benefits for children, families and society.
- QCSA recognises the numerous informal care arrangements used by families (e.g. nannies, unregistered child minders) and advocates minimum safety requirements and police checks for these services. However we see these as private family arrangements and believe that Governments' main focus and funding priorities should be on approved ECEC.
- Playgroups also play an important role in Australia, and while they are not regulated under the National Quality Framework, Queensland promotes the application of the NQF (and EYLF) as a quality framework for the delivery of these services.

## **Queensland Children's Services Alliance Responses**

### **1. Government involvement in ECEC**

#### ***Desired outcomes***

QCSA endorses the government's primary objectives for ECEC, that is, to support parental workforce participation and to promote early learning and successful transition to school. We believe that these objectives are interdependent and of equal value. We urge government to maintain a balanced view in this regard, recognising individual and collective social and economic benefits (and savings) accruing from investment in quality ECEC services. We also note the need for a longer-term view, recognizing that the most significant benefits take time to be realised.

## **Role of Government**

QCSA views the provision of quality ECEC as a public good, in the same sense as the provision of a quality school system. Within this context, and noting the influence of market theory on ECEC in Australia, we strongly believe that Government maintains significant responsibilities to support equitable access to quality ECEC for all Australian children and families. These include:

- **Supporting and ensuring quality service provision.** There is clear evidence that high quality ECEC services deliver multiple shared benefits for individuals, families and society while poor quality ECEC services can at best have limited impact and at worst may do damage that requires later and more costly remediation. Government maintains a key role in setting and administering quality standards to ensure that children benefit from their time in ECEC and that families have confidence in the ECEC arrangements. We believe the current NQF provides an effective framework for this purpose, reflecting contemporary research and targeting those factors that have the greatest influence on quality service provision. *See section 5 for further reflections on the NQF.*
- **Planning to support the expansion of the service system.** While recognising the Australian ECEC quasi-market, and the benefits of some competition between services, QCSA believes that government needs to play a greater role in planning the development and expansion of the ECEC service system (in a similar way to planning the school system). We believe that this is appropriate in a context where public funding is applied, and necessary to ensure equitable access to high quality services regardless of where children and families live.
- **Funding the provision of quality ECEC.** QCSA maintains that it is the responsibility of government(s) to apply a funding framework that recognises the real cost of quality ECEC. We advocate a funding formula that is based on the cost of providing quality ECEC per child, with top-up funding to support access and participation for children and families from low socio-economic communities. We also contend market theory alone will not ensure the development of the system we are seeking. While recognising our current mixed service system, and the important contribution of both community-based not for-profit and private for-profit services, we strongly believe that government has a responsibility to address known market failure in this context. This includes: setting and enforcing quality standards; educating parents and the community about the benefits and features of quality ECEC; and supporting a strong community-based sector to drive innovation and quality improvement.
- **Supporting integrated service delivery for children and families.** QCSA recognises the individual and collective benefits of 'joined-up' services for families with young children, which may be provided in a number of different ways (e.g. child and family centres; community partnerships and networks). We believe that government has a leadership role to play in supporting more integrated services, and that universal ECEC services provide a family-friendly and cost effective point of access to other local child and family services.
- **International models.** QCSA perceives value in exploring different ECEC service systems and service models and reflecting on the experiences of other countries. However, we caution that discussion about these different models needs to be embedded within the historical, social and cultural context of the host country and take into account all related factors (e.g. funding; family and community support; related social policies; regulation of services). While we can always learn from other countries,

we believe that it is not possible or desirable to try to transplant international models without due regard to local context.

## 2. Demand for and expectations of ECEC

- **Family expectations of ECEC.** It is our shared experience that families have increasingly greater expectation that ECEC services will ensure that their children are safe, happy and well cared for, and that they will benefit from their time in ECEC. A recent Queensland study of 200 parents (Irvine, 2012; 2013) found that families used formal ECEC services primarily to support workforce participation and to promote early learning. This study also found that parents were seeking more information about ECEC educational programs and wanting more information about their child's learning, including ways that they could support learning at home.

## 3. Availability and cost of ECEC

- **Flexibility of ECEC services.** QCSA challenges the notion that current formal service models are failing to respond to diverse and changing child and family needs. While recognising challenges, primarily in relation to funding and viability, we are able to identify many examples of innovative service provision and cases where individual services are tailoring their service delivery to respond to local needs and context. For example: long day care services that are housing local community playgroups; standalone preschools/kindergartens who offer extended hours of ECEC; approved preschool/kindergarten programs integrated within long day care services.
- We also wish to draw attention to Family Day Care and In Home Care as examples of flexible and responsive ECEC. Due to the nature of FDC being based in a home environment, FDC services are able to respond to growing needs and recruit to support accessibility and respond to flexible care arrangement needed by families with in short timeframes. A limiting factor for FDC and IHC is the funding support provided to either the family and or service to support innovative approaches to education and care during non-standard hours, along with responding to the changing workforce requirements. We believe when parents identify that flexible options are not available, it is usually linked to affordability which determines their choice.
- **Inclusive service provision – services for children and families with additional needs.** We argue the need to both require and support quality and inclusive ECEC. As noted earlier, QCSA advocates investment in a strong foundation of universal ECEC services that promote positive outcomes for all children and families, with additional funding to provide targeted services and support for children and families with diverse needs. We strongly believe that inclusive ECEC services promote shared benefits (e.g. for individual children and families and the broader community) and are cost effective in both the immediate and longer-term. We believe that the way forward is to support educators to work with children and families with diverse needs by: ensuring education and training courses at all levels build the capacity of educators to work with diverse children and families; providing ongoing professional learning and support on inclusive practice; supporting services to connect with local child and family support services; and providing timely and simple access to funding support for additional resources (i.e. human and physical resources) as necessary.
- **Cost of ECEC.** QCSA advocates equitable access to quality formal ECEC services for all Australian children and families, regardless of family circumstances or where they may live. We believe that cost should not be a barrier to access, and support the

continuation of means-tested subsidies for families. This said, we do not support any funding approach that seeks to trade off quality for affordability. The research is clear that the quality of service provision determines the outcomes for children and families, and ultimately for society. We suggest that a narrow focus on the cost of service provision at this point in time fails to take into account the longer-term cost benefits and savings that stem from investment in high quality ECEC. Any analysis of cost, must take into account the full context: cost of service use for families as well as the cost to the nation of lost educational, social and economic opportunities and cost of later interventions (e.g. learning support; unemployment assistance; intensive health interventions; criminal justice interventions).

- QCSA is also of the view that there is a need to end the subsidisation of the ECEC system by educators working in this profession, and advocate enhanced wages and conditions commensurate to the value of the work these people undertake. We view ECEC as a public good, and, as such, a worthy target for public investment.

#### 4. Government regulation of ECEC

- **National Quality Framework.** QCSA supports the NQF as a contemporary approach to quality assurance in ECEC. We recognize the efficacy of the NQF as an integrated framework that identifies minimum quality standards and supports services to engage in continuous quality improvement. Features that we believe exemplify the efficacy of the framework and are worth noting include: the focus on child outcomes rather than inputs and outputs; the introduction of performance-based standards which enable flexibility and different ways of working; the focus on a limited number of key quality determinants (e.g. educator qualifications, staff: child ratios, the educational program); the emphasis placed on critical reflection and self-evaluation as a means to strengthen practice and to improve outcomes for children, families and the broader community.
- Our research indicates that ECEC services (of all types) are engaging with the NQF (and related learning frameworks) and progressing changes which are having a positive impact on daily practice (See Appendix B). While noting some concerns about 'red tape' and perceived 'administrative burden', our collective experience is that the majority of Queensland services are managing the transition, and that an increased administrative duties may be linked to the change process and should be short-lived.
- **Workforce.** Research shows that skilled and qualified ECEC staff underpins the delivery of quality teaching and learning programs. The delivery of inclusive and flexible services requires that the ECEC workforce have continued access to professional development and ongoing reflective processes which will enable flexibility within the workforce and the service. QCSA supports minimum qualifications requirements for ECEC settings and urges government to provide continued policy focus on the ECEC workforce.
- QCSA acknowledges the leisure based pedagogical approach required in outside school hours care services as being distinct from the early learning and transition to school focus of early childhood education and care. We support greater flexibility in the minimum qualifications of educators in OSHC settings, acknowledging the great benefit drawn from disciplines such as sport, recreation and the arts in OSHC settings.
- Transition to the NQF and the continued improvement of services under the framework requires a government and services support for a whole of workforce approach which includes
  - Strategies to support the continued development of leaders and managers for ECEC services

- The promotion of clear and thoughtful career paths and broader promotion of the profession
- Targeted initiatives to address workforce shortages in specific areas and with specific groups
- Continued revision and updating of training products and increased sector influence on training products and delivery.

## **5. Government support for ECEC**

- QCSA supports the focus on the exploration of funding models and urges that specific attention be given to models which include a mix of demand and supply side funding to ensure the availability and accessibility of ECEC services.
- Government has a responsibility to provide targeted approaches to workforce development to ensure the continued delivery of high quality services.
- Government must be clear and visible in relation to their support for the ECEC sector and its workforce, demonstrating understanding of the present and future worth of the profession that will make an enormous contribution to the economy.

## **6. Collaboration with sector**

- QCSA commends the current governments approach in providing the ECEC sector and families an opportunity to have a voice on the future directions of ECEC service delivery. The benefits in this approach allow opportunities for innovation and responsiveness to the needs of children and families based on evidence from the lived experience of all involved. We recommend that this collaborative approach continues with the continued refinement of ECEC policy.
- As a ECEC sector alliance, QCSA believes that we are an effective vehicle to engage with government to review and feedback on policy initiatives, as we represent views from diverse geographical areas and all approved service types ( FDC, OSHC, LDC, Preschool/Kindergarten) and additional service types including playgroups.

## *References*

Irvine, Susan (2013) The family participation in child care project : educator views. In the Loop, Autumn, pp. 3-7.

Irvine, Susan (2012) The family participation in child care project. In the LOOP, Autumn, pp. 9-14.

## Appendix A

### *Queensland Children's Service Alliance Member List*

Name	Organisation
Anna Giesenberg	Representative of Early Childhood Australia
Anne Reddell	
Cathy Hazzard	Sunshine Coast TAFE
Cathy McClennan	The Creche & Kindergarten Association Limited (C&K)
Jane Bourne	Gowrie (QLD) Inc
Jane Carter	Churches of Christ Care Representative of Australian Community Children's Services (ACCS)
Julie Miles	Centacare Brisbane
Julie Price	Health and Community Services Workforce Council
Kylie Brannelly	Queensland Children's Activities Network (QCAN)
Leonie Wallwork	Playgroup Association of Queensland
Lesley Jones	Goodstart Early Learning
Majella Fitzsimmons	Village Kids
Peta McNellie	Family Day Care Association of Queensland
Susan Irvine	School of Early Childhood QUT



## Appendix B



### The National Quality Framework: a case study of Karana Early Education Centre, Karana Downs

A Brisbane child care service which was one of the first to be assessed under the new National Quality Framework (NQF) has received a positive report card.

The NQF is a new national standard and quality assessment process for early childhood education and care introduced in January 2012. It applies to long day care, family day care, outside school hours care, pre-prep and kindergarten services. Under the NQF, more educators and enhanced educator qualifications, higher educator-to-child ratios and improved health and safety are being phased in from 2012 to 2020.

Karana Early Education Centre Director Trisha Dean said the service was keen to be one of the first to be assessed. 'We were excited about the process. All the changes under the new framework are really positive and I'm an advocate for change.'

'It was a great experience to be assessed by really examining the practices happening here day to day. I can't speak highly enough of the way in which the assessing officers conducted the visit.'

The National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating Report found that in all key child development areas, the services delivered at Karana Early Education Centre aligned with the new National Quality Standards.

The educators at the Karana Early Education Centre were found to be using the Early Years Learning Framework and including the children planning education programs which took account of individual children's interests and levels of development. Sleep and eating routines were flexible so that children's play was not hurried or interrupted. The centre recently renovated the outdoor play areas using a playground designer and challenging features such as an undulating landscape, edible garden, logs, stumps, a large grassed area, ample natural shade and shade sails were noted in the assessment report as providing a stimulating environment for the children.

Trisha says the centre has gained insight from the assessment process.

'While we were meeting all standards - our improvement plan has been updated to reflect areas of further development for all educators in working with the Early Years Learning Framework, and ensuring that quality interactions with children are occurring during all times of the day, especially with regards to routine times.

'We embrace new ways of doing things rather than getting stuck in the same old.

'A major change is how we view children. We are moving from structured environments to a more free-flowing approach and giving children a lot more choice in what they are doing. Part of that is about seeing the daily routines as valuable learning times.'



Under the NQF, all child care services will be assessed and rated using the following system:

Significant Improvement Required	S
Working Towards National Quality Standard	W
Meeting National Quality Standard	M
Exceeding National Quality Standard	E

The first round of ratings is only preliminary as the ratings will be independently evaluated and published in early 2013.

Trisha concedes that some services are apprehensive about being assessed 'because there has been a lot of bad press'.

'Once the services have engaged with the process they are pretty positive about it. At our service there has been no change to fees following the NQF assessment process. We engaged parents in the process and they are positive about it.

'It is important for services and parents to realise that receiving a less than perfect rating or assessment doesn't always mean the service is not doing great work. It points the services in the right direction. It means going a little further.'

'I really feel that the NQF is taking child care in the right direction.'

#### **This case study is brought to you by the Queensland Children's Services Alliance (QCSA)**

*The QCSA is an independent alliance of children's care services. QCSA provides a forum for shared enquiry and collaborative problem solving to inform and influence policy and practice. A priority is supporting implementation of quality reforms in children's services, particularly the NQF.*

**Additional case studies can be found at: <http://www.qcsa.net.au/media>**