

***What role, if any, should the different levels of government play in childcare and early childhood education?***

The current National Quality Framework and the National Regulations has come some way to bridging some of the inequities and inconsistencies across the different states. There is certainly some review and adjusting that needs to occur, but inquiries such as this and ongoing research and review into the systems in place will hopefully iron out the issues over time.

An area that needs further review and consideration is the role State Government plays in the funding and provision of preschools. Currently in NSW, the Department of Education and Care funds preschools including the eight (8) run by Fairfield City Council. This funding is targeted at assisting services to increase accessibility of preschool care, with an emphasis on children aged (four) 4 in the year prior to starting formal school. There is a very complex formula that calculates the funding received on a yearly basis so the amount varies considerably across local government areas. These grants have made it possible for Fairfield City Council to subsidise our full daily fee of \$36 to a reduced rate of \$31 for all families and a further reduction to \$17 for low socio economic families attending the service. Even with the subsidies, many families in this area cannot afford the fee which often results in poorly utilised services and children not accessing preschool.

Now that preschools are subject to the same National Regulations and the same Assessment and Rating process as long day care, the way in which preschools are funded and the access the families get to child care rebate should be consistent across all states and service types so that preschool becomes more affordable and accessible to families.

***The Commission is seeking evidence on the effect of the different types of ECEC, including separate preschool programs, on children's learning and development and preparedness for school.***

As part of ongoing quality assurance we have expanded our reporting to include not only occupancy rates but outcomes for children's learning. Key performance indicators have been established to capture a snapshot of children's development prior to them entering formal school. The data is collected in the months of March and November and is completed by Educators at each service. The March data provides Fairfield City Council with an indication of a child's performance and identifies areas that need further development to ensure they are prepared for their next stage of schooling. As a combined result, our services achieved 29.8% for the March 2013 data. This result is based on the number of children that achieved above 80% in each domain of learning. The study evaluates children across four domains of child development (physical development and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity and language & cognitive skills). As a comparison the November 2013 results saw an increase in all four areas with the overall result for November increasing to 62.5%. This is a positive and considerable increase of 32.7% from the March data collected. The Language and Cognitive Skills showed the largest proportional change across each of the four developmental domains supporting the strategies and programs we are delivering at each of our services. A strategy Fairfield City Council's Children Services introduced in 2013 (to improve early literacy levels in children) was an initiative titled "Early Literacy Action". This pilot program was trialled at Tasman Parade Early Learning Centre. The program has proven to be successful and is evident in Tasman Parade's individual service results of the AEDI.

In the long day care room the AEDI results for March showed 13.3% of 4 year olds were meeting 80% of the four areas of domain whilst the November results showed an increase to 73.3% of the children meeting the criteria. The preschool room showed similar improvements with March results of 42.3% to November results of 96.2% of four year olds meeting the criteria. These results show quite clearly the impact an appropriate preschool program can have on children's learning. A current evaluation of this initiative is being undertaken to extend its benefits across multiple services.

***Key barriers that are inhibiting an expansion in ECEC services where demand is highest, development of more flexible ECEC, or alternative models of care***

Barriers include insufficient funding made available for capital works for purpose built services, the ever increasing cost of staffing in line with National Regulations and internal staffing issues that may pose a problem when changing conditions of employment to include expansion of hours.

In areas such as Fairfield there is also the risk with the rising fees required to keep a service viable. Fee increases may price us out of the market in an area that is incredibly disadvantaged. Families cannot simply afford the cost of care.

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

The industry has had to invest in internal initiatives to address the skills shortage given the requirements for appropriately qualified staff. Fairfield City Council has invested in providing opportunities for staff to access Diploma Traineeship, in addition to providing study leave and part reimbursement for staff to complete Early Childhood Teacher qualifications. Over time, this has meant that staff are able to work in qualified roles once they have completed their course and for Fairfield City Council has meant fewer costs associated with external recruitment.

Consideration needs to be given for continued initiatives such as funded traineeships and lower costs or funding for Early Childhood qualifications. In addition more flexible models for delivery of courses needs to be provided to attract more people into completing qualifications.

Consider the reintroduction of the Early Childhood Teacher initiative scheme and provide a bonus for the number of teachers employed by a service. This would assist services in the cost of additional qualified staff without having to increase fees to cover costs.

***Is it confusing and/or costly to deal with the large number of programs and agencies administering ECEC support? Is there overlap, duplication, inconsistency or other inefficiencies created by the interaction of programs?***

Fairfield City Council has both long day care and preschool. We also have three services that we classify as multi-purpose services that provide both long day care and preschool in the one location. In our long day care services, families can claim CCB whilst our preschool families claim a much smaller rebate which was previously known as the ***medicare cash rebate***. The inequity for families in accessing appropriate assistance

when enrolled in one of our preschools has always been an issue given the rebate is only approximately 30c per hour compared to what some of these families could claim if they were enrolled in a long day care setting. This inequity needs to be addressed.

Toward the end of 2013 we were advised by Centrelink (Child Care Team, DHS) that Fairfield City Council as an Organisation could no longer be a registered provider for the preschools and that we would be required to nominate a registered carer from each preschool if we wanted our families to continue to be eligible to claim the 30c rebate. This was apparently as a result of changes to the Family Assistance (Administration) Act 1999 that outlined that an Organisation could no longer be a Registered Provider. In addition you could not provide an approved service on the same premises as a registered care service. This needs to be reviewed.

Our preschool services were also provided with notice (in 2012) that they would need to complete a Registered Carer Application and that their registered provider approval would be revoked if the carer application was not received. Upon further investigations with the Child Care Team within DHS (Emma Nichols [CCB.Programs@humanservices.gov.au](mailto:CCB.Programs@humanservices.gov.au)) Council was advised that the legislation changed in 1999 and implementing the changes had been an oversight so the Department was implementing it as per the 1999 Act.

As it currently stands our Preschool Directors are now the registered carer for each of their service, however, Council believes that this Federal Act has not taken into consideration the way NSW funds preschools. Further investigation is required on whether the NSW preschool model was taken into consideration when the Legislation was changed. Even within the Productivity Commission Issues Paper, the definition of registered care is limited.

***Registered care is child care provided by grandparents or other relatives, friends, neighbours, nannies or babysitters who are registered as carers with the Department of Human Services. In some circumstances it can also include registered care provided by individuals in private preschools and kindergartens, some occasional care services, and some outside school hours care services. Registered care services also have to meet certain standards and regulations. (Childcare and Early childhood Learning-Productivity Commission Issues Paper 2013)***

Our preschools and many others within NSW do not fall within this definition; however individual staff are being forced to make changes and be responsible for administering receipts when the service is not privately run by them and is owned and operated by Fairfield City Council.

In addition our multi-purpose services families that use the preschool room are no longer eligible to claim the 30c rebate as there is no provision in the Act to allow an approved and registered service to operate at the same location. This confusion and inequity between preschools and long day care needs to be addressed.

***Should support be extended to cover certain types of childcare not currently funded or to increase funding for specific types of childcare — for example nannies providing in-home care?***

Consideration needs to be given to extend support to current services in providing more flexible models of care as opposed to providing new funding for care that is currently not funded (such as nannies providing in home care). Funding new types of childcare would be introducing a broader range of services with increased difficulty when assessing quality and regulatory requirements.

The focus should be on further increasing consistency of quality across current service types, not introducing more complex services that may further complicate the choices for families. Consideration needs to be made for current services to provide the flexibility that families want. Extending hours and days of operation for example to include weekends would open up the issues of increased wages that would inevitably add to the cost of care for families. If funding was available to assist service providers to extend services it may provide the flexibility that families need within current service types.