

NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK

Comments for Submission, from Robyn Paterson.

Looking at the situation for mobiles from a National point of view:

- 1 Mobile children's services have many purposes and functions. The comments in this paper refer to the mobile services which offer child care.
- 2 Differences between the compliance and licensing regulations of States are obvious, and as the physical environment and safety and security are seen as components of the quality system, this needs to be addressed. The different aspects of models of care (particularly mobiles) will need to be understood, and provision for those differences covered by separate expectations (or a core standard with service-specific standards where applicable).
- 3 There are great differences between the support and involvement which States have for this model of care. These differences are linked to the regard and recognition, which each State has for mobiles as a legitimate model of care.

MOBILES: Considerations when assessing quality

1. *Attendances:* Some documents are proposing that success of a service is measured by numbers in attendance as an indicator. In a remote and rural setting this is not considered as a meaningful indication of success. Population is sparse, and if children become ill and the service does not receive that information re non-attendance until the morning, then there is not sufficient time to get that space filled. Parents working on the land or at sea have already started their day and cannot interrupt their work, to bring a child in to fill a space. Attendance numbers/ utilisation will be affected.
2. *Systems of Assessment needs to appreciate:*
 - Mobiles have shared tenancy – that is they use buildings which have other tenants on days when they are not there. There are therefore limitations in the ability to meet some compliance standards in some areas. Staff will adapt a site as much as possible on the day, but permanent structural changes may not be possible eg putting in a permanent bath, changing the amount of light coming into the room. Many sharing organizations work out an agreement to their mutual satisfaction re the use of premises/ the use and sharing of equipment/ cleaning arrangements/ putting things back in place.
 - Mobiles are not the same as Centres, and the National Quality Framework will need to recognize that mobiles may be operating in a premises that was not purpose built for Children's Services and many daily adaptations may need to be made. Safety, security and protection should not be compromised (the necessity for visual supervision is non-negotiable).
 - Mobiles do not operate at the same venue each day. This means the amount of time that they see each child and family is limited, in some cases a child may attend a ½ day session weekly. It also means that with moving from one place to another, there will be many different communities with which to communicate.
 - This limitation of time and non-continuous attendances for some children will affect the observations and programming for that child.

- Itinerant workers, vineyard teams, shark fishermen, potato harvesters etc may not be in the area for the entire year, so this is another component of change for the mobile staff to manage.

3 Parental Involvement

- Interaction with parents at drop-off and collection time is crucial for exchanging information, reporting, developing rapport – as long distances mean parents are not likely to return to site for meetings or other sessions of involvement. Development of other means of communication can compensate eg. including IT which enables a slide-show of the mobile day, or emailing videos, plus looking at newsletters, discs to borrow etc.
- Parents who are working, do not have the opportunity for day-time involvement, and in the mobile situation, both staff and parents are reluctant to drive at night for extended periods through 'kangaroo country'. So mobiles need to be innovative in their interaction with parents.
- GRADINGS/RATINGS Having ABCDE gradings for mobile services will not assist parents to make a choice of service. Mobiles are there, because usually there is no other service. Any open system of disclosure of quality ratings, will of necessity have a 'translation' into values which can be generally understood eg an illustrative: "A" means you will be able to see this happening in your service/ or "excellent standard" in .../ or C" needs improvement" in this area. There needs to be parent education re what the gradings/ratings mean (no matter what grading or measurement system is used).

4 PROCESS of assessment

- Needs to be undertaken by validators who are familiar with the model of care. With the distance involved with mobiles, perhaps peers/ qualified stakeholders may be more realistic. In the case of mobiles, the necessity to visit each site/ or some at random will need to be addressed with a balance of looking at the staff, administration and team which offers the service.
- Past difficulties with inspection for compliance of mobile services have illustrated the need for 'understanding' of the model of care eg arriving and carrying out a physical inspection of the site, on a day when the service is not operating. Making an assessment without the staff being there to adapt the site for the day's operation shows lack of understanding of mobile operation.
- For mobiles, the quality framework will be most useful as a tool for advocating the recognition of the innovativeness and flexibility of this model, and for the incentive for self-improvement for the services.

Staff qualifications, child-to-staff ratios, group size /And Implications for mobiles

Qualified Staff

1. We agree that qualified staff have a noticeable influence on the quality of outcomes for children –obvious in the knowledge of children's development and realistic expectations, appropriate activities, strategically improving the 'flow of the day'. For mobiles operating in remote and rural areas there is a difficulty to attract and retain staff with qualifications.
 - Considerable relocation costs
 - Difficulty with housing availability (and rental costs in some tourist places).
 - Ability to adapt to country life, lack of accustomed infrastructure and services
 - Difference in expectations (if previously training and working in a Child Care CENTRE cf. a mobile). The driving a 4WD and trailer, setting up fences, equipment , mixed age groups of children are all a challenge.
2. Ongoing staff improvement, training and development are difficult because of expense in combating distance. Travel and accommodation (for staff) combined with finding relief staff to replace them while they are off-the-floor is a big consideration for mobiles (coupled with limited availability of relief staff in a rural setting). Alternatively there is difficulty in having sufficient numbers of staff to attract training groups to travel to site.

Training local people is one way of finding people who are likely to be happy to stay in the area. They already know country life, and hopefully have some of the 'pioneer flexibility, ingenuity and common sense', which sees them adapt to the rigorous life of a mobiler. To this end some services are setting up partnerships with their closest TAFE, so that lecturers come to facilitate a "study hub group", where trainees are more likely to progress and succeed because they are part of a group (but are still able to train at their level and pace).

Staff-to -Child Ratios

- 1 Having mixed ages in the one group, and overall small total numbers in the group, invites the opportunity to have a *different vision* for ratios in mobile services. The thought is to have a more financially viable situation while not impacting on the nurturing, engagement, safety and protection of the children in our care. A National Agreement re staff-child ratios makes sense, but there should always be the possibility of responsiveness to service-specific or model-specific circumstances.
- 2 Staff –children ratios and programmed 'flow-of-day' both affect the nature of carer-child engagement, which is leading to well-being and high quality care provision.

Group Size

1 Varies in mobiles according to the season, the weather, local Field Days and State regulations. Mobiles do not experience a consistent, constant attendance. This does not mean that the service is not offering high quality, nor that it is not appreciated.

It does mean that it cannot rely on parent's fees nor CCB to cover the operational costs of service provision.

2 The greater significance in rural and remote areas, is not the size but the composition of the groups. And this too, is affected by the unpredictable attendance (as mentioned above). Meaning that some days there may be a full contingent of under-2's and few older children, and other occasions may see some 4-year olds ready for challenges and only a few babies.

SOME GENERAL COMMENTS

* When I first started working with mobiles, I thought "What possible use is one day's care a week going to be to a rural/ remote family?" That has been answered by appreciative parents over and over again. It has been an amazing learning experience, to find how practically involved parents are on the land (or at sea), and how one day can be so precious. To be able to complete dangerous tasks without children tied to a fence / or asleep in the ute, and to fit in going for financial or medical appointments without their child...and having confidence that their child is in safe-keeping is much valued by families. But as we move along in our partnership all the other benefits to their children are becoming apparent to them. The ability to share, knowing when a 'farm-wee' is not appropriate, ideas /activities that they can pursue at home are all commented upon. When we make the opportunity to share videos, slide-shows, visit the families at home, and share children's learning story journals, parents respect the professional, caring staff and the stimulating, safe environment their children have for one day a week.

So this makes me think, how do we align a rating system to measure these values and convey to parents the Quality of Care their children are receiving?

* Many families have not had experience with putting their child in care, they have had little or no contact with any other service. Their isolation has been diminished by the opportunity to have access to a mobile child care service. This has provided the opportunity to empower parents, and to mentor assistance as we take them through the challenge of realizing their child may benefit by extra assistance (intervention). Many children would be left without recognition of their needs, if they had not been initially noticed by a Professional Carer. This is one of the great benefits to rural and remote families. And as a hub we can offer information about, and contacts to other services and organizations which can assist these isolated families.