



Submission to the  
Productivity Commission Inquiry  
into  
Child Care and Early Childhood Learning

19 February 2014

Contact:

Joy Williams

Early Childhood Consultant

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania

# About UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania Early Childhood Children's Services

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania is a large provider of children's services in Victoria, with over 100 services. We provide quality education and care to over 8500 children and families each year. UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania services include long day care, preschool, outside school hours care, occasional care and family day care.

Our purpose is to provide an educative environment that nurtures resilient and confident children through inclusive services in partnership with families and community. UCVT aims to nurture the confidence and development of children, enabling them to have the best start in their critical formative years. We value and advocate for positive early childhood education and care experiences that lead to opportunities throughout life for all children.

We represent over 100 years of experience providing innovative and quality programs and advocacy to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects vulnerable children, young people and families. UnitingCare Victoria Tasmania agencies provide services across the continuum, ranging from preventative programs such as supported playgroups; early intervention programs, intensive family support programs; out-of-home care programs and aftercare programs.

UCVT is a member of the UnitingCare Australia Children Young People and Families Network, which brings together UnitingCare services across Australia. Through this group we participate in national policy debates on key issues that impact on children and in particular early childhood education and care. UnitingCare services provide and resource early childhood services in every Australia state and territory – nationally we provide services to more than two million Australians, with a strong focus on children and young people.

## Executive Summary

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania commends the Government's commitment to the development of a Child Care and early Childhood Learning system that enhances outcomes for children and families, and welcome the opportunity to contribute to any process that informs such decisions. We have significant presence in the Child Care and early Childhood Learning sector and considerable experience providing quality services for children across Australia.

The Uniting Church in Australia (Victoria) and its UnitingCare Victoria Tasmania agencies have a long history of advocating on the importance of early childhood education and care to support children's development and wellbeing.

The National Quality Framework (NQF) and the National Quality Standard (NQS) form part of a comprehensive reform of the ECEC sector in Australia that includes a number of significant and historic agreements between State and Territory Governments through COAG.

UnitingCare Victoria Tasmania (UCVT) strongly supports the NQF and the NQS. We note there has been substantial investment from government, services and the workforce in order to meet the new regulatory requirements and that the overwhelming majority are either meeting, or on the way to fulfilling relevant obligations. We see no benefit in, and strongly oppose, any potential changes to the current system that impact upon quality provisions. However, we applaud the focus of the reforms on providing the best possible outcomes for children.

The NQF has been effective at improving staff ratios and qualifications to support better outcomes for children. These quality measures are evidenced widely in research.

While part of the current Productivity Commission inquiry focuses on the ECEC sector as a means to increase workforce participation, especially of women, this inquiry provides an opportunity to build on the broad consensus amongst researchers, practitioners, policy-makers and politicians that quality early childhood education and care delivers significant positive benefits for children. These benefits span children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. ECEC can help children's transition to formal school as well as improving their life chances at school and later in life.

The longitudinal impacts of a quality ECEC system are integral to any conversation about future productivity. Economists have shown that investment in ECEC delivers economic benefits to society by creating savings on more costly intensive downstream interventions and services. It is also clear that the benefits of quality ECEC are most significant for vulnerable and disadvantaged children.<sup>1</sup>

Given the wealth of evidence on the link between the quality provision of services and quality outcomes for children, UCVT is a strong advocate for the continuation of a national framework for the Early Childhood Education and Care sector.

## Quality is Driven Through Qualified Staff

The experience of our service delivery network, which also reflects the outcomes of research, is that appropriately qualified staff are critical to achieving better outcomes for children.

Qualification requirements introduced through the NQF are having a number of other positive outcomes:

- The status of the child care profession is being lifted, increasing its desirability as a profession. Qualified staff are also mentoring and providing capacity building in staff teams. This supports the attraction of quality staff and reduces staff turn-over, further enhancing quality of care and learning.
- Parents are able to continue in or return to work with confidence, satisfied that their children are in professional, quality environments which provide the opportunity for learning and development.

It is difficult to attract quality staff to areas of significant disadvantage. This could be improved with incentives such as those used in public education and health sectors, and the provision of increased funding to assist in support and mentoring of staff.

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania providers strongly support the NQF but there are often issues related to the remote and rural locations due to small numbers and the cost of service provision. These factors are not recognised in the current funding model through CCB and CCR.

---

<sup>1</sup> Heckman, J. (2006), The economics of investing in early childhood, *Prevention: Invest Now or Pay Later*, NIFTeY National Conference, Sydney 8 – 9 February 2006; Press, F., What about the kids? *Policy directions for improving the experiences of infants and young children in a changing world*, NSW Commission for Children and Young People, Commission for children and young people and child guardian, and NIFTeY.

# Recommendations

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania recommends that the Inquiry:

- Recognizes that Early Childhood development is of central importance to the wellbeing of Australia's children and to the future productivity of the nation;
- Recognizes that quality is driven through qualified staff;
- Notes that the National Quality Framework has been effective at improving staff ratios and qualifications to better support outcomes for children, and acknowledges that the NQF in its current form has wide sector support;
- Notes that families in regional and remote areas, in particular, need better access to quality child care and Early Childhood Learning opportunities;
- Review the funding model to simplify the funding and accommodate a more flexible and viable model for rural and remote services/providers.

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania endorses the submissions from UnitingCare Children's Services (UCCS) and UnitingCare Australia.

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to participate in this Inquiry and looks forward to further engagement with the Productivity commission. UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania would welcome the opportunity to provide specific details or examples of particular relevance to commissioners in their ongoing investigations.