

INTRODUCTION

Yarra City Council has a strong and proud history of supporting the health, care and educational needs of children and families through a rich and diverse local service system.

Council plays multiple roles across the early education and care sector to ensure services are delivered as part of a coordinated system designed to support families and children in their local communities. Our practice entails leadership, planning, advocacy and information as well as support for other service providers.

Council carries out a range of roles aimed at ensuring that its community is inclusive of, and accessible to all community members, while delivering a range of services including Maternal and Child Health, family strengthening programs, early learning and care (long day care, kindergarten, outside of school hours care), occasional care, youth programs and support services and home and community care programs.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Council supports the Australian Government's commitment to establishing a sustainable future for flexible, affordable and accessible child care and early childhood learning environments that helps underpin the national economy and supports the community, especially parent's choices to participate in work and learning, and children's wellbeing, learning and development whilst still maintaining quality service delivery.

The Inquiry's focus on the two key areas of optimising children's learning, care and development and increased participation of women in the workforce is featured in the four key elements of Yarra's Early Years Plan.

Council supports the drive in commissioning the inquiry to examine and identify future options for child care and early childhood learning system reform as well as the discourse on children's learning and developmental needs, including transition to school.

Government's policy to optimise children's learning and development is significant in enabling children to establish foundations and navigate the education system as they progress. These foundations enable children to develop into confident adults and realise their potential in work and within the community.

Council supports flexibility in service provision to suit the needs of families, including families with non-standard work hours, disadvantaged children and families.

Yarra Demography

Yarra is a vibrant inner-city municipality, wrapped around the north and east of Melbourne's Central Business District.

Fundamental to Yarra's identity and history has been its social diversity: the rich mix of cultures and communities, first home to many migrants and refugees, and the spread of families from poor to affluent backgrounds. Changing housing, shopping strips and local employment, as well as the declining affordability of homes, are all impacting on this diversity.

In recent years, around 1,100 babies have been born each year in the city of Yarra, a geographically small but densely populated inner city municipality with over 74,000 people living in 20km². Babies are born into a city of diverse communities created not only through geography but cultural and linguistic backgrounds, common identity or shared experiences.

While people living in Yarra are relatively young with the average age 33 years, children from birth to age eight comprise eight per cent of the Yarra population overall. Almost 47% of Yarra families have children and there has been an increase in households with children since 2006. The proportion of families headed by single parents is more similar to Victoria generally at almost 15%.

Employment is growing, with around 10,000 jobs added in Yarra in the last 5 years, and has shifted away from manufacturing to be predominantly managers and professionals in service industries.

Yarra is home to Victoria's largest public housing community, with over 8,000 residents living in public housing as well as residents living in community housing and other supported accommodation. With a decline in funding for new public housing during the 1990s and 2000s, there has been a relative decline in the amount of public housing. This has led to public housing being prioritised to those with the greatest needs. High-rise public housing has a high concentration of the greatest disadvantage.

The community within the City of Yarra is notable for its diversity of cultural backgrounds and economic circumstances. A quarter of all Yarra households live on less than \$500 per week while almost half have an income of more than \$1,700 per week. People have settled in Yarra from more than 50 countries of origin.

Commonwealth, State and Council Policy alignment

There is a high degree of congruence between State, Federal, and Yarra Council policy approaches and the work which is planned and underway in Council's Family and Children's Services Branch.

There is a strong focus within the three tiers of government on building high quality and coherent birth to adulthood learning and support systems which provides high quality, integrated and accessible pre natal and early childhood services which continue to support children and families as they grow.

Council supports community wellbeing through many of its services – particularly to families and children, youth and older people as well as residents with a disability. These services range from ensuring access to basic services as well as targeted support for high-needs groups.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Commonwealth Government's objectives in commissioning this inquiry are to examine and identify future options for an educational and care learning system for children which:

- supports workforce participation, particularly for women

- addresses children’s learning and development needs, including transitioning to school
- is more flexible to suit the needs of families, including families with non-standard work hours, disadvantaged children, and regional families
- is based on appropriate and fiscally sustainable funding arrangements that enhance support, flexible, affordable and accessible quality early childhood learning and care.

SCOPE

The contribution that access to affordable, high quality child care can make.

Council supports the provision of high quality, affordable and accessible childcare to families. Research which underpins the Early Years Learning Frameworks informs the sector that it is critical that the care provided be of a high quality and that the early learning outcomes for children be delivered in various settings (e.g. kindergartens, long day care, family day care, out of school hours care) to provide a longer-term and more substantive economic and social dividend to the community.

Early education and care access ought not to be about, “who minds children for working parents” it should be viewed as a valued education and care program which supports the learning and development of children, support for families and provide opportunities for educators.

Schools are funded directly, so ought early education and care services, streamlining funding across services delivered. Investment in the early years provides important platform for optimising children’s learning and development.

Optimising children’s learning and development

Council supports and delivers quality early learning programs which provide a firm foundation of every child’s life long social and learning prospects. The needs of children themselves must be considered of paramount importance in this Inquiry. For all children in early childhood education and care environments, it is the quality of the learning and care experience which will enable children to flourish. This is supported within the National Quality Agenda Framework.

Council provides families with affordable choices, ensuring all services provide quality early learning outcomes to give children the best possible start in life.

Local Government plays a key role in assisting with service delivery, planning and integration of services and infrastructure development for children and families.

Evidence points to the efficacy of working in partnerships with families and community organisations to achieve family centred, flexible, accessible and responsive locally based family and children’s services.

Evidence amassed by neuroscientists and child development experts over the past decade point to the wisdom and efficiency of prevention and early intervention. Well-designed

programs created to promote healthy cognitive, emotional and social development can improve the prospects and quality of life for children.

Council aims to work in partnership with families and to actively listen and support family decision-making. Evidence points to the following outcomes in this approach:

- Greater probability that agreed desired outcomes will be achieved
- Parents are more likely to listen and utilise professional services
- Families develop confidence with their own decisions and better solutions for the child are likely to be found with increasing family self-reliance
- Social connectedness.

Current research supports a focus on continuous quality improvement in all early years' services particularly in relation to the most vulnerable families and children. Flexible and affordable services are required for families to access a suit of programs through the early years.

The quality of early childhood experiences is directly related to strengthened intellectual/cognitive and social/behavioural development in children. Integrated service settings which have staff with higher qualifications demonstrate enhanced outcomes for children and where settings view educational and social development as complementary and equal in importance, children make better all-round progress.

Professional development creates and enhances a culture of learning. The alignment of staff development strategies with service improvement objectives delivers more satisfying experiences for staff and enhanced outcomes for children and families.

There is a direct link between above qualified staff and improved care and education for children. Education and care settings which employ staff with higher qualifications generally demonstrate higher quality performance and better outcomes for children.

Workforce support and development needs to take account government policy directions, Council planning priorities and potential sector vulnerabilities in relation to early years training and development.

Evidence based family centred practice focusing on life course developments provides a platform for shared understanding across the sector and enhances individual professional practice opportunities. Mechanisms and processes of accountability and continuous improvement through data collection, reporting and monitoring user satisfaction will provide a platform for responsive outcomes focused service delivery.

Children thrive in settings which view educational and social development as complementary and equal in importance. Children tend to make better intellectual progress in fully integrated centres and schools.

“Australian and international research strongly suggests that investment in high quality early learning improves school performance and opens future pathways to further education and employment”, - Jennifer Westacott, CEO of the Business Council of Australia.

The benefits and other impacts of regulatory changes in child care over the past decade, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in States and Territories, with specific consideration given to compliance costs, taking into account the Government's planned work with States and Territories to streamline the NQF.

Council acknowledges the lead role played by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) and Universal Access (UA); and other initiatives that demonstrate a shared commitment to all families and children in the City of Yarra. The major benefits for families and children include:

- Improved educator to child ratios
- Greater individual care and consideration for children
- Educators with increased skills and qualifications
- Enhanced support for children's learning and development
- A national register to help parents assess the quality of education and care services in their area
- Setting children up to succeed in school and life; lifting children and families out of generational vulnerability; closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Council supports the National Quality Framework and Universal Access and encourages the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments to continue to invest in early learning infrastructure, inclusion support, and the workforce, and develop a long-term and sustainable vision for the kindergarten cluster management model.

Council continues its commitment to work in partnership with Commonwealth and Victorian Governments to deliver high quality early learning and care opportunities.

The National Quality Standard is linked to national learning frameworks that recognise children learn from birth. It outlines practices that support and promote children's learning.

Council has embraced the national quality agenda and trusts that the Commonwealth is well placed to lead a debate around the importance of early learning to the community's social and economic future and to support the investment in the development of long-term early years' strategy to improve children's social, educational and wellbeing outcomes.

Achieving the best outcomes for young children is reliant upon an early childhood education and care system which is well resourced and recognises the factors that contribute to quality. The National Quality Framework was designed around evidence base worldwide research that demonstrates the importance of giving children the increased start in life.

In making any recommendations for future Australian Government policy settings, the Commission will consider options within current funding parameters

On virtually every indicator, children do better in life if they have a high quality education from an early age, finish school, and progress to further training or tertiary education. Investing in our children and young people means they get the most from learning throughout their development and are equipped for success in later life.

More four-year-old children participate in kindergarten in Victoria than anywhere else in Australia and Victoria's unique Early Start Kindergarten program providing free three-year old kindergarten for Aboriginal children and children known to child protection is making a difference in the lives of children.

The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (NQF) is improving quality across early childhood education and care services. The standards require improved educator-to-child ratios and more educators with increased skills and qualifications. These requirements help to ensure all early childhood services meet the individual educational, health and wellbeing needs of children.

The National Quality Framework requirements have increased the cost of providing services to children and their families. Parents should not have to bare the additional costs through increased fees, especially as this would deny access to many vulnerable families who benefit the most from improved quality educational and care programs.

Implementation of the NQF has meant additional administrative, staffing and training costs for services. Kindergartens also require professional support and expert advice to implement the reforms and meet quality requirements. These costs should be met by the Commonwealth Government, as recommended by the Productivity Commission in 2011.

The Commonwealth Government should maintains and expand its investment in and commitment to the National Partnership on Early Childhood Education and the National Quality Reforms, as investment is critical to continuing to improve educational outcomes for all children.

REFERENCES

"Introducing the National Quality Framework", ACECQA <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/>

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