

## **Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning**

### **Northern Territory Government Submission**

The Northern Territory Government welcomes the Productivity Commission inquiry into childcare and early childhood learning programs. The Inquiry provides an important opportunity to examine the objectives and support mechanisms that drive the provision of services to support long-term developmental benefits for children in the Northern Territory (NT).

In this submission, the NT Government offers comment in respect to the Inquiry's key areas of:

- the contribution of childcare to workforce participation and child development;
- the capacity of the childcare system to ensure a satisfactory transition to school, in particular for vulnerable or at risk children;
- current and future need for childcare in Australia, particularly given changes in work patterns, early learning needs, childcare affordability and government assistance; and
- options – within existing funding parameters – for improving the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of childcare for families with diverse circumstances; and
- the impacts of regulatory changes, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework, on the childcare sector in the NT over the past decade.

### **Executive Summary**

The NT Government supports the continued development of high quality early childhood programs, the endeavours to ensure all NT children have access to quality affordable early childhood programs, and the reduction of regulatory burden where possible.

The regulated childcare and early learning programs that operate within the NT include preschool, long day care, outside school hours care and family day care. The unregulated programs include crèche, mobile preschool and playgroups. New services under development include five child and family centres due for completion by 30 June 2014.

The NT Government provides preschools and some school councils provide long day care and outside school hours care within school grounds. Collectively, these services represent approximately one third of all regulated childcare and early childhood learning programs within the NT. The NT Government also regulates all early childhood services in scope of the National Quality Framework.

Ensuring high quality, appropriate resourcing and consistent regulation of childcare and early childhood learning programs are major contributing factors in the long-term education, care and wellbeing outcomes for children in the NT.

Recognition of the NT's differences and its challenges is essential for the development of effective approaches to childcare and early childhood programs and the development of national funding arrangements and legislation. For example, delivery of early childhood learning programs to developmentally vulnerable Indigenous children in remote and very remote areas requires targeted education and health intervention, underpinned by appropriate legislation and long term funding models.

A summary of the NT Government recommendations to the inquiry are detailed below.

It is recommended that the Productivity Commission:

1. reiterates the importance of high quality early childhood programs, namely evidence based programs that have proven to be effective through evaluation for children from birth to school age and that establish patterns of attendance and provide a positive transition to school;
2. finds that current Australian Government policies driving the development and provision of childcare services in metropolitan areas fail to address needs in the Territory, particularly in areas outside Darwin and Palmerston, and recommends a separate model that is tailored to regions outside metropolitan areas;
3. finds that sustained Australian Government support is crucial for early childhood programs that are shown to be feasible, culturally accessible and cost-effective for the NT context such as the successful Families as First Teachers program;
4. supports the continuation of the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development;
5. notes the importance of the role of quality social infrastructure, including adequate housing in remote communities, in being able to provide appropriate levels of service delivery;
6. supports workforce strategies that increase the number of qualified Indigenous and non-Indigenous early childhood educators, including alternative learning pathways, language and literacy support programs and early childhood scholarships, and urges the Australian Government to clarify its role in providing funding towards these strategies;
7. calls for reform of the current Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate funding schemes to better address affordability of child care and the needs of families;
8. calls for sustained Australian Government investment to strengthen the business capacity and viability of all service providers to ensure quality, affordable early childhood learning services;
9. finds that enhanced accountability systems are required for currently unregulated childcare and early childhood learning programs to ensure greater rigour and ability in addressing disadvantage; and
10. finds that regulatory burden and compliance costs can be reduced for school-based preschools subject to dual regulation under the Education and Care Services (National Uniform Legislation) Act and Regulation and the Education Act NT.

## **NT context**

The demographic, geographic, cultural and economic circumstances in the NT differ extensively from other jurisdictions and present a unique and challenging environment in which to deliver effective early childhood services. In the NT:

- 44.2 per cent of the population lives in remote and very remote areas - over 6 times greater than the proportion in any other jurisdiction in Australia
- 43 per cent of birth-12 year old children are Indigenous (compared to 4.8 per cent nationally)
- 47 per cent of children live in remote and very remote areas (compared to 2.7 per cent nationally).

By the time many NT children commence school, they are more developmentally vulnerable than other Australian children. The 2009 and 2012 Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) data shows that Indigenous children in remote areas of the NT have high levels of developmental vulnerability across each of the five domains: physical health and wellbeing; emotional maturity; social competence; language and cognitive skills; and, communication skills and general knowledge.

In 2012 35.5 per cent of NT children were found to be developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains compared with the national figure of 22 per cent. This was an improvement from 2009, when it was 38.7 per cent compared with the national figure of 23.6 per cent. For Indigenous children in the NT, this was 59.2 per cent in 2012, down from 65.1 per cent in 2009.

The very small population of children in the NT (total annual birth cohort is approximately 3,600, of whom 1,600 are Indigenous) means that economies of scale in service provision are often difficult to achieve. Fixed infrastructure and staffing costs become increasingly prohibitive where the market does not readily respond to demand and the number of service sites grows to cater for small and dispersed populations.

Furthermore, the mobility of the remote and very remote population, including children aged birth-12, impacts access to and continuity of services, and on the outcomes able to be achieved by them.

The health and social risks that many children in the NT face early in their lives compound these developmental disadvantages, making them less amenable to remedial interventions. For example, 5.3 per cent of NT children are reported as having special needs compared to 4.9 per cent nationally and 11.4 per cent of NT children are identified by their teachers as requiring further assessment.

Children from a language background other than English constituted 40.3 per cent of the NT AEDI population compared to 18.7 per cent nationally, and 69.9 per cent of NT Indigenous children have a language background other than English compared to the national rate of 19.8 per cent.

The NT Government is the only provider of early childhood services in many remote and very remote communities in the Northern Territory. These communities cannot sustain commercial operators, simply because of their size and location. This also means that there is also a heavy reliance on Australian Government Budget Based Funded services in these areas.

As a consequence of the unique demographic, geographic, cultural and economic circumstances in the Territory, the NT Government faces a number of challenges for the way in which quality services are planned, funded and delivered that ensure their accessibility, cultural relevance, and suitability to the needs of the communities they service.

## **1. The importance of high quality early childhood programs**

These comments relate to the Productivity Commission's consideration of *the contribution of childcare to workforce participation and child development, and the capacity of the childcare system to ensure a satisfactory transition to schools, in particular for vulnerable or at risk children.*

### **1.1 Need for quality early childhood programs**

'High quality programs that have been rigorously evaluated for their preventive effects and their long-term benefits to individuals and society provide the strongest evidence regarding the characteristics of effective early childhood interventions.' (Robinson et al 2011).

National and international research demonstrates that the early years have enormous potential to transform the lives of individuals and build social capital. Investing in the early years is now

understood to be one of the most important and cost efficient strategies available to governments to reduce disadvantage.

Analysis of evidence-based early childhood interventions demonstrates that high quality programs can yield significant short and long-term benefits that far exceed their costs. These programs include approaches to early learning in childcare centres and preschool settings, and parenting programs that target child behaviour, mental health and social emotional learning.

Recent research also identifies the direct positive impact on Year 3 NAPLAN outcomes when children attend high quality early childhood learning programs that employ qualified early childhood teachers, particularly numeracy, reading and spelling. 'The direct causal effects are equivalent to 10 to 20 NAPLAN points or 15 to 20 weeks of schooling at the Year 3 level'. (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013)

Conversely, there is evidence that demonstrates that low cost, poor quality programs are unlikely to benefit children. Indeed, findings from studies such as the *Zero to Three* study show that some children from disadvantaged families had poorer outcomes if exposed to poorer quality childcare programs than children not participating in any childcare program. Lower quality programs can have a negative impact in children's cognitive and language outcomes, levels of school readiness and increased behavioural problems.

The NT Government supports continued investment to ensure access to and affordability of childcare and programs that provide a strong basis for early learning and adequately prepare children and families for schooling. However, it is essential this investment is made in early childhood programs that are shown to be effective through research, vigorous monitoring and evaluation.

#### *Recommendation 1*

*It is recommended that the Productivity Commission reiterates the importance of high quality early childhood programs, namely evidence based programs that have proven to be effective through evaluation for children from birth to school age and that provide a positive transition to school.*

## **1.2 Access to quality early childhood programs**

### ***Workforce participation***

By way of supporting workforce participation, according to the Report on Government Services 2014, in 2013 the NT had the highest average hours of attendance at Child Care Benefit approved childcare and vacation care services. Average weekly attendance at long day care in the NT was 35.9 hours compared with 27.6 hours nationally.

However, lack of access to childcare is an issue frequently raised, particularly in areas outside Darwin. The Australian Government policy of a market driven system serves metropolitan areas well. However, historically the market has not responded well to demand outside the Darwin and Palmerston area, where populations are small and dispersed. There is limited access to approved childcare services in regions such as Katherine, Alice Springs and in very remote communities. This indicates that neither workforce participation nor opportunities to attend to child development issues are being fully addressed in the NT through current Australian Government access policies.

### ***Access by vulnerable children***

The Report on Government Services 2014 identifies that, of NT children aged birth-12 years, special needs groups, children with non-English speaking backgrounds, children with a disability, Indigenous children and children from remote areas had lower attendance at approved childcare services than their representation in the community. Indigenous children (birth-12 years) represent 43 per cent of the NT population, but only 12 per cent of attendance at approved childcare. Most approved childcare

services in the Northern Territory are located in urban areas, and the opportunity to access approved childcare is significantly lessened for children in remote areas.

The NT Government expects quality early childhood services for children to be delivered to all children regardless of where they live. In the NT, where high numbers of children are at developmental risk, particularly Indigenous children in remote and very remote locations, it is especially important to ensure there are high quality, appropriately resourced, culturally appropriate childcare and early childhood learning programs to enable any significant improvement in the long-term outcomes for children.

### ***Budget Based Funded Programs***

Data for the Report on Government Services 2014 are drawn from attendance at approved childcare centres, namely mainstream Child Care Benefit services that are approved under the National Quality Framework (NQF). Australian Government Budget Based Funded services, predominantly childcare services in very remote areas, are exempt by national regulation from the NQF. The lack of data from these services provides an incomplete picture of access to, and attendance at, childcare or early childhood learning programs. In addition, the lack of regulation provides no data on standards of services or their performance.

An example of an emerging evidence-based program that is suited to NT circumstances is the Families as First Teachers program (FaFT) (see Appendix A for an outline of the program). This program is delivered by the NT Department of Education through local schools in remote communities. FaFT has enabled children aged birth-3 years with their families in very remote communities to have access to quality early childhood learning programs that facilitate development and a positive transition to preschool. FaFT was established in 2009 in six very remote communities. By 2012 the program had expanded and included a mobile FaFT service. It engages 2455 children and 2294 adults in the 45 very remote communities it services, approximately 70 per cent of eligible children.

The FaFT program delivers the Australian Abecedarian Approach model, an evidence-based literacy approach and parenting program that has been evaluated in the NT context, and continues to be subject to research on its effectiveness on child development, preparation for and adaption to preschool and relevance in the Indigenous context. FaFT programs are delivered by teachers and supported by 25 locally recruited Indigenous staff that are trained and offered ongoing professional development.

FaFT is limited to very remote communities due to current funding arrangements. Extending the program to other areas, such as town camps in urban regional centres, to facilitate family engagement, preparation and transition to school requires further resourcing. FaFT is funded through joint NT Government funding and various streams of Australian Government funding, including the Budget Based Funding program. There is no ongoing or long-term certainty with these Australian Government funding sources. Indeed, the Australian Government has commenced a review of the Budget Based Funding services and indicated funding may be considered on a case by case basis. This piecemeal approach is destabilising for communities and a disruption to any long-term progress for children through targeted intervention, positive transition to school, and improved life-long learning outcomes.

### ***Recommendation 2:***

*It is recommended that the Productivity Commission finds that current Australian Government policies driving the development and provision of childcare services in metropolitan areas fail to address needs in the Territory, particularly in areas outside Darwin and Palmerston, and recommends a separate model that is tailored to regions outside metropolitan areas.*

### **Recommendation 3**

*It is recommended that the Productivity Commission finds that sustained Australian Government support is crucial for early childhood programs shown to be feasible, culturally accessible and cost-effective for the NT context such as the successful Families as First Teachers program.*

### **1.3 Early childhood services as a means to address vulnerability**

Childcare and early childhood learning programs play a vital role in identifying and supporting vulnerable children and families. Children's services can provide a soft entry point into family support services to, for example, address incidents of child neglect. This is particularly important in remote communities where engagement of local families on pathways to more targeted support may be otherwise difficult.

Cost effective delivery of an expanded range of early childhood services and intervention can be achieved through collaborative and integrated services. The NT is, under the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development, developing five child and family centres to provide health and education services and programs that are closely linked with schools.

While the NT welcomes the Australian Government's investment in infrastructure to support these services, they are dependent on securing ongoing operational funding. The lack of sustained funding contributing to the child and family centres severely jeopardises the services that can operate from them. Sustained Australian Government funding could be achieved by extending the National Partnership Agreement to include operational funding for child and family centres. Child and family centres are an essential element of the broader strategic intent to close the gap on outcomes for Indigenous children.

Housing related factors can also influence a range of child outcomes. Overcrowding in particular has been found to have a negative impact on children's learning outcomes. In Indigenous communities in the NT, there are often 12-18 people residing in one dwelling, which results in a range of factors such as family conflict, interrupted sleep, lack of space to study and hygiene and health issues which severely impact on children's ability to learn.

The provision of adequate staff housing is also necessary to attract and accommodate qualified early childhood educators in remote communities.

The participation in national programs, including the National Partnership for Remote Indigenous Housing and Stronger Futures, will result in improved housing numbers, conditions and neighbourhood liveability in remote communities aimed at improving outcomes for all residents. However the cost of delivering initiatives is a constant constraint, along with inadequate essential services and infrastructure to service new housing, given the population distribution in the NT. Ongoing investment from the Australian Government is necessary for the provision of quality of social infrastructure in communities that can support the learning needs of children along with their families.

### **Recommendation 4**

*It is recommended that the Productivity Commission supports the continuation of the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development.*

### **Recommendation 5**

*It is recommended that the Productivity Commission notes the importance of the role of quality social infrastructure, including adequate housing in remote communities, in being able to provide appropriate levels of service delivery.*

## 1.4 The supply and up skilling of the workforce

A significant challenge to providing quality programs in the NT is obtaining staff with appropriate qualifications and training. It is difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff in remote areas, but this is also a feature in regional urban centres. There remain difficulties in accessing accredited training programs that support Indigenous people where English is not the first, but often the fourth or fifth language, and those living in remote areas.

As staff qualifications are one of the greatest influences in quality of service and strongly associated with improved child outcomes, it is an area that requires increased support in partnership with the Australian Government.

The NT has recognised the need for more highly qualified staff to satisfy the requirements of the Australian Government early childhood reform activities such as the NQF and the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education. The NT Department of Education has been proactive in this area through the NT More Early Childhood Teachers Scholarships and trialling alternative training models for Indigenous staff in remote areas, however, only short-term funding has been available to date and it is not possible to sustain these programs over the longer term. This is another example of where piecemeal Australian Government financial support can produce only irregular results.

The NT Government Department of Education has also invested in the development of pathways through school to employment in the community services sector in remote communities, particularly the childcare sector. As an example, the Department of Education has partnered with the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education to provide onsite early childhood vocational education to adults in remote communities. In 2014 the NT Department of Education will continue to work closely with Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education to implement an NT Schools Community Services Workforce project. This will see further development of the Certificate I and II in Community Services in schools and the roll out of the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care program.

The NT acknowledges efforts such as the Australian Government Early Years Quality Fund to improve staff wages and then to translate the funding into opportunities for professional development. However, this program did not include the full range of services in the sector, and was beyond the reach of most NT early childhood services, creating an uneven playing field. Further, the ad hoc nature of the funding could not address issues such as high staff turnover in the sector and the needs of Indigenous educators working in remote locations. These issues call for sustained long-term investment in upskilling existing employees and training new people for the sector.

### *Recommendation 6*

*It is recommended that the Productivity Commission supports workforce strategies that increase the number of qualified Indigenous and non-Indigenous early childhood educators, including alternative learning pathways, language and literacy support programs and early childhood scholarships, and urges the Australian Government to clarify its role in providing funding towards these strategies.*

## 2. Resourcing of services

These comments relate to the Productivity Commission's consideration of *current and future need for childcare in Australia particularly given changes in work patterns, early learning needs, childcare affordability and government assistance.*

## **2.1 NT Government assistance for services**

According to the Report on Government Services, Australian Government recurrent expenditure in 2012-13 on childcare services per child aged birth-12 years in the NT was \$1,415, lower than the national average of \$1,426. In 2010-11 the level of Australian Government funding per birth-12 year old NT child was 52 per cent higher than the national average. This funding has declined over the past two years, while nationally it has increased.

The Northern Territory Government provides the highest level of direct assistance to the early childhood education and care sector in Australia. In 2012-13, the NT Government provided the highest rate of funding for early childhood education and care of any jurisdiction, at \$1,164 per child in the community, compared to a national average of \$326.

Investment by the NT Government includes the NT Early Childhood Services Subsidy, an operational subsidy for long day care centres to assist in preventing all costs being passed to families. In addition, the NT Government funds a Long Day Care Toy and Equipment Grant, which provides approved long day care services with funding for the purchase of quality and developmentally appropriate toys and equipment. In addition, the Business Support for Community Based Childcare Services, a joint initiative between the Department of Education and Department of Business (DoB) helps individual community based child care services to develop strategies to enhance governance and financial management practices. More detailed information about these grants is provided in Appendix B. The NT Government also provides free preschool education delivered through schools, and, in the case of very remote communities, through mobile preschool services. The extent of the NT Government's direct costs in early childhood education and care is unique among Australian jurisdictions.

This assistance by the NT Government is in recognition of the importance of the early years and its support of the children and families, including reducing the cost of childcare borne by families. This is also responding to the generally higher cost of living in the Northern Territory.

## **2.2 Affordability and viability of early childhood services**

### ***Affordability***

The NT Government is concerned about the cost of childcare. The current structure of the Australian Government funding through Child Care Benefit (CCB) and Child Care Rebate (CCR) subsidises families to access available mainstream childcare, up to a threshold. However, even families eligible for maximum subsidies have considerable out of pocket costs given that fees are much higher than the subsidies. Figures for average service fees are outlined in Appendix C.

Given the role childcare has in enabling families to participate in the workforce, affordability is a key concern for the NT Government and needs to be addressed through reform of the current CCB and CCR arrangements.

First, the dual funding system of CCB and CCR presents considerable administrative burden on both services and families with duplication of reporting and administration of two rather than one system. Second, the CCB and CCR do not reflect the current costs to families with thresholds falling below the actual fees, creating considerable out of pocket cost to families. Third, as it is not means tested, the CCR applies an overall equal increase in assistance to all families and therefore fails to address the needs of low income families struggling to meet the cost of child care. Any increases that may be applied to CCR are designed to reduce the out of pocket cost to families. However the application of equal amounts to all creates an incentive to service providers to raise fees by the value of the CCR, with no net improvement for families as a consequence.



## **Viability**

Viability of services is also a concern. The child care industry has a low profit margin in comparison to other small business, with staffing by far the majority of costs to business. Any measures that increase staffing costs will have a direct impact on business viability and is most likely to be passed on directly to families.

The introduction of new regulatory frameworks has the potential to create cost barriers for providers entering the market and initial costs for existing providers as they transition to new legal and regulatory requirements. NT education and care services were previously regulated under Territory law, and incurred compliance costs under that scheme. Increased compliance costs and higher fees since the introduction of the NQF have been attributed to factors such as lower educator to child ratios and increased qualification requirements. It is recognised that although labour costs are the greatest cost to services, other factors, such as ownership type of services, rent costs and the dynamics between supply and demand have influenced costs and fees. Some existing providers maintained relatively static fees during the introduction of the NQF as they had factored these quality costs into their business models.

Due to the unique service delivery environment in the NT, set-up and supply costs, through infrastructure and staffing, are comparatively high. Other drivers that impact on the cost of service delivery include the increasing cost of utilities, building maintenance and professional development and support.

In recognition that the Australian Government has the primary responsibility for access and affordability through parents' subsidies, the NT Government assistance to community based child care centres has focused primarily on supporting the viability of services and their strength of business management.

The NT Government provides business support to community based child care services, however, expanding this to for-profit private owned businesses is beyond the means of the NT Government. Increased Australian Government support for all businesses in the early childhood education and care industry is an investment worth making.

The NT Government considers that elements of the NQF such as educator to child ratios and qualification requirements are in fact important quality standards which should not be wound back, particularly for vulnerable children. Measuring quality could be undertaken differently, particularly for remote services, by using outcome data such as NAPLAN and the AEDI.

### **Recommendation 7**

*It is recommended that the Productivity Commission calls for reform of the current Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate funding schemes to better address affordability of child care and the needs of families.*

### **Recommendation 8**

*It is recommended that the Productivity Commission calls for sustained Australian Government investment to strengthen the business capacity and viability of all service providers to ensure quality, affordable early childhood learning services.*

## **3. Regulatory Impacts**

These comments relate to the Productivity Commission's consideration of *the impacts of regulatory changes, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF), on the childcare sector over the past decade.*

### 3.1 Unregulated services

The NT Government supports the significant progress on the major reforms that have been implemented across Australia to date. However, there are a number of services in the Territory that remain outside the rigour of the NQF, for example, Budget Based Funded crèches in remote communities.

Other than school-based preschools (all Northern Territory Government preschools), most early childhood programs in remote NT communities are delivered by shire councils and non-government organisations funded directly by the Australian Government. The main source of funding, such as the Budget Based Funding program, provides operational funding to enable services to operate where full-fee paying, mainstream operations is not feasible. It is important to note that the level of funding may not be adequate to ensure quality early childhood programs, for example, the employment of a degree qualified early childhood educator.

As many of the services in remote areas are Budget Based Funded, this in part explains the lower data figures for attendance of Indigenous children and children in remote areas, as raised in 1.2 *Access to quality early childhood programs*, but also highlights that many vulnerable children in the NT are attending early learning programs that are not regulated or quality assured. It should also be noted that not all Budget Based Funded programs are in very remote areas, as some services are located in regional urban areas.

Services outside the NQF are not accountable for the key drivers of quality in their early childhood learning programs, such as qualified early childhood educators and educator to child ratios, yet they are funded by the Australian Government to deliver early childhood programs to many of the NT's most vulnerable and at-risk children. There is a need to establish minimum accountability systems for currently unregulated childcare and early childhood learning programs such as these, to ensure greater ability to respond to disadvantage.

#### *Recommendation 9*

*It is recommended that the Productivity Commission finds that enhanced accountability systems are required for currently unregulated childcare and early childhood learning programs to ensure greater rigour and ability in addressing disadvantage.*

### 3.2 Reducing the regulatory burden

At the 13 December 2013 meeting, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) identified early childhood as a deregulation priority. All jurisdictions agreed to work collaboratively to eliminate areas of overlap and duplication.

In the case of the NQF, the NT does not seek significant changes but intends to pursue issues through current systems, working with other jurisdictions and the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, and the 2014 Review of the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda. Streamlining some aspects of the NQF, such as assessment and rating processes, to reduce cost and processing time would be welcomed by the NT Government.

The legislation, in accordance with the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care, explicitly includes preschools within the scope of education and care services. All NT preschools are administered as a component of government school operations and therefore must meet requirements of the NT *Education Act*, education regulations and administrative policy as well as being regulated by the NQF. This is unique to the Northern Territory, where there are no private stand-alone preschool providers.

A streamlined regulatory and quality assurance system for school based preschools would be appropriate where the education legislation drives regulatory and quality assurance, safeguarding standards that uphold children's wellbeing. The NT *Education Act* satisfies many of the NQF requirements, and therefore, regulation under both systems concurrently presents duplication and anomalies in the broader education system context, increasing red tape and regulatory burden. A streamlined regulatory system for school based preschools would require legislative amendment.

#### *Recommendation 10*

*It is recommended that the Productivity Commission finds that regulatory burden and compliance costs can be reduced for school-based preschools subject to dual regulation under the Education and Care Services (National Uniform Legislation) Act and Regulation and the Education Act NT.*

## **Conclusion**

There are significant benefits for individuals, society and the economy in developing an efficient labour market through which childcare is used to assist women to re-enter the workforce after childbirth. Access to and affordability of childcare programs in this context is critical for families.

There is also a need to provide evidence-based early childhood programs that support healthy development in the early years. Where such programs offer enriched early education, parenting support and early intervention, they have the potential to benefit all children and particularly those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable.

These objectives can, in practice, compete for resources when the outcomes of access and affordability are weighed up against the cost of providing and quality assuring effective programs. There is a need to ensure that a reasonable balance can be found between these two competing interests in policy and funding responses and that monitoring and evaluation measures the impact of the outcomes being achieved.

Evidence shows that childcare alone does not produce the long-term benefits that some specific high quality early childhood development programs, with a high degree of carer engagement, have demonstrated. From the perspective of delivering improved child outcomes, the equation cannot be *any* childcare is better than no childcare. The efficacy of the programs must be established, and the quality of program delivery should be monitored to ensure delivery of positive outcomes for children. In the NT, where high numbers of children are at developmental risk, this is especially important.

Both the NT Government and Australian Government have already made considerable investment in childcare and early childhood learning programs. However, high priority must be given to sustained support. High quality appropriately resourced and consistently regulated programs are necessary to achieve any significant improvement of long-term developmental, educational and wellbeing outcomes for children in the NT. A comprehensive and strategic long-term approach to funding is required of the Australian Government, noting the significant level of the Northern Territory Government's own resourcing applied to achieving the best possible outcomes for young children in the early childhood and services sector.

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