



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

**Comments from the Western Australian Aboriginal Education & Training
Council (WAAETC).**

**WAAETC is a Ministerial Council, providing advice to the WA Minister for
Education and Minister for Training and Workforce Development**

Included are only those comments which are approved by the WAAETC Council for use by the Commission.

1. BACKGROUND

Recently the Western Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Council (WAAETC) Chairperson and Kimberley representatives visited three Children and Family Centres in the Kimberley region. The Centres which are located in Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and Kununurra were built as part of Closing the Gap: *National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development*, to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians, particularly children. The Australian Government provided \$42 million to build five Children and Family Centre facilities in Western Australia, including the three in the Kimberley.

The Centres provide vital support for Aboriginal families in the region with young children, as well as providing opportunities for local people to undertake training and work as child care workers. They also bring together different programs and services including child health services, playgroups and parenting courses.

Investment in early childhood is critical and evidence shows that the experiences in the first five years of a child's life are important in promoting their future good health, education and social development. Families in the Kimberley now have greater access to child care and early childhood support services with the completion of all three Centres in the region.

2. CURRENT SITUATION

Baya Gawi Buga-yanu Jandu-yanu Children and Family Centre

Baya Gawi Buga-yanu Jandu-yanu Children and Family Centre in Fitzroy Crossing has been operational since September 2012 and builds on existing work to close the gap in disadvantage among Aboriginal people. The Centre forms part of an educational precinct in Fitzroy Crossing, where learning begins locally at early childhood and continues right through to adult education and training at the Kimberley Training Institute campus.

The design of the building is a reference to the Baya Gawi or freshwater whip-Ray which is an important symbol to the local Aboriginal people who live in the Fitzroy Valley. The programs and services currently offered at the Centre include approved child care, and a range of early childhood and parenting programs and services such as the Maru Maru supported playgroup; the Partnership Acceptance Learning Sharing (PALS) Program; and the Kids Matter Program. Health providers offer information sessions, counseling and clinics from the centre on a regular basis and these include the Mums, Bubs and Bibs program; a Pediatric Clinic; and a number of allied health services such as occupational therapy and audiology. The Centre's operators are the Marninwarntikura Fitzroy Women's Resource Centre Aboriginal Corporation.

The Centre employs three Aboriginal women who are also studying to complete Certificate III Child Care qualifications and one of the women plans to commence Diploma studies in 2015. The employment opportunities offered by the Centre for the three Aboriginal women and the non-Aboriginal staff are in serious jeopardy if the Centre is not funded next year due to the cessation of the National Partnership Agreement under the new federal governments funding arrangements.. In addition the WAAETC is concerned that without guaranteed future funding, the services currently on offer may cease to operate and the disadvantage gap will not be closed but widen.

Ningkuwum-Nganayuwu Children and Family Centre

Wunan Foundation has formed a unique partnership with Save the Children and Little Nuggets Early Learning Centre to operate the Children and Family Centre in Halls Creek. The partnership vision is to become a “one-stop shop” of health and education services for children aged 0-8 years and their parents/carers. Wunan believes that the Centre has a unique opportunity to network with other organisations to help families to access services in a family-friendly and culturally sensitive way.

The Centre opened in January 2012 it has established strong connections with other local organisation and service providers. The number of groups keen to use the Centre includes Community Health which currently provides weekly nutrition classes for young mums. The Little Nuggets Child Care staff provides a crèche service so that the mums can participate in activities without the worry of their children. Medical organisations connect with clients and offer easy access to informal services like counselling, pregnancy support and allied health services. The programs and services offered build on existing work to close the gap in disadvantage among Aboriginal people. Again the WAAETC is concerned that without guaranteed funding support, the services currently on offer may cease to operate and the gap between the outcomes of Aboriginal Australians and Non-Aboriginal Australians will similarly continue to widen.

The Kununurra Children and Family Centre

The Kununurra Children and Family Centres provides early learning opportunities and access to community services programs in Kununurra which are predominately for, but not exclusive to, Aboriginal families with children from birth to six years of age. The programs and services offered build on existing work to close the gap in disadvantage among Aboriginal people. The Kununurra Centre has been operational since June 2013 and offers approved child care services, and a range of family and health programs such as the Family Information and Help Service (FIHS); the Second Bite Nutrition Program; and the Well Women's Workshop. The Centre employs four Aboriginal women who are all studying to achieve a national accredited qualification. The WAAETC was impressed with the strong work ethic of the four young women who were employed in this Centre and also by the high level of Aboriginal community involvement. The Aboriginal community involvement is quite high at 80% use of the services provided by the Family part of the Centre. Again the WAAETC is concerned that without guaranteed future funding, the services which are being readily accessed by the Aboriginal community will cease to operate and the gap between the outcomes of Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal Australians will likewise widen.

3. ISSUES

- I. There are a number of issues raised by staff in the Children and Family Centres with funding beyond 2014 being the most pressing on the list. The Centre has been established in the most impoverished locations to provide services to the most vulnerable people, the Aboriginal people in these remote areas. Without Commonwealth or State funds to support the Centres, the people for whom the Centres were established will again miss out on the health and education services they provide. The only people who will be able to access the Centres will be the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families that are working and obtaining a decent wage to pay for the services they access.

- II. All three Children and Family Centres have experienced and accredited Childcare Managers who have tried every possible funding avenue to employ local Aboriginal people to work and study for nationally accredited qualifications such as a Certificate III and/or Diploma in Children's Services. Job Services, CDEP, Apprentices, and Skill Hire have been approached and they are now looking at Jobs Connect to raise funds to employ local Aboriginal workers to take on studies and work within the Children and Family Centres.
- III. The 42 Day Rule - Under Child Care Benefits (CCB), each child is permitted 42 days absence from the child care centre they attend. At this point, Child Care Benefits (CCB) ceases and parents are required to pay the full cost of care. While there are circumstances under which additional days can be covered, it then requires supporting evidence which may not be realistic to obtain and/or which would place an additional burden on the already overworked doctors each time a child had a cold and required a medical certificate to explain their absence. Insisting that Childcare and Family Centres introduce Child Care Benefits (CCB), would leave them and the families in an untenable position for the following reasons:
- Annual leave: in recognition of the remote localities, employees are provided with additional annual leave. This equates to 7 weeks or more per annum. This instantly brings families to 35 days of leave. Under the 42 day rule, this only allows each child 7 days of sick leave which is completely unrealistic.
- Cultural obligations: for local Aboriginal families, the requirement to attend funerals (they are currently averaging 2 – 3 deaths per week in Fitzroy Valley) and to visit relatives in other localities mean that families would meet their 42 days extremely rapidly. At that point they would have to withdraw their children due to the cost impost, resign from work and return to Centrelink benefits.
- IV. The combination of these factors would mean that each Children and Family Centre would be financially crippled. They would have to close the doors which would have a profound negative impact on the children they serve. Each day they witness the positive impact the Children and Family Centres has on the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of the children who utilise the service. The intent of the National Partnership Agreement – to improve Indigenous childhood development – would be completely undermined if all Children and Family Centres have to close due to inappropriate funding models.
- V. The application process assumes a level of literacy that is unrealistic for many of the families. English is frequently a second if not third language for many people in the Kimberley. Explaining the forms, the financial implications and completing the application process would fall back on the staff. Staff members already work far in excess of a standard day and do not need more tasks added to their responsibilities.
- VI. Child Care Benefits (CCB) funding is designed for mainstream services in urban and regional locations. It is completely unsuitable for Children and Family Centres. It does not account for the cost imposts of providing services in remote localities.

These include:

- Above award wages which are necessary to attract and retain staff
- Provision of housing
- The additional cost of travel for professional development and meetings
- Purchasing vehicles; and
- Running costs of these vehicles which are driven hundreds of kilometres a week, including over 4WD only roads, to pick up children, parents and staff.

VII. The Centres provide opportunity for employment of Aboriginal people and as such require funding to train Operations Managers as an accredited Early Childhood Trainer and Assessor and to support Aboriginal staff in gaining national accredited qualifications such as a Certificate III or Diploma in Children's Services. The Centres offer other employment and training opportunities for Aboriginal people such as Food Handling and Meal Preparation; Horticulture and areas where their skills and qualifications can be used in providing a service to the centre and the community.

VIII. The closure of the centres would impact on the children, and it would be devastating as they were established in the highest needs communities in Australia. The Centres have proven their worth in early detection and intervention in such things as speech and hearing, visual impairment, occupational therapy and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

IX. The NAPLAN results and Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) results paint a bleak picture of the educational attainment of the children and their prospects. Yet at Children and Family Centres in the Kimberley they are witnessing daily, positive changes in the children they serve. They are creating the foundations for literacy and numeracy which are essential for children to transition effectively into school and succeed academically and in life. Over time this will contribute to improvements in the educational attainment of children in the region. One practical demonstration of positive change is that at the Jambila Room (for children aged 3 – 4 ½) in Fitzroy Crossing, the children now voluntarily read themselves to sleep.

4. The Western Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Council (WAAETC) seek reassurance that the efficacy and sensitivity of Indigenous child care and early childcare learning increases for the Aboriginal populations it serves. These centres are culturally and linguistically relevant and culturally responsive as they promote essential contributions by Aboriginal parents, family and community thus advancing holistic developmental outcomes for Aboriginal children.

5. Recommendations

- Increase Childcare and Family Centre funding to continue with programs which addresses six main themes: culture and language, education and school readiness, health promotion, nutrition, social support, and parental involvement;
- Urgent provision of funding for Childcare and Family Centres to purchase urgently needed resources to cultivate lifelong learning with Aboriginal children, and to support parents and guardians as the prime teachers and caregivers of their children;
- Increase funding the need for professionals such as occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, and community health nurses to be involved with the programs