



31 January 2011

Early Childhood Development Workforce Study
Productivity Commission
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**Comments from the Council for the Care of Children regarding the
*Australian Government Productivity Commission Issues Paper on the
Early Childhood Development Workforce***

The Council for the Care of Children appreciates the opportunity to comment on the *Australian Government Productivity Commission Issues Paper on the Early Childhood Development Workforce*.

The Council was established in early 2006 and is an independent advisory body that reports directly to the Minister for Families and Communities. Established under Section 7B of the *Children's Protection Act 1993* (as amended), which came into effect on 1 February 2006, the Council's purpose is to:

- keep under review the operation of the *Children's Protection Act 1993* and the *Family and Community Services Act 1972* so far as it affects the interests of children and young people
- provide advice to the government and promote the rights and interests of children and young people and report on how children and young people are faring in this State
- advocate for or on behalf of South Australian children and young people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, children and young people with disabilities, and children and young people under the Guardianship of the Minister for Families and Communities
- inform the South Australian community about the best care and support for children and young people.

The skills and capability of the early childhood development workforce is of interest and concern to the Council for the Care of Children. The Council has a strong advocacy role and interest in the building of South Australian communities to ensure appropriate environments, both physically and socially, are created for the health and wellbeing of the young people of South Australia.

Because one of the Council's current areas of focus is working with vulnerable families, particularly in integrated services, the members believe it is vital to have a well trained, professional and flexible workforce to deliver the type of 'wrap around services' which families need in order to thrive in their community.

Please find the Council's comments on the *Australian Government Productivity Commission Issues Paper on the Early Childhood Development Workforce* attached.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Diana Hetzel'.

Diana Hetzel
Chair

The Council for the Care of Children

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Introduction:

About the Council for the Care of Children

The Council for the Care of Children is an organisation working to ensure children and young people in South Australia are safe and have the best possible start in life. Ten Council members are leaders from the community, including an Aboriginal leader and two young people who are youth advocates. The Minister for Families and Communities names the state government departments to be on the Council and the heads of those departments also sit on the Council.

Our vision

The Council's role is to advocate for South Australian children to ensure that they are cherished, nurtured and respected. We want South Australia to be a child and youth-friendly state that acknowledges children's rights and seeks to ensure that children are:

- safe
- happy
- healthy
- confident and secure, and
- supported to learn and develop.

What Do We Do?

In South Australia, the Council works to advocate for the wellbeing of children and young people and inform others about children's rights by:

- providing information and advocate for children's rights;
- actively consulting with and listening to the needs of children and young people and informing relevant bodies about the opinions of children and young people concerning issues that affect them; and
- advising government and those who work with children and young people concerning services needed to ensure the protection of children's rights and the provision of appropriate supports to help children develop and be the best that they can be.

Why do we have a Council?

Many South Australians have campaigned for children to have a special body to speak up for children's rights and help to protect them. The Council was set up by the South Australian Government in 2006 to monitor how children and young people are progressing in South Australia. We also advise government on what is needed to give them a good start in life.

We bring government and the community together to encourage everyone to do their best for children and young people by:

- understanding that all children and young people are citizens;

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- doing more to promote wellbeing, and to help children and young people to feel good about themselves; and
- making sure that children and young people have help to achieve their hopes and goals.

Our Legislation

Part 7B of the *Children's Protection Act 1993* sets out our responsibilities:

- advising government about the rights and interests of children and young people
- reporting to government about the wellbeing of children and young people, the services to support them, and the ways in which they are helped to reach their full potential
- looking at the *Children's Protection Act 1993* and the *Family and Community Services Act 1972* to make sure that they are meeting children and young people's needs
- promoting the safe care of all children and young people, and in particular:
 - children and young people with disabilities
 - Aboriginal children and young people
 - children and young people under the guardianship, or in the custody, of the Minister for Families and Communities
- reporting to the Minister for Families and Communities¹ on:
 - environments which are safe for children and young people
 - raising community awareness of children's and young peoples issues
 - research priorities in relation to children and young people.

Working Together

Many people and organisations look out for children and young people. The Council works hard to bring them together. We keep a close eye on what is happening around the world, in Australia, and in different parts of South Australia, both in the country and the city.

We belong to many networks for children and young people, in South Australia, Australia and overseas, and we encourage others to join us.

The Council is a member of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). ARACY is a not for profit organisation which brings researchers, policy makers and service providers together to improve the lives of children and young people.

The Council has signed the ARACY *Commitment to Young Australians*. The Commitment was written by ARACY members who consulted with children and young people. The Commitment has seven principles to guide decision making about and with children:

- The wellbeing of children and young people needs to be a national priority

¹ The Council for the Care of Children also reports from time to time to the Minister for Education on matters relevant to the Education portfolio.

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- The whole community is responsible for the wellbeing of children and young people
- Families need support and resources to nurture children and young people
- Children and young people should grow up in a safe environment
- Children and young people should be valued and respected
- Children and young people should have learning and development opportunities to realise their potential
- The capacity of children and young people to contribute to the community should be enabled.

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Focus of the Council

The Council has a strong advocacy role and interest in the building of South Australian communities to ensure that appropriate environments; both physically and socially, are created for the health and wellbeing of the young people of South Australia.

In this submission the Council has chosen to focus on the areas of most relevance to their work. The Council for the Care of Children has a current focus on building child and youth friendly communities and working with vulnerable families. The Council believes that integrated early childhood services such as Communities for Children sites, and in South Australia, Children's Centres, are able to deliver preventative early intervention and family support and capability building services in a non-threatening and empowering way to begin to address the multiple disadvantages that some families face.

To be able to deliver these services effectively the sector must be staffed by competent, flexible workers, highly skilled in their discipline, who are comfortable working in a multidisciplinary team environment with a focus on the wellbeing of individual children in partnership with their families.

Scope of the ECD workforce

Whilst the scope of the paid early childhood development workforce is covered in this study the Council would ask if the selection, training and professional development of foster carers should be considered given the increasing complexity of working with children in out of home care.

Integrated services

In South Australia, the Department of Education and Children's Services funds and administers Children's Centres. There are twenty such centres currently in operation with a number of centres under development. Children's Centres bring together care, education, health, community development activities and family services for families and their young children from birth to eight years of age. Children's Centres help parents and children get the support they need, when they need it, within their own community. Each Children's Centre is tailored to meet the needs of the local community.

At the Children, Communities, Connections conference held in Adelaide in November 2010 Paul Prichard, who currently works with the Centre for Community Child Health leading the Learning and Development Strategy for the roll out of Child and Families Centres in Tasmania, delivered a key note address: 'Developing integrated child and family centres – how easy?'

In this address Paul warned of the danger that services will have a new look whilst still offering the same services. Paul believes that early childhood services need to engage in reflective practice to move through the processes of being services individually supporting families, to services co-locating for families to services collaborating for families and finally the achievement of services integrated for families. This will require an early childhood

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workforce with the attitude and capacity to achieve results in such an environment. The Council for the Care of Children would strongly advocate for education and professional development of early childhood professionals who would commit to a process of active consultation with and listening to the needs of their peers working in early childhood services as well as parents using such services.

To achieve such outcomes for the early childhood workforce, the Australian Government needs to provide funds to encourage community ground up engagement in integrated services through incentives and professional development linked to National Standards. This could be achieved as part of the process of the Implementation of the National Quality Agenda currently being developed.

Five Commonwealth funded Communities for Children sites also operate in South Australia which offer integrated services such as home visiting, early learning and literacy programs, early development of social and communication skills, parenting and family support programs, child nutrition, and community events to celebrate the importance of children, families and the early years.

The benefits of integrated services are well documented especially in meeting the needs of more vulnerable families. Leaders within these integrated services must be carefully selected and have the skills and abilities to manage the diverse service providers to stimulate the vision and motivation within the full range of teams to implement the seamless service for families. Specialist training for managing integrated services is essential. Aboriginal services need Aboriginal workers preferably from the local community, to be trained and supported in the delivery of services to Aboriginal families. In summary leaders are required to work with complexity in dynamic evolving communities leading a team of diverse professionals able to engage with families and communities, participate in ongoing professional learning, dialogue and successful engagement with change.

The Council's enquiry and discussions with service providers and researchers have recommended the following range of skills and abilities for workers in early childhood services:

- service providers must have the attitude and capacity to focus on enabling families to develop thriving behaviours, thereby increasing the awareness of their own competencies
- workers must be able to build relationships with families who are doing well to help those who are not
- must be able to provide professional support and training of volunteers
- have the ability to manage and maximise resources, including enhancing the capabilities of staff and parenting partners
- have the capacity and tenacity to seek out the people not currently engaged in services
- workers should be willing to consider what is required to engage and encourage families to seek support early
- have a broad network of professionals, and knowledge of and networks with, diverse service types to provide effective preventative programs
- professionals in services may need to be prepared to be flexible and adaptive in their role depending on the context of the family's and children's presentation

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- workers must be constantly mindful of the unequal power relationship between service providers and families, and how that affects the family
- providers need to have the ability to consider who controls the definition of the problem and the definition of the need. In some cases the way services are constructed can define that need instead of granting respect to the knowledge and experiences of frustration felt by people who may well feel oppressed by the issues; workers must be able to change this focus
- many assessments to meet the criteria for accessing services highlight the deficits. Workers need to focus on how to implement a strengths based approach to preventative support
- people want someone who will travel the journey with them
- workers need autonomy and flexibility and appropriate funding to be able to negotiate outcomes – this is getting harder to do
- community control of primary health care is the best model and workers need to consider how best to achieve that
- professionals need to accept the changing nature of their roles and adopt new behaviours

The Council would also offer the following opinion with regard to skills and qualifications for work in the early childhood sector. The two types of qualifications currently available for training professionals in the early childhood sector are the Certificate III and the Diploma of Children's Services and the various early childhood teaching degrees. These qualifications offer a different range of skills and knowledge with some overlap in aspects of child development, learning through play and health and development units, hence the ability for some universities to offer credit from the Diploma into their degrees.

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) Diploma inevitably has a focus on the care of the child in the form of physical care and nutrition with of course, the education of the child and nurturing of their development also being an integral part of the course. Most Early Childhood degrees focus on child development and learning through play and brain development (as does the Diploma) but then progress, particularly in the latter parts of the course, to pedagogy and encouragement of the practitioner to critically reflect on the way they work with children and enhance their development at a deeper level than is possible in a two year Diploma.

There is a place for both qualifications but there urgently needs to be nationally negotiated arrangements with all the universities to develop their degrees using the Diploma as a foundation and building upon that initial practical base into the more reflective pedagogical headset. If that occurred, then all Diploma students would automatically receive credit and universities would save time and resources in the development of their degrees and a clearer career path would be possible for child care workers.

With regard to integrated services, the benefits of co-location of services are ease of access, and streamlining of support to families so that they don't have to negotiate multiple sites,

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systems and staff. However, if services are simply co-located rather than fully integrated then they may find that rather than working in partnership with one another, they are in fact competing with one another and this is very confusing for those using the service.

Lack of respect for different roles, responsibilities and professional qualifications can cause disharmony within integrated services which inevitably impedes functioning and effectiveness. Also impacting on effectiveness and collaborative working is the lack of appropriate awards for early childhood workers (child care) and the lack of a career structure. Whilst there can be different awards, there is an overdue need to address underpayment of child care workers.

Different funding models for services, different line management and reporting requirements and lack of cohesion in policy and program development and implementation can be a major source of frustration in the early childhood sector. Should integrated services be under the jurisdiction of a Department or Office for Children instead of the Department of Education and Children's Services? This Department would not be particularly aligned with education, care, health or social services and so could provide the ideal independent administrative structure for workforces within these services?

Reasons for accessing early childhood services

Families are increasingly choosing to access early childhood services as they become more aware of the importance of the early years on brain development and the holistic development of the child. With the introduction of paid parental leave however, parents may choose to remain at home with their children longer before accessing formal early childhood services. As baby boomers choose to retire they may increasingly be available to provide care for grandchildren thereby reducing use of formal care. There is already an established pattern of families using combinations of formal and informal child care arrangements. A consequence of this can be that children experience difficulties as they are moved from setting to setting.

Families are increasingly aware of the need to provide high quality care for their children and in some cases will be prepared to pay a higher cost for care if they feel the outcomes are beneficial for their children. However, most vulnerable families cannot access child care services which could be very supportive to them because the fee structures in child care need an urgent overhaul. Gap fees are too high and a comprehensive review of the child care fee system and rebates is required to ensure equitable access for poor families. Many vulnerable families, dealing with children with complex needs whilst dealing with a range of personal issues themselves often require active financial and personal counselling in order to thrive. This makes the need for affordable accessible child care for these families, staffed by highly skilled professionals, even more imperative.

Ample evidence shows that workers with qualifications particularly at Diploma and above, encompassing early childhood development and who are able to access ongoing professional development, deliver higher quality services. For example, teachers who are supported with high quality professional development such as the Kids Matter initiative can make a substantial difference to the health and wellbeing of children with disabilities and social and emotional difficulties. With the introduction of mandatory qualifications for staff in these services, quality will be enhanced but workers will expect to be appropriately remunerated for their qualifications. Also the changing face of families as family units

become more complex means that early childhood services must have staff competent to professionally handle this change.

Supply of qualified staff

Adequate numbers of staff are being trained for entry into the sector but low wages and difficult working conditions, particularly in the care sector, mean that qualified staff often move to other positions within a short period of time of completing their qualification. Equitable arrangements between care, education, health and community services staff in early childhood services is an urgent matter.

There are a range of excellent national vocational qualifications which have been developed in partnership with industry for the early childhood care and support workforce. Whilst there are articulation arrangements between some vocational qualifications and university degrees there is a need for these arrangements to be negotiated in a consistent way nationally to ensure a more predictable career path for all who work in early childhood services.

Access to achieving qualifications in the sector, particularly vocational qualifications have been improved by the better use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and are particularly relevant to those workers who have been in unqualified positions for many years. Whilst there remain some issues with the implementation of RPL the capacity of training providers to deliver this form of assessment seems to be improving.

Access to ongoing professional development can be problematic if staff wishes to attend training during business hours. The requirement to pay relief staff can be financially restrictive for some services and workers are often too fatigued to attend training after work, therefore study leave should be built into workforce conditions.

Status of the sector

The status of the sector and workforce in the community as a whole is generally low, but as more families use formal early childhood services and realise the benefits to their children they become advocates for the sector and more appreciative of the skills and abilities required to work in the sector. Unfortunately this is not widespread; child care is still viewed by many as child minding, without recognising the complexity of the work and providing appropriate remuneration thus leading to high attrition within the sector.

The Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing development of workers in the early childhood sector and offers support and encouragement to ensure effective implementation of initiatives particularly affecting South Australian workers.

The Council's membership provides an expert reference group from which the Productivity Commission could gain high level advice and information. The members of the Council are:

Chair: Dr Diana Hetzel

Members:

Youth Advocates: Ms Emily Rozee

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	Mr Thomas Manning
Family Therapist:	Ms Jane Chapman
Community Agency expert:	Mr Simon Schrapel (Chief Executive, Uniting Care Wesley)
Disability representative:	Ms Jane Cooper
Early Childhood experts:	Professor Phillip Slee (Flinders University) Ms Kaye Colmer (Lady Gowrie Child Centre)
Aboriginal representative:	Ms Debbie Bond
Community member with expertise concerning child and youth friendly communities:	Dr Angelique Edmonds (Lecturer in Architecture, Uni SA)
Departmental representatives:	<p>Department of Health: Chief Executive, represented by Mr Daniel Cox</p> <p>Department for Families and Communities: Ms Joslene Mazel, represented by Ms Sue Barr</p> <p>Department for Education and Children's Services: Chief Executive, represented by Ms Janine Harvey</p> <p>Department for Premier and Cabinet, Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division: Ms Nerida Saunders</p>