

Mobile Children's Services Association of NSW Inc

Submission to Productivity Commission Study on ECD Workforce

Introduction

MCSA's submission follows the format of the Issue Paper.

The submission only addresses areas where MCSA is competent to comment.

The Mobile Children's Services Association of NSW Inc. [MCSA] is the peak advocacy and resourcing body for Mobile Children's Services in NSW.

The Association's Mobiles Resourcing Project [MRP] resources services in NSW by providing information, advice, referral, mentoring, advocacy, networking and training. The Project is funded by the NSW Community Services.

Mobile Children's Services provide flexible, responsive and innovative services to children and families experiencing social, geographic, cultural or economic isolation. Focusing on the care and education of children, they aim to ensure that children and families in isolated and disadvantaged communities in rural, urban and remote areas have access to good quality and safe children's services.

Through their work with children, Mobile Children's Services also support families and the parenting role.

Mobile Children's Services operate from a base such as Alexandria, Bourke, Fairfield, Moree, Inverell, Hay, Broken Hill, Penrith, Toronto or Marrickville and outreach into the isolated communities.

There are currently 110 Mobile Children's Service projects in NSW sponsored by 80 organisations.

There are several types of Mobile Children's Service. They work in hundreds of communities with thousands of families and children, in a range of ways, breaking down the barriers of isolation by being responsive to the particular circumstances and needs of the children and families in those communities.

Mobile Children's Services are a very practical and cost effective means of providing access to services and providing an equitable amount of the resources of society to those in isolated circumstances.

Whilst being cost-effective, *Mobile Children's Services are not cheap*: Access, safety, quality and good management do cost.

Most Mobile Children's Services in NSW are involved in the direct care and education of children. Services aim to support the achievement of a child's full potential.

MCSA notes that the following comments are with respect to Mobile Children's Services in NSW and the not for profit ECEC sector in NSW.

MCSA notes that broader ECD policy, with respect to the adequacy of funding levels in government programs, is a key factor in achieving outcomes noted in the *National Early Childhood Development Strategy* and key elements, particularly the *National Quality Framework*.

In particular, wages in the NFP ECEC sector need to be commensurate with Infants/Primary teachers and staff in school leadership positions.

2 Early Childhood Development

Scope of the ECD sector

MCSA notes that the broad ECEC sector, in its universal service delivery role, is actively involved in more than 'childcare' and 'education' services. In particular, services in the ECEC sector directly address the support of parents in their role as parents.

MCSA notes that many not for profit [NFP] ECEC services are great contributors to the positive social capital of entire communities by virtue of many being community managed as well as, in most instances, one of the key facilitators of social activity in many regional, rural and remote communities [ie: The village pump].

These benefits are not usually measured when accounting for the value, positive externalities or productivity of ECEC services.

MCSA notes that there is also a significant and strengthening connection between ECEC services and family support services, where 'care' providing ECEC services [Licensed centre-based and Mobile services] are strong supports of children and families using targeted/intensive services.

The NSW Government's Brighter Futures program has a large component dedicated to placing children in ECEC services.

MCSA also notes that a key strategy for many family support services in NSW, particularly through Brighter Futures and Families NSW programs, is 'supported playgroups'. A key issue to consider is the knowledge and skills required in these programs that directly relate to the support of child development.

These broader 'services' to the community have implications for the range of knowledge, skills and attributes required of ECEC staff, their tertiary and continuing training/professional development and the ability of ECEC services to recruit and retain staff.

MCSA notes that, with reference to the schematic on page 3 of the Issues Paper, the new National Quality Framework does not discriminate between 'childcare' and 'early childhood education - Preschool'.

All children are educated whilst in any care setting. Childcare is not a baby sitting/baby watching service.

Under the current NSW Children's Services legislation, child care and preschool are not differentiated.

'Preschools' are a sub-set of 'child care' [Where 'education' associated with all aspects of a child's development are part of the program for all ages] with a specific set of operational parameters, particularly 'age'.

Under the National Quality Framework, a "Preschool Program" provided in licensed children's services is only differentiated from the status of a general, licensed children's service by the insertion of a funding program requirement under the Universal Access initiative through the quality ratings component.

Integration and co-location

All the following are organisation's that sponsor Mobiles and other service types. For the most part, these organisations are ECEC based rather than health or welfare focused.

For the most part, the key to their multi-project strategy is about the hoped for efficiencies of larger organisations.

Most have an ECEC ethos rather than an integrated services philosophy.

MCSA notes that governance arrangements in NSW NFP services, particularly multi-auspicing, is becoming a critical issue for the survival of many services, particularly in more remote locations.

Multi-auspicing is a key factor which should assist in improved professional development, recruitment, retention, job satisfaction and career pathways.

Awabakal Mobile Playsession Service is a targeted Playsession Mobile operating in the lower Hunter Valley. It is associated with Awabakal Preschool at Glendale and part of the broader Awabakal Co-operative which works across Indigenous health and welfare.

Bankstown Mobile Minders and Canterbury Mobile Minders are sponsored by Bankstown Community Resource Group which sponsors a range of other ECEC services, including additional needs.

Bourke Children's Services provides a children's services 'hub' for a range of ECEC Services, including a Playsession Mobile.

Blacktown Learning Support Program is a Mobile Playsession service with an early intervention focus. It is sponsored by Children First which is a very large multi-auspice group covering various types of licensed centre-based care plus additional needs supports.

Brewarinna Mobile is sponsored by Mackillop Rural Community Services which provides a range of welfare supports in north-west NSW, particularly for Indigenous communities. Although welfare based, MRCS's has a strong focus on early childhood training.

Central West Families First Supported Playgroup is sponsored by Lithgow Information and Neighbourhood Centre [LINC] which also sponsors other welfare and community development services.

Community Early Years Childcare [Operating from Wodonga throughout the NSW and Victorian Upper Murray] provides Mobile Long Day Care and supported playgroup. It is sponsored by an Adult Education organisation.

Community Activities Lake Macquarie [Toronto] sponsors Mobile Playsession as well as Toy Library, OOSH and a range of community development services.

Deniliquin Mobile Children's Service is sponsored by Deniliquin Children's Centre which sponsors Long Day Care and Preschool as well as Toy Library.

The Family Action Centre at University of Newcastle sponsors a Playsession Mobile that supports families in caravan parks in the Lower Hunter.

Galloping Gumnut Mobile Children's Service [Lithgow] provides Mobile Playsession and Preschool activities.

Goonimoo Mobile Children's Service, offering Mobile Playsession, is sponsored by Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service.

Hawkesbury Community Outreach Service [Kurrajong] provides a range of Mobile ECEC services as well as Family Support services.

Jumbunna Mobile Preschools are sponsored by Jumbunna Early Intervention [Casino] which has an early intervention ethos and also sponsors a centre-based Preschool.

Inverell District Family Services provides a children's service hub for a range of ECEC services, including two Mobile Preschool units.

KU Children's Services is a very large and diverse ECEC Services provider sponsoring several Mobile Preschools located in Sydney's urban /rural fringe.

Mountains Community Outreach Service [Lawson] sponsors Mobile Occasional Care and Mobile Minders as well as a range of community development and welfare services.

Ooranga Family Mobile Resource Unit [Gunnedah] provide Mobile Playsession, Mobile Preschool, centre-based OOSH and Toy Library.

Save the Children [Sydney – NSW] sponsors several Families NSW or Brighter Futures Mobile Playsession Services based in Wagga Wagga and Redfern.

St George Early Years Supported Playgroup [Funded by Families NSW] is sponsored by Communicare a multi-project ECEC organisation [Burwood NSW].

Upper Hunter Children's Mobile is sponsored by Upper Hunter Community Services. UHCS also sponsors a range of family support projects.

Many councils and Shires sponsor a Mobile Children's Service within their children's services units: Bland Shire, Fairfield, Gwydir Shire, Hawkesbury Council, Lachlan

Shire, Marrickville, Port Stephens, Penrith, Singleton, Tumbarumba, Warrumbungle Shire and Warringah.

On the family support side of things, many adjunct care/Mobile Minder/Community Access/Care Pair services are sponsored by multi-project welfare and community development services. These were generally funded by the Area Assistance Scheme of the 1990's in Western Sydney: Pied Piper sponsored by Liverpool and District Neighbourhood Centres; Macarthur Care Pair sponsored by Woodbine Neighbourhood Centre, Blacktown Roving Childcare sponsored by Werrington Neighbourhood Centre; Fairfield Roving Childcare.

These Community Access Mobile Minder Services [CAMMS] have an ECEC ethos and are a critical component of the Western Sydney family support system.

A few Playsession Mobiles are sponsored by family support services and neighbourhood centres. The focus of these Mobiles depends on the funding source and may be universal, targeted or intensive.

3. The ECD Workforce

The ECEC Workforce

MCSA notes that Mobile Children's Services in NSW provide a range of licensed and non-licensed activities to children and families in isolated circumstances. Isolation may be geographic, social, cultural or economic. These activities include forms of outreach: Long Day Care, Preschool, Occasional Care, Toy Library, Playsession, Supported Playgroup, Additional Needs.

Mobiles are 'fit for purpose' services designed around the needs of the communities they travel to. In some circumstances, funding program boundaries, inflexibility and slow response limit what these services can do.

There are approximately 40 Mobile Preschools funded by the NSW Government servicing approx. 160 communities in urban fringe and regional and rural NSW. Whilst the numbers of children at these services are relatively low and the services are therefore not required to employ university trained staff, the majority of Authorised Supervisors [Also with Director responsibilities] are university trained.

There are five Mobile Long Day Services operating in approx. 20 rural communities where, again, child numbers do not require university trained staff. Most of these Mobiles are led by Diploma trained staff.

There are four Mobile Occasional Care Services operating in metropolitan Sydney, sponsored by larger services, where most Authorised Supervisors are Diploma trained.

There are several DEEWR funded Playsession Mobiles operating in rural and remote areas, which are licensed because they occasionally provide 'care'. The majority of Authorised Supervisors are Diploma trained although this wasn't always the case. Recruiting staff to remote locations is a difficult matter.

There are a significant number of NSW Government funded Playsession Mobiles operating in rural and urban areas. Only one of these is licensed to provide care. Most of the leadership staff are Diploma trained.

MCSA notes the crucial importance of funding levels being enough to be able to employ EC staff, particularly degree qualified staff.

Over the last few years, a number of these services in remote areas dropped their licence and the capacity to provide 'care' as they could not attract any qualified staff, degree or diploma trained.

MCSA notes the different and confusing nomenclature for the various roles in children's services. A key issue here is the conflation between what qualifications/experience are required under children's services regulation for the 'educational leadership' or Authorised Supervisor role and qualifications, knowledge and skill appropriate to the tasks and responsibilities of those staff with 'management and governance support' responsibilities.

MCSA notes that, under the NSW Children's Services legislation, an Authorised Supervisor of a licensed service must have qualifications related to the number of children attending a service. At the moment in NSW, services with less than 29 children can have an Authorised Supervisor who is VET trained to Diploma level. With more than 29 children, a university degree is required in the 'educational leadership' role.

A Diploma trained Authorised Supervisor can also be called a Director, Manager or Co-ordinator as they have management and governance support responsibilities.

MCSA notes that "committee members" are not "other workers" in a licensed service setting although, in some circumstances they can hold the responsibility of an Authorised Supervisor..

MCSA notes the relative stability of the Mobile Children's Service workforce in rural, regional and remote areas, particularly in the leadership roles.

MCSA views this stability as a function of the intrinsic rewards of this type of work. There is great variety in the work, children, families and communities over a working week, the work is physically and technically challenging in many ways and those in isolated circumstances are very forthcoming in acknowledging how they value the service.

Staff in Mobile Children's Services generally feel that they do very valuable work and that they are highly valued by their parents and children.

Nevertheless, when vacancies occur, they are hard to fill and some services have had to temporarily close or, in some circumstances, change their model of service delivery to accommodate the qualifications and skills of those who will work in isolated circumstances.

MCSA notes that a crucial component of any ECEC service is the administrative function. Administration Assistants/Bookkeepers are crucial supports to ECEC staff who have governance support and management responsibilities. Competent admin staff with adequate hours can carry out many of the management and governance support tasks in an organisation and free up the Director for a deeper focus on ECEC issues as well as higher order governance support and management tasks.

The availability of competent admin support ties in with a number of other staffing issues and organisation structure and function matters: Directors become overwhelmed by management and governance support tasks making the role unrewarding in many respects; Directors need time and coaching/mentoring to

develop the various knowledges and skills for management and governance support; Small stand alone services often do not have the resources to employ competent admin staff on adequate hours.

Multi-auspicing is seen as a strategy to address these issues.

That most Mobile Children's Service staff have high job satisfaction is a necessary but not sufficient factor in staff recruitment and retention. Extrinsic rewards have also to match those available to others who are perceived to be equals in attributes and effort.

MCSA notes the significant differential in salaries between degree trained staff in ECEC services and DET teachers. This covers both those who teach and those in management/leadership roles.

It has always been difficult to attract EC trained and experienced staff to Mobiles, let alone degree trained.

This salary differential is a fundamental problem and operates at the recruitment stage, setting the career pathway for 'teachers in training' and newly qualified teachers, and the retention stage as the vocation of working with young children is often eventually overwhelmed by the need for better wages and these are provided by DET Preschool or infants teaching.

MCSA also notes that the wage differential is accentuated at management and Director levels, where relatively high levels of knowledge, skills and responsibility for various ECEC practices as well as governance, management, staff and financial control need to be accounted for, in similar ways to the salary system in DET for Head Teachers, Assistant Principals and Principals.

As with nurses in the health sector, unless ECEC teachers are paid better, the problems of recruitment and retention in the sector will remain.

MCSA also notes the relative underpayment of Diploma qualified staff in leadership positions. This underpayment relates to the relative high levels of responsibility for various ECEC practices as well as staff and financial control.

The wage differentials are clear indicators of the relatively low and unwarranted employment status of ECEC Services staff.

The Family Support Workforce

MCSA notes that many family support services sponsor 'supported playgroups' and some of these are mobile 'supported playgroups'. MCSA believes that the supported playgroup strategy is well founded.

MCSA believes that the staffing of these service types should be cross-discipline and include EC trained staff to support both children and parents on developmental issues. The employment of qualified and experienced EC staff will have a cost impact but is likely to lead to better outcomes.

4. Institutional Arrangements and COAG Reforms

MCSA agrees with the National Quality Framework's approach to rationalising regulation and quality assurance in the sector through the COAG process. It has great potential.

Key structural issues for the long term recruitment and retention of staff are:

1. MCSA notes that the funding levels of any initiatives of government must have a functional relationship to the costs of service delivery.
2. MCSA notes that the structure of the NFP ECEC sector in NSW needs fundamental review with a view to rationalisation of governance arrangements.

Government's current role – Australian Government

MCSA notes that not for profit children's services are generally income tax exempt but do not necessarily have GST exemptions for the range of services they may charge for.

Government's current role – NSW Government

MCSA notes that there is no functional relationship between the funding of Preschool and the cost of delivering Preschool in NSW. The current arrangement may work where the price of a service is no problem for service users, such as Randwick and the North Shore. However, the funding methodology does not work in many areas of NSW and is a concern for those who are not able to afford or currently physically access a local service. In particular, this provides great difficulties for rural Preschool services or for Preschools that have extra costs due to the circumstances of their service users or the requirements of the Preschool service delivery strategy.

MCSA notes that the NSW Government does not have a systematic resourcing strategy in place for the hundreds of Preschools it funds or the thousands of ECEC services it regulates.

MCSA notes the opportunities for and the criticality of rationalising the governance arrangements of the NFP Preschool sector in NSW. MCSA notes the work of the Victorian Government on the rationalisation of governance in their Preschool sector.

Government's current role – Local Government

Local governments usually sponsor children's services and are funded by other levels of government to provide these services.

Local governments also provide much essential 'in-kind' support to the local not for profit ECEC sector.

It is clear that many councils/shires only 'fund' children's services to the extent that they meet the shortfall in funding provided by the other levels of government.

Local government is sick of funding this shortfall and in many instances are reviewing their direct commitments as well as their in-kind support.

This is a risk to access to ECEC services. The loss of local government in the mix as sponsors and ECEC service employers would be immeasurably negative for the ECEC sector.

This is fundamentally a funding issue.

5. Demand for ECD workers

Child Development plus the future of Preschool vis-à-vis Long Day Care

MCSA's experience of Mobile Long Day Services is that rural families would prefer a service that operates in their community over longer hours per day, for more days per week, for more weeks per year and be able to accommodate a wider age range and the family setting. This has sometimes put these services in conflict with centre-based Preschools who do not offer the longer day/days per week/weeks per year and wider age range/family setting.

In many ways, if an ECEC service is to be provided to an isolated community, a funding program should be flexible enough to allow service delivery to address the above parameters.

It is a pity that the Australian Government is not developing any more Mobile Long Day Care Services.

Although cost effective, these services are not cheap.

Nevertheless, MCSA also notes that many families throughout NSW choose Preschool because it is a dedicated service strategy for their 3 to 5 year olds, addressing many parent objectives, especially social and related to school readiness.

There is mostly the critical mass of utilisation to make dedicated Preschools an efficient use of resources. Where the utilisation is falling or staffing is not available for small stand alone Preschools, Mobile Children's Services should fill the gap.

In theory, every Long Day Care Service should be providing a Preschool 'program', adapted to the longer day, more days per week and more weeks per year typical of the service type.

A Long Day Care setting can provide a Preschool program as well as accept a wider age range for a family setting which parents like: Because they want their children together and because it is easier to drop off/pick-up at one premise.

As per the National Quality Standards, MCSA believes that a Preschool 'program' should be delivered by or closely supervised by a degree trained teacher.

It is unlikely that any more dedicated Preschools will be built in NSW. It is more likely that current Preschools will be extended in some growth areas or some Preschools will transition to Long Day Care.

It is more likely that Long Day Care Centres will be built. It is likely that these will be built by for-profit operators.

Under new Australian Government and NSW Government funding initiatives, it is likely that new Mobile Preschools will be developed or current ones extended to address demand in growth areas, however, Mobile Preschool venues will likely be replaced by centre-based Long Day Care once demand is established.

Labour force participation

MCSA notes that Mobile Long Day Care Services have been a very successful service type over the past ten years.

Build them and they will come, most of the time.

These services offer Long Day Care a few days per week in rural communities too far away from other children's services to make the trip to work worthwhile for parents. They are larger services, outreaching from larger rural centres, requiring many staff because of the nature of the work.

As such, they have been a boon to local economic development where families can have a second adult work, even if part-time.

This has been useful both in drought stricken communities [Off Farm income] as well as where primary industry is doing well and need to employ staff [Who have their children cared for].

In particular, women are able to work off farm, providing many benefits for families and local businesses.

As well, this type of Mobile makes farming for families safer as children are cared for off farm.

DEEWR funds these costly but effective services very well. Fees are able to be kept down.

Whilst there are only a few Mobile Long Day Care Services, there are many Mobile Preschools.

Where Mobile Preschools operate in rural communities, the same employment and economic benefits accrue albeit the shorter service delivery parameters limit further access.

Given problems with the level of funding for NSW Preschools in the circumstances noted above, the cost of attending Preschool for one or more than one day per week is prohibitive to some parents.

Use of Preschools may relate to starting or extending workforce participation but is also often related to parents just wanting a Preschool 'program' for their children.

Greater affordability, combined with better access for some rural isolated communities, would see demand for Preschool increase and associated increase in demand for Preschool staff.

This is the promise of the Australian Government's Universal Access initiative.

MCSA believes that the cost of ECEC services is a fundamental determinant of demand for many children in families of the 'working poor' and children in low income and 'at risk' families.

Future demand for ECD workers

Future demand for ECD workers – Demand in general

If demand for ECEC services remain strong and families can afford ECEC services, then it follows that the both the Universal Access initiative and National Quality Framework improvements will drive an increasing demand for better qualified ECEC staff.

Future demand for ECEC staff will not only be driven by better standards but by population growth and staff attrition requiring replacement staff.

A number of issues about the current ECEC workforce and their immediate future needs to be considered:

- Whilst increased demand for better qualified staff at all levels may be a useful working assumption, the loss of current staff must be considered as well. MCSA has seen no data on the age-related characteristics of staff in the sector.
- The ECEC workforce may be aging as young people choose other than ECEC or choose ECEC in the better paid school setting.
- As with other 'community service' professions, it may be that the higher qualified staffing component is aging with an inadequate uptake by young people to carry through into these roles.
- It may be that the 'management' staffing component is aging with an inadequate uptake by young people to carry through into these roles.

Australia enjoyed a brief and unedifying population 'debate' during the last Federal election.

MCSA notes the continuing and higher than expected increase in Australia's population.

Future demand for ECEC workers is dependent on the demand for ECEC services and many population, environmental and economic variables. These will vary from state to state, region to region and economic base to economic base and will have an impact over differing time scales:

- Extent of the child bearing working population
- Location of the child bearing working population
- Urban development strategies, particularly in Sydney, the Illawarra, Central Coast, Lower Hunter and North Coast
- Location and extent of food production in NSW in a difficult environmental context, especially with respect to increasingly numerous and more intense weather events: Heat, drought and flood.
- Immigration policy and the complex matters of location of settlement, mix of ethnic identities, cultural attitude to ECEC services [ie: Formal vs formal care] and mode of arrival in Australia in a complex world refugee setting
- Availability of infrastructure commensurate with maintaining a good standard of living in rural, urban and regional settings
- Urban and rural/agricultural water requirements, especially where the local water infrastructure cannot or is not used to supply needs
- etc

MCSA's view is that future demand for ECEC services in coastal areas will continue in the current pattern for the medium term.

The South West and North West Sydney urban development corridors will expand with population growth from whatever source. Current ECEC services may need to upgrade staffing and new services will demand new staff at the new standards.

NSW's food and animal products industry is at a critical juncture having weathered successive droughts and floods. It is difficult to assess how these events will affect the sector as some producers will be ruined or will walk away and it may be that corporate interests will institute more industrial style production.

The proposed rationalisation of water infrastructure will also have an affect on rural population which may be, in the end, again driven by lack of water in el Nino events.

Food and animal products industry activities affect the on-farm population and off-farm industries in the villages, towns and regional centres servicing them. Loss of rural working population may lead to ECEC service closures and movement to large, rural regional centres.

Mining in rural NSW is captive to commodity price variability and also generally constrained by access to water. This affects the location and density of working population.

Future demand for ECD workers – Funding better standards

Better standards will lead to higher costs unless ECEC services already subscribe to the higher standards – The latter is observable in the NFP ECEC sector.

Commercial operators have a different financial dynamic with respect to loan repayments, premise costs, current ROI, tax treatment, re-investment of profit and 'valued added' to the enterprise in contemplating the future sale of business. Nevertheless, the standards are reasonable and Australia is a first world country that should not take risks with the development of children who attend ECEC services.

Putting aside efficiencies to be gained from better service management and the prospect of ECEC services unduly cutting costs in other areas [Which would be picked up by other NQF standards], the pathway to financial viability is to charge higher fees and/or receive better funding from Australian taxpayers, through CCB in most cases.

The NSW Government intends to provide funds to ECEC services that employ degree qualified staff in 'preschool programs' through funds made available via the Universal Access initiative. This will benefit many state funded NFP Preschools services and NFP and for-profit LDC providers, including Mobile Preschools where degree qualified staff are employed.

Mobiles provide ECEC services where the market has failed. Mainly because of low utilisation, a centre-based service, for-profit or NFP, is not financially viable. As such licensed Mobile Children's Services are funded specifically to provide access to isolated communities. Given the generally low utilisation of these services and the costs of an outreach model, funding should be tailored to the circumstances of each Mobile.

To a certain extent, this is so in the case of DEEWR funded Mobile Long Day Care Services where funding levels are appropriate.

MCSA notes that there are areas of the NSW that would probably benefit from access to a few days LDC in their own local community. DEEWR needs to reboot its Mobile LDC Service program. This would meet need and increase demand for ECEC staff in more densely populated/agriculturally dense rural areas.

NSW Government funding to Mobile Preschools is on the same basis as centre-based services: Funding is provided on a per child basis with loadings for various circumstances. This funding model doesn't work for Mobile Preschool so they can achieve their quality, safety and affordability objectives. The subsidy per child and loading need to be increased or the funding should be allocated on a contingency basis where there is a strong relationship between the actual costs of service delivery and funding level.

Funding models have an affect on service provision where demand may not be met be cause services can't open their doors unless they know they can at least break even.

If NSW's funding of Mobile Preschools is fixed, it is likely that there will be an expansion in service provision to new communities or more often to current communities, again increasing the demand for ECEC staff.

Future demand for ECD workers - Outcomes for children – Qualified staff

MCSA notes the poor outcomes for children generally associated with the employment of less qualified staff and high child:staff ratios. This is observable in the ECEC sector.

There is a point where low standards will do more damage than good to a child. The National Quality Framework sets up to date standards.

MCSA notes that, as with any area of professional practice, better qualified staff have a deeper and broader knowledge of the area of practice and develop deeper and broader skills to apply. This in turns leads to a better quality of service and better outcomes for service users. This is observable in the ECEC sector.

A better qualified ECEC sector will make it more likely that the outcomes of the National Early Childhood Development Strategy will be met. This view assumes that ECEC staff are suited to and enthusiastic about their work with children and parents and that opportunities for continuing professional development and networking are accessible and affordable.

Feeling competent is also a key element in the intrinsic rewards and job satisfaction of professional work as is the autonomy usually associated with higher order application of knowledge and skills.

Future demand for ECD workers - Outcomes for children – Quality relationships and child:staff ratios

MCSA notes that a key component of the quality of an ECEC service is the quality of the relationship between individual staff and children. This is pertinent to the ability of staff members to apply their knowledge and skills and well as develop and maintain a warm and/or loving relationship with children.

As such, better child:staff ratios allow for more quality and intensive time for better relationships to develop as well as support the developmental needs of children. This is observable in the ECEC sector.

Feeling connected is also a key element in the intrinsic rewards and job satisfaction of professional work.

MCSA also notes that the continuity of individual staff and child relationships in the ECEC setting is critical to the child care experience of children and the job satisfaction of staff.

6 Supply of ECEC workers

MCSA notes that, like other community service professions, there is generally a vocational element in the choice to work in the ECEC sector. This is closely related to the intrinsic benefits of job satisfaction where feelings of autonomy, competency and relatedness need to met.

Nevertheless, extrinsic benefits need to be commensurate with other professions so that workers feel they are being relatively equally rewarded for their attributes and effort, or close enough.

MCSA notes that, in the ECEC sector, workers are relatively underpaid and this is more so at the higher level of knowledge, skill and responsibility.

MCSA notes that it is difficult to recruit workers from any profession in rural and remote locations.

Recruitment difficulties in these locations are exacerbated by the low status and relatively low pay of ECEC workers.

Difficulties in recruitment of qualified and experienced staff is the most acute and critical problem in rural and remote locations.

MCSA notes that DEEWR, over several years from 2002 to 2007, steadily increased the funding of their services [Mobile LDC in rural areas and Mobile Playsession services in remote areas] to an adequate level so that organisations were able to offer above award wage and non-wage incentives to attract staff.

These added incentives were/are generally necessary but unfortunately not sufficient to attract and retain staff to these locations.

In rural and remote circumstances, MCSA notes that funding models need to be flexible enough to allow the employment of degree trained staff where Diploma trained staff may be the minimum requirement but are not available to fill a position.

MCSA also notes the difficulty in recruiting and retaining non-qualified staff in rural and remote areas, such as untrained assistants. This is related to the physical and time consuming nature of Mobile Service work and may also be related to the low status of children's service work and/or relatively low pay.

MCSA notes the criticality of being able to employ the qualified ECEC staff that meet the requirements of the children's services legislation. Otherwise, a service cannot operate or continue to operate. Services may be able to engage untrained casuals to replace untrained staff but they cannot operate without their qualified staff [For long].

Whilst the NSW legislation allows for a licensee to take on the Authorised Supervisor responsibilities in some circumstances, other legislation and common law torts mean that service provision can't be provided without qualified and experienced staff in a leadership capacity.

Staff retention and turnover

See above comments about staff retention and continuity of care in Mobile Services and ECEC services in general.

In summary, MCSA notes that there are many intrinsic rewards for staff in the work of Mobile Services that lead to better retention.

Nevertheless, when staff in leadership roles do leave, usually the mandatory qualified staff member, it has been difficult to replace them.

MCSA also notes a range of staff team, leadership and service delivery attributes that are more likely to lead to staff retention.

These relate to the quality of management and meeting the intrinsic needs of staff: Feelings of competency, autonomy and relatedness:

- The workload must not be too high or rushed
- There must be time to engage with parents and receive feedback
- There must be quality time to follow up on face to face activity
- There must be a reasonable level of democracy in the workplace
- Communication processes need to be competent and inclusive
- Professional development opportunities must be available
- Management at the Board/committee level must be responsive and communicative
- The leader must be professionally and 'emotionally' competent
- Staff of all the various qualifications must be able to take responsibility/lead the various aspects of the work
- Staff must get the feedback that they are valued by the families and children

Pay and conditions

As noted throughout the above – A fundamental issue.

As noted above: The high potential intrinsic rewards in ECEC work – Necessary but not sufficient

MCSA notes the considerable outflowing of statements valuing those who work with children.

This is perceived as empty rhetoric.

Show children's service workers the money.

Regulatory burden

Regulatory burdens will always be with us.

It is how they are managed that is important.

MCSA notes the increasing regulatory burden across a range of matters including children's services legislation, child protection, financial control, fundraising, corporations/associations law, child health and OH&S plus a range of common law torts that need to be considered such as misinformation and negligence in its many forms.

ECEC services need to pay attention to the risks and consequences underlying a plethora of legislation. These cannot be ignored.

Good standards of practice must be maintained.

MCSA notes that some legislation, in some practice areas, and its compliance monitoring processes, is more efficient than others.

MCSA notes that there are always administrative efficiencies to be gained.

As in most areas of professional practice, the leadership staff in ECEC services, those with the main responsibilities to address legislation, chose to work in a sector because of the professional practice rather than to manage a service.

Mostly, providing a service and managing a service [ie: Addressing regulatory burden] is an impossible balancing act.

The smaller an organisation, the more difficult the balancing act, lowering job satisfaction.

A decent level of administrative support can mitigate the level of effort 'managers' put into compliance, admin being able to deal with lower order matters.

This issue has been noted by students on placement, those working their way up the organisational ladder and those struggling to deal with the load. It has a negative effect on recruitment and retention.

MCSA notes that organisations which employ dedicated managers who have the necessary qualifications and experience and who are committed to the management role are more successful organisations. This only happens with scale. Continuity in these roles is also associated with the level of rewards available.

MCSA notes that the structure of the NFP ECEC sector could be improved to better address regulatory burden by improved governance arrangements leading to larger organisations employing dedicated managers.

MCSA notes the work of the Victorian Government in rationalising the governance arrangements of their Preschool sector and hopes that NSW follows.

Larger organisations provide better career pathways and allow for some aspects of the regulatory burden to be spread amongst other senior staff.

Addressing regulatory burden, in whatever governance and management arrangement, will affect professional development at all stages of the training and employment cycle.

Qualifications and career pathways

MCSA notes that Charles Sturt University [Bathurst] offers an EC teaching degree for 0 to 5 years old children.

MCSA notes that the tertiary sector is now developing courses to address the new degree related standards.

MCSA notes that Australian Government incentives are making it easier for current ECEC staff to upgrade to a university/VET qualification. Anecdotally, this seems to be gathering pace.

MCSA notes that training providers have developed and are refining modes of delivery that cater to rural and remote workplaces. See ECTARC.

MCSA notes that the National Quality Framework should make it easier for staff to move across jurisdictions.

MCSA notes that Australia is a first world country and the care and education of young children is an important matter, best dealt with appropriately qualified and experienced staff.

Apart from degree related requirements for some positions, requirements for Diploma and Cert III for some staff are not barriers to entry as requirements are qualified by a 'or studying towards' provision. This is reasonable from a standards and workforce capacity building sense but perhaps difficult given the relatively low pay and perhaps for the older elements of the ECEC workforce.

MCSA notes that maintaining staff:child ratios constrains staff from attending professional development when a service is being delivered. ECEC services need to be committed to and be well funded enough to provide off-floor relief for training purposes.

See above for comments regarding recognising and rewarding qualifications, skills, experience and responsibilities in the ECEC sector.

See above for comments regarding rationalisation of NFP ECEC services' governance arrangements that may provide better professional development and better career pathways.

Professional status and the ECD workforce

See above for comments.

In summary, MCSA does consider that the low professional status of ECEC workers is an issue. Whilst society wide rhetoric generally values staff in the sector, like nursing up until recently, this valuing is not reflected in extrinsic rewards such as pay rates.

Future supply of ECD workers

MCSA notes that the ECEC workforce will need to expand given the policy settings.

MCSA notes that many in the current ECEC workforce need to be retained as well.

MCSA notes that the fundamental problem of lower relative wages will need to be dealt with for attracting people to training, recruitment and retention.

MCSA notes that it is the traditional role of government, acting for the broader Australian community and ensuring that taxpayer funds aren't pocketed by slick operators, to fund to the standards they promote.

It is also the case that many service users, in the various ECEC settings, are in a position to contribute to any increase in service costs through paying higher fees.

Quality of training courses and providers

MCSA notes a lot of anecdotal feedback about the quality of some VET providers.

In this case, MCSA wonders how VET providers are accredited and monitored.

Although the new standards are commendable, they will be worth little if the quality of training provision is not effective.

The quality of VET providers should be monitored by COAG.

MCSA notes some anecdotal feedback concerning the comprehensiveness of some university degrees.

Productivity of the ECD workforce

The new standards will improve quality which leads to good outcomes for children. An important objective in a first world nation. Perhaps termed as a good quality product.

The standards of the old system, in theory, would produce lesser quality outcomes for children. Perhaps a poorer quality product.

A statement in the Issue Paper implies that the higher costs of salaries under the new standards will lower productivity. Per unit costs will go up.

Another statement in the Issues Paper implies that higher staff:child ratios are more productive than lower staff:child ratios. Per unit costs will go up.

In the field of economics, how is an improvement in quality treated in a productivity framework?

MCSA has observed that better qualified and skilled practitioners and better motivated practitioners, in any setting, not only provide a better quality of service, they eventually have higher productivity as they can often take a shorter amount of time or less other resources to produce the same result.

In this framing, better qualified staff and lower staff:child ratios will be, in theory, more effective and efficient in achieving the good quality outcomes of the NECDS.

MCSA suggests that scope for productivity improvements in the NFP ECEC sector can be related to greater efficiencies that can accrue to better governance arrangements.

MCSA also notes that measurements of productivity changes between the old and new standards must also account for the theoretical improved local social capital, improved results for children in both the family support and ECEC sector, improved results for children in both the health and ECEC sector and better transition to the school sector.

MCSA is not aware of any data about the usage of reduced course fees, fee rebates or provision of additional training places nor their linkage to increasing the supply of ECEC staff – Perhaps too early in the initiative.

MCSA notes that many unqualified Mobile Service staff are taking the opportunity to gain VET qualifications through work based RPL. Feedback is that this is not detrimental to the functioning of the services.

MCSA has had some anecdotal feedback that many older staff are not planning to gain or upgrade their VET qualifications.

Demographic, social and policy changes

Assuming that the demand for ECEC services is likely to increase in a growing economy and population, the demand for ECEC workers will also increase.

Many policies are working towards making attaining ECEC qualifications easier.

The new standards should make working in ECEC services more rewarding.

It is critical that young people are attracted to the profession.

If ECEC staff wage and conditions can be made commensurate with Infants/Primary teachers, **then ECEC services will be able to compete for staff on a level playing field thus increasing supply.**

Increasing parity in wage levels should not be left to market forces alone and should be driven by government on behalf of the Australian community.

Tim Keegan

January 2011