

**Submission to the Productivity Commission on the Early Childhood  
Development Workforce  
By Penrith City Council Childrens Services Co-operative January 2011**

## INTRODUCTION

Penrith City Council has embraced the establishment of children's services in this Local Government Area (LGA) since the 1970's and currently sponsors the following not for profit services and programs.

- 17 Long Day Care (740 licensed places)
- 7 Pre School services (222 licensed places)
- 9 Before and After School Care services (842 funded places)
- 6 Vacation Care services (275 funded places)
- 1 Occasional Care service (22 licensed places)
  
- 1 Mobile Playvan
- 1 ISA (Inclusion Support Agency)
- 1 SAACS project (Supporting Aboriginal Access to Children's Services)
- 1 OOSH Integration Project (supporting inclusion of children with a disability)

In 2000, Council adopted a 'Statement of Purpose for Children and Families' which states that "Penrith City Council believes that quality early childhood experiences have a profound and lasting impact on outcomes for children and their potential to develop into the citizens who will form the social capital of the community of Penrith. Council is committed to the provision of children's services programs for the benefit of families and children across the City. Council itself will plan and provide quality services and support and work in partnership with others to do that". This Statement reflects Council's acknowledgement of the role of quality early childhood experiences in the lives of families and children.

In 2002, Council delegated authority to the Penrith City Children's Services Co-operative Ltd. (PCCSC), to manage children's services on its behalf. The Board of the Co-operative consists of parent, staff, community and Councillor Representatives and a representative of the General Manager. With key objectives to retain parent and community involvement, developing an efficient and economic management structure was critical to maintaining quality and sustainable children's services. This management model of children's services has served the Council well since its inception.

As an experienced not for profit provider of children's services, the PCCSC is well placed to support a submission to this Senate Inquiry, providing valuable information to Government on the workforce issues facing the Early Childhood Sector.

### *Early childhood education and care workforce*

The early childhood and care workforce is primarily young and female. The workforce is diverse but doesn't necessarily reflect the diversity within the families using the services. Penrith has an increasing number of staff holding qualifications due to a concerted effort over the last decade to support upskilling and mentoring of internal staff and recruiting practices.

Difficulties mainly arise in retaining staff as the lack of part time opportunities, due to regulations and accreditation requirements of services, means these opportunities cannot be offered to as many staff as request this flexibility. This means that women with young families have difficulty juggling family's responsibilities in 38 hours a week/ rotating shift work position, especially where care is required, given that many centres cannot offer extended hours of care and need to rely on informal care arrangements.

The award wages for childcare for both qualified and unqualified positions are low compared to equivalent trades and industries in the workforce and have led to a reduced amount of new staff entering into the early childhood sector over the last decade.

As identified previously, the short term nature of grant funding means that positions relying on grants or additional enrolments to provide additional carers in the service, can only provide temporary or casual contracts. This results in many centres losing staff to seek permanent positions and lowering staff morale and contributing to parent dissatisfaction due to the constant changing of workers in the centres.

For reasons identified above and other reasons there is a high turnover of staff in comparison to other professions in Council. Many vacancies are difficult to fill including Child Care Aides (Diploma Trained) and Early Childhood Teachers (ECT).

The greatest difficulty has been in the recruitment and retention of ECT in long day care particularly, and in the management roles of director and cluster director (cluster of children's services-up to 3 service types under one director) where the administrative duties have more impact with limited remuneration for the additional responsibilities. Many qualified ECT staff have elected to move to the primary school sector where their qualifications permit as the holiday periods, remuneration steps and lower administrative burden prove very popular. Experienced ECT have also been attracted in the children's services management support positions with the federal and state government and NGO's with funding to provide support to the sector reducing the pool of staff available for face to face positions.

There are additional issues facing workers who are required to work with children with additional needs. Many services can only employ these staff on temporary contracts as the position is linked to the enrolment of a child/ren with additional needs. The funding is also below the actual cost of an unqualified worker so often services will employ untrained staff to fill these positions due to the cost of providing extra staff. The temporary nature of employment in these positions and lack of funding often means these carers do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the issues facing children with additional needs. The centres often struggle to provide sufficient equipment such as lifting assistance, modified change facilities and accessible play equipment to support staff in their care of these children.

### *Differing roles and policies of Governments and the effect on planning and provision of the ECD Workforce*

Penrith Council offers employees a variety of opportunities for employment in the Early Childhood Sector in Occasional Care, Long Day Care, Preschools and Out of Hours Care Services. Each service has variable funding sources accountabilities placing additional constraints on operations. The absence of base funding for the operation of services means that staffing for each of these services is determined by utilisation. This can result in more staff being employed under temporary contracts tied to additional enrolments, or specialist funding, providing unpredictable working conditions for employees and lacks the consistency of care for children considered essential for high quality care environments.

The inability of Local Government to plan and fund new infrastructure under the revised developer contributions programs (Section 94) for new developments, and the lack of infrastructure funding in older established areas means local government cannot take a planned approach to provision of early childhood education and care. The gap in early childhood care provision relies on the 'for profit' sector to provide this essential service for children prior to school. The 'for profit' sector does not tend to provide preschool or before and after school care as the potential for profit is not available and as such the only model

available in growth areas is long day care, reducing ECEC options for families in their local area.

### *Demand for ECD Workers*

#### *Child Development reasons parents choose to use or not use ECEC services*

Our experience of the reasons parents choose to use ECEC services is primarily for the care of children whilst working. Approximately 10% of places are used by families who do not have both parents working. Other reasons identified by parents on enrolment are socialisation, and preparation for school. The changes that have been noticed over the past decade is the move by families to mixed care arrangements. There are fewer children in fulltime care in Penrith City Council services than ten years ago. There are more families choosing to juggle work schedules around part time care and relying on informal care arrangements with family and friends. Parents are identifying that the cost of care is the biggest impact on the amount of care being utilised choosing to drop work rather than increase care. Anecdotally staff report there is a reluctance to take up full time care where parents have an option to have a mixture of home based and centre based care.

Availability of childcare of choice is also an influencing factor with parents preferring to take up the option of occasional care or preschool rather than paying for long day care where the longer hours are not needed and juggling friends and parents care around these care arrangements. Out of School Hours care services are very cost sensitive to economic circumstances with parents opting to drop care as a first option when economic circumstances become tight, choosing to rely on informal care arrangements.

Shortage of flexible care arrangements especially for shift workers and services workers who operate out of traditional hours has been a source of parent complaints as out of hours care has been difficult for parents to find and difficult, under the current models of operation, to provide as out of hours care is expensive to operate. Casual and temporary workers also find it difficult to find care, as do parents with shared care arrangements that require care on alternate weeks/fortnights. Those families requiring alternative types of care have limited options and usually utilise unreliable and informal arrangements. This is more difficult for families with limited social networks and supports who find themselves in vulnerable circumstances. For example a woman, recently migrated to Australia from the UK, without a partner or extended family was required to travel overseas for three weeks for business purposes. She sought care for her 11 year old son and had extreme difficulty finding suitable care. Nurses, police workers and other emergency service workers equally have difficulty finding suitable care with rotating shifts and overnight work.

As women maintain their participation in the workforce they are opting to choose career paths that are more adaptable to changing family circumstances and can work around care arrangements. Inflexible work environments and restricted availability of care outside of core hours limit the availability of women who primarily bear child rearing responsibilities. Work environments such as long day care where core ratios and consistency of care environments demand that staff primarily work full time make it difficult to attract and retain workers in a primarily female workforce.

### *Future Demand for ECD Workers*

The new federal government initiatives to improve the standards and quality of care must be applauded. The increase in the number of qualified staff and the reduction of staff:child ratios will make a significant contribution to improving the quality of care provided for children under 5.

The requirements for all staff to have a minimum qualification will change the number of staff available for work as casual and temporary staff will be required to obtain qualifications before becoming available for work, usually at a cost to them. This may influence school

leaver's choice of careers as the untrained pathway was a popular option for school leavers who then obtained qualifications whilst working.

For existing unqualified staff Council will be required to fund the education of these staff from staff development resources. Many older staff having worked in the field for over 20 years have elected to retire rather than completed the training, which will accelerate the exit of experienced untrained staff from the workforce.

The increased requirements for qualified staff will have a cost impact on provision of services. Feedback from parents and services indicate that parents are willing to pay fees for qualified, consistent staff but only to a certain extent. Once the full impact of the qualification requirements are implemented there is a very real risk that care for middle to low income families will be too prohibitive and parents will choose more informal or lower cost options such as family day care.

Paid parental leave will have a dual effect on the availability of ECT. As previously identified many workers in the ECEC field are in their child bearing years and may choose to return to work once their extended maternity leave period expires. These staff will be looking for more flexible arrangements. It also may encourage staff to start families earlier taking longer periods of maternity leave thus reducing availability of staff, particularly diploma and degree trained staff.

The ageing workforce and availability of grandparents has impacted the uptake of care by young families. As previously identified this usually influences the amount of care taken up by families, enabling them to choose part time care over full time care, and increases the ability to access care in preschools and occasional care. Our services have identified an increase in the number of grandparent picking up and dropping off children to care over the past five years. There have also been increased amount of grandparents utilising supported play sessions such as mobile playvan and toy libraries.

### *Supply of ECD Workers*

As previously mentioned the ensuring supply of qualified staff has many challenges including comparatively low wages and limited career opportunities for a predominantly female workforce. The lack of flexibility and difficult hours of work (split shifts, rotating shifts) do not make this career choice attractive in the long term and for degree qualified staff the ability to transfer into the school system with more family friendly conditions adds to retention issues faced by the ECEC sector.

### *Pay and Conditions*

The pay and conditions of workers in the local government sector are more favourable than some others in the field. Council staff are assured of permanency and prescribed conditions under the local government award that often are not available in the 'for profit' or non government sector. There is however a greater administrative burden placed on early childhood staff particularly directors, in providing information for funding bodies and regulatory authorities that in a larger system such as school are completed at a higher managerial level. Director's who are required to spend a portion of their time in face to face care, struggle to adequately meet all their supervisory responsibilities to staff and management. Changes in accountability are a constant in early childhood, and can frustrate even the most organised centre director.

### *Qualifications and Career Pathways*

The issues in attracting and retaining qualified staff have been addressed in previous comments. The inability to port qualifications between sectors has contributed to these

difficulties. Primary school teachers who have enquired about the possibility of obtaining work in early childhood centres have been considered inappropriately qualified by the regulatory authorities and unable to move across where a flexible recognition arrangement may allow staff to move between these education sectors increasing the possibility of backward flow between education services.

The current EC qualifications' do not adequately prepare childcare director's for the managerial responsibilities of a centre. We recommend a review of the types of qualification's required to manage a children's service with the possible development of a post graduate qualification in children's centre management.

The undertaking of professional development has been difficult for ECEC workers as staff shortages often mean there isn't the staff to backfill when training is undertaken during work hours. Many staff in Council services identify difficulties in upgrading qualifications due to the heavy academic workload, particularly if working full time.

Many staff struggle with the perception from both customers and the community that Childcare is an easy job lacking prestige. Many parents value the care that is provided to their children and appreciate the information and feedback workers provide to their families, but there is a community attitude that childcare is 'babysitting' and less valued than preschool or school education. With the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework a public awareness campaign would be invaluable in raising the profile of the ECEC sector.

### *Future Supply of ECD Workers*

The implementation of the qualifications requirements for ECEC services will require some innovative options to support training staff in the workplace. A system of childcare apprenticeship should be considered as an option to follow on from the successful childcare traineeship program. Council has explored the providing of Diploma traineeships but is unable to sustain the program without external funding. Mentoring and on the job training have proved very successful in Council's experience as it allows for feedback and experiential learning in an ongoing manner. Most rooms have two or more staff so a new staff person has a supported learning environment. The diversity of unions and management structures in the sector has inhibited collegial advocacy and advancement in this area.

### *Integration of ECD services*

Integrated services can provide a variety of opportunities for ECEC staff to experience different types of delivery of care. Many of our cluster sites provide care across the 0-12 age's groups and staff in these centres work in all areas. There still is the lack of flexibility and rotating shifts that prove difficult to retain staff, but it does provide for variety. Attracting managers (cluster directors) has proved a challenge as the level of administrative tasks matched with poor comparative remuneration makes these positions less attractive. This area again highlights the needs for specialist courses in management of children's centres and mixed agency services.

### *ECD Workforce for Indigenous Children*

Council has undertaken strategies to increase employment of indigenous staff with limited success. Targeted recruitment strategies, engagement with indigenous specialists often lead to increased recruitment of indigenous staff but retention of staff becomes an issue as possibly due to the lack of flexibility experienced by all ECEC staff.

### *ECD Workforce for Children with Additional Needs*

The ability to attract and retain staff to work with children with additional needs is compromised by the low wages and the lack of permanent positions with consistent hours. These positions are attached to external funding sources and as such are intermittent. The skills and aptitude required to work with children with additional needs is not highly valued by the sector and there are no incentives for staff to pursue this type of employment other than love of the job. The Inclusion Support Agency also has difficulty attracting and recruiting support staff as the positions are over prescriptive and have a low rate of remuneration when matched with the skills and knowledge required.

Our experiences of successful outcomes include the OOSH (Out of School Hours) Integration Program and the RAPS (Recreation and Peer Support) Program. These are examples of successful programs specifically targeted to children with additional needs where staff are able to be offered long term contracts and have specific targets for their program over time.

### *Lessons from the other Sectors and other countries*

There are many examples of best practice in many areas across the world. One example of specialist services meeting diverse care needs comes from Chicago where 5 twenty-four hour crisis care centres have been established across the city to enable shift workers, and parents experiencing brief periods of being unable to care for their children, to place their children in a care centre, with trained staff and access to specialist assistance to screen children for areas of vulnerability. This has afforded parents the opportunity to seek support early and flexibly when needed.

### *General Comments*

When discussing the EC workforce on page 6 and 7, we found the terminology "preschool teacher" for both the childcare and preschool workforce to be misleading, we would prefer it referred to as Early Childhood Teacher. This section neglects to list the position of position of Clerical officer. Also within the preschool section, when teachers' aides (or assistants) are referred to, this implies that these staff are not trained when in fact Pre schools do employ EC Teachers and Diploma trained Aides, so I believe the terminology as per the childcare section of qualified and unqualified contact workers could be used for consistency.

With regard to the quality of training courses and providers, to what degree are new recruits provided with an understanding of the EYLF. Have Diploma courses, for example, been able to incorporate the EYLF into their curriculum ? We believe this may not be the case, based on conversations we have had with centre staff and the students they have been supervising during practicums.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

That core funding for early childhood services be established to ensure security of core qualified staff without reliance on enrolments reducing the need for temporary and casual staff.

Increase the subsidies to employ staff for additional needs programs to ensure capacity to employ qualified staff in these crucial support positions

Explore the possibility of establishing a Childcare Apprenticeship to improve access to entry level positions in early childhood

Increase award rates for trained staff and standardise conditions across all sectors to ensure equity and portability of experience and qualifications.

Undertake a public awareness campaign of the importance of education in the early years from birth to kindergarten and what a quality education environment looks like in ECEC sector

Ensure that then increase quality provision do not dramatically impact on fees for childcare as parents will choose not to access formal care if the cost is too prohibitive.

Explore innovative care provision internationally to provide alternative care arrangements for parents engaged in shift work, essential services and periods of inability to care for their children that does not rely on foster care.

Introduce a post graduate qualification in childcare management and staff supervision skills.