

ECD Workforce
Productivity Commission
LB2 Collins St East
Melbourne VIC 8003

31 August 2011

Dear Commissioner

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Productivity Commission's Draft Research Report on the Early Childhood Development Workforce.

There is increasing evidence that access to good quality early childhood programs from an early age, together with programs that increase parents' capacity to assist children's learning, can make a significant difference to children's life chances. As an employer and service provider, in NSW and QLD, The Benevolent Society is very supportive of sector reforms which will promote access to high quality, sustainable early childhood programs that improve outcomes for children.

We welcome the recommendations outlined in the draft research report and have provided specific comment on a number of them below.

Government involvement in the early childhood development sector

Draft recommendation 3.2

To achieve the goals of the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) ECEC reforms without disadvantaging low-income families through the anticipated increase in fees, governments will need to ensure that there is adequate financial support for such families.

The Benevolent Society strongly supports this recommendation. There are very few free early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. The vast majority of child care centres, preschools and kindergartens are operated by non-profit organisations or commercial businesses that charge fees. Child care fees, even with subsidies from government, remain expensive for people on low and modest incomes, particularly if a parent is not working.

The Benevolent Society works with disadvantaged children and families, many of whom cannot afford to pay ECEC fees. The implementation of the Child Care Tax Rebate has failed to improve access for the most disadvantaged families. Passing on any further costs associated with reforming the sector will make ECEC services even more unaffordable for the most disadvantaged families.

A major UK study, the *Effective Provision of Preschool Education*¹, found that all children benefitted from preschool, with disadvantaged children benefitting most. It is vital, therefore, that adequate financial support is available to promote access for these families.

Training the early childhood education and care workforce

Draft recommendation 10.8

Governments should ensure that all workers in ECEC services have access to professional development and support programs.

The Benevolent Society welcomes this recommendation as ECEC workers must have a clear professional development pathway, which includes ongoing access to quality evidence-based training, if we are to ensure a highly skilled workforce.

It is important that strategies be put in place by government that enable the sector to access funding for professional development, including for the provision of replacement staff. Where an ECEC centre has the minimum number of staff to operate, it is not possible to release a worker to attend training without compromising the staff:child ratio and breaching regulations. Backfilling the position using casual agency staff is expensive and may be prohibitive for a small service. The course costs can themselves act often as a barrier for many service providers.

Workforce for family support services

Draft recommendation 13.1

In order to ensure that family support services can sustain their workforces, and as wages are a major factor in the successful recruitment and retention of staff, government funding for family support programs should:

- *be based on relevant market wages and conditions for equivalent positions*
- *take into account the skill sets required to perform the purchased services*
- *be indexed appropriately to market wage growth within the relevant industry sector.*

The Benevolent Society strongly supports this recommendation as low wages are a major contributor to difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff.

The majority of families that The Benevolent Society works with are experiencing disadvantage and have multiple and complex needs. Given the complexity of these issues, workers require considerable skills and expertise. It is imperative that salaries reflect the training and skills required in order to attract and retain people in the sector. There is strong evidence within the Australian context that without pay parity there is little incentive to stay in the profession.ⁱⁱ

There also needs to be pay parity between the not-for-profit and government sectors. The disparity in pay and conditions between the not-for-profit sector and government is a growing issue, especially as these sectors are increasingly competitive players in the delivery of human services.

Similarly, early childhood teachers need to be offered salary and conditions which are comparable with primary teachers in order to attract and retain a sufficient number of early childhood teachers in the sector to achieve the reform goals.

Draft recommendation 13.2

In order to facilitate better workforce planning by services and the attraction and retention of staff, governments should increase the certainty and duration of funding for family support programs where possible.

The Benevolent Society welcomes this recommendation. In our experience, the often short-term nature of government funding can result in job insecurity and act as a barrier to recruitment and retention of staff. The often short lead time can also negatively impact on recruitment of staff, particularly in rural and remote communities.

Funding models should allow service providers to undertake long-term planning and provide the flexibility to tailor services to local needs. Funding should include indexation, the full cost of service, and be granted for a minimum of three years.

In relation to integrated services, short-term funding can also act as a barrier to service integration and effective collaboration.

Draft recommendation 13.3

In order to obtain the greatest benefit from workers in the family support sector, governments should direct a larger share of funding for family support programs towards obtaining high-quality evidence about the effectiveness of different programs through longitudinal studies and robust program evaluations.

The Benevolent Society welcomes this recommendation. We are committed to undertaking high quality evaluation of our programs and would welcome additional resources to undertake this work. We are in the process of evaluating our family support programs delivered via the Early Years Centres in Queensland. Preliminary results are positive however to fully assess the effectiveness of interventions over the longer term greater investment in longitudinal studies is needed.

Draft recommendation 13.4

In order to obtain better evidence on the effectiveness of family support programs delivered by volunteers and peers, governments should evaluate such programs on a wider scale, with a view to the expansion of such programs if they prove to be effective.

As discussed above, The Benevolent Society has a strong commitment to evaluation and evidence-based service delivery. Evaluation is critical to measuring what we do and the impact of our programs on the people we work with. This allows us to identify what's working well and any gaps in service delivery so that we can continually improve what we do and ensure that we are providing the best possible service to our clients.

We welcome the call to evaluate programs delivered by volunteers and peers on a wider scale. The evaluation of our own Volunteer Home Visiting programs, for example, has shown that they appear to lead a range of positive outcomes for parents. The broader evidence base about the effectiveness of these programs, however, is inconclusive. Greater investment by governments in large scale, high quality evaluations would be extremely valuable.

Workforce for Indigenous ECEC services

Draft recommendation 14.3

To meet the goals of the Closing the Gap: National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development and the COAG ECEC reforms, more workers, and more highly skilled workers, will be required to work in Indigenous-focused services. To support service-level workforce planning and to provide for greater certainty to facilitate more effective attraction, retention and training of staff in Indigenous-focused services, governments should:

- *give priority to the provision of quality ECEC services for Indigenous children, without passing on the extra costs to parents*
- *provide multiple-year funding for Indigenous-focused ECEC services.*

The Benevolent Society welcomes this recommendation. As discussed previously, it is imperative that any additional costs associated with the reforms are not passed on to disadvantaged families (3.2). Also, as outlined in draft recommendation 13.2, funding must be provided for a minimum of three years to enable long-term workforce planning.

In addition to attracting highly skilled staff to work in Indigenous-focused services more needs to be done to attract Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to the sector. In our experience, programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are delivered most effectively by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers.

There are a number of initiatives The Benevolent Society has put in place to attract, retain and train staff including an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Recruitment and Retention Strategy and an

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staff Network, through which staff meet regularly to learn from each other and share their experiences.

In addition we have in place a Recruitment and Learning and Development model to facilitate:

- culturally relevant and appropriate recruitment and selection processes
- identification of staffing positions, position descriptions and qualifications
- transparent recognition of prior learning and professional development planning to meet identified skill gaps
- mentoring of staff with suitably qualified and trained workers from the Society
- ensuring a critical mass of Aboriginal staff in order to build networks, self sustaining supports and cultural identity
- onsite training and development
- recruitment through Aboriginal community networks
- informal information sessions about upcoming jobs in partnership with a local Aboriginal person
- liaison with Aboriginal Support/Program Units in tertiary institutions
- traineeship positions in collaboration with TAFE and Aboriginal Employment Service.

The Benevolent Society also strongly recommends that scholarships be made available to train Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood teachers on a scale large enough to address the shortage of qualified teachers.

Yours sincerely

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ⁱ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B (2004), *The effective provision of preschool education (EPPE) project: Final report – A longitudinal study funded by the DfES 1997-2004*.

ⁱⁱ Fenech, M (2006), *The impact of regulatory environments on early childhood professional practice and job satisfaction: A review of conflicting discourses*. AJEC, Vol. 31 No. 2, June 2006, pp. 49-57