

# **Mobile Children's Services Association of NSW Inc.**

## **Comment on Productivity Commission 2011 *Early Childhood Development Workforce*, Draft Report**

### **1. Introduction**

This paper comments on the Productivity Commission's 2011 *Early Childhood Development Workforce*, Draft Report.

The Draft Report provides a welcome and comprehensive overview of the issues facing ECEC services in rural and remote areas as well as points to several strategies aimed at dealing with constraints to ECEC workforce supply and demand.

This paper's focus, and that of MCSA, is to support recruitment and retention strategies that will enable better access for children in isolated circumstances to a good quality ECEC experience provided by a well managed organisation.

There are several types of Mobile Children's Service in NSW, mirroring centre-based EC services. They all operate under an early childhood ethos, although some are targeted to work with disadvantaged communities and are embedded in family support type services.

Those Mobile Services providing 'care' are licensable and are available where the 'market fails'.

The majority of Mobile Children's Services in NSW operate in metropolitan to outer regional communities [ABS classification]. This reflects the nature of the 'mobile model' which has a focus on 'access' for those in 'isolated' circumstances where isolation is inclusive of geographic as well as cultural and socio-economic circumstances and combinations of these.

Whilst there are fewer Mobile Services in remote communities, they operate throughout large and sparsely populated lands, often being the only community service that has a physical presence in those communities.

Mobile Services can be a universal, non-stigmatised entry point for children to a range of services that support children and families. They are the 'fit for purpose' services in the 'service system' of the *National Early Childhood Development Strategy*.

The demand and supply constraints noted in the Draft Report affect all Mobiles, especially those in outer regional, remote and very remote communities.

In outer regional areas, the 'mobile model' outreaches to the hinterlands of the larger regional townships and up-river coastal communities where there is no "reasonable access" to an ECEC experience, generally determined by travelling time and cost as well as the local work and schooling circumstances of families.

Whilst the workforce constraints in outer regional areas may be similar to those of centre-based ECEC services there is still an issue of funding being flexible and adequate to deal with the 'system of work' of Mobile Services.

Most Mobile Services operating in remote and very remote communities are multi-strategy travelling roadshows, mainly providing playsession and toy library activities on properties or community halls in very small communities. Most of these are licensed to allow flexibility to have occasional care sessions as needed by the community.

In many respects, Mobile Service staff working in remote locations are adventurers whose work is a way of life. Their work is deeply embedded in the lives of local communities and they work in many communities over a wide geographic range.

There are a lot of intrinsically derived satisfactions from this work, however, there are necessary preconditions that have to be met.

Connecting these adventurers to the possibilities provided by employment in remote communities requires a long term information strategy.

The following emphasises various aspects of the Draft Report that reflect those 'necessary preconditions' as well as provides some information on useful ways to effect the preconditions.

## **2. Comments**

### Access for children

MCSA agrees with the Draft Report's view that a lot more Government funding has to go into ECEC services that support children with additional needs, Indigenous children and children from low income families. There is no other source of funds.

If this is the state of affairs for the majority of children in NSW, then it is even more crucial for children in rural and remote communities.

If the level of funding can be sorted and packages of recruitment and retention strategies can be implemented, children in rural and remote areas are more likely to get better access.

MCSA understands that there are still under-serviced communities in NSW seeking access to Preschool. The NSW Government's Preschool Growth Program has been successful in exploring the issue of access as well as providing better access.

Mobile Preschools are a useful model for providing better access.

DEEWR funded, Budget Based, Mobile Child Care Services [In many respects mirroring LDC], working in more densely populated rural areas, are constantly asked to expand their level and locations of service delivery.

Even over the last few years there have been economic and demographic changes that have altered the demand for ECEC staff in rural and remote areas.

Both the breaking of the drought and the mining boom has led people back to western NSW. This has led to more children in locations that are densely populated enough to drive demand up. Whilst this may create demand, it also increases the adult population that may already be ECEC trained or willing to train.

## VET

MCSA agrees with the DRAFT Report's view that the VET sector needs closer regulation to ensure quality in outcomes for students.

MCSA sees flexibly delivered VET courses, including appropriately assessed RPL, as a key to upgrading the qualifications of staff in rural and remote areas.

See later on the use of ICT to deliver training in remote locations.

## Wages and conditions of ECEC staff

The wages and conditions of ECEC staff need to be comparable with other similar roles and levels of responsibility as a basic precondition, amongst other requirements.

In NSW, this means that university trained ECEC staff need similar wages and conditions to staff in the school sector.

In remote communities, wage levels for untrained staff must be commensurate with other jobs where training isn't essential.

Other incentive mechanisms need to be explored to recruit and retain ECEC staff in remote and very remote communities.

A number of Mobile Services have experimented with district allowances, housing subsidies and other incentives such as school holiday trips back 'home' and payments for VET study.

MCSA agrees with the Draft Report that housing, however it is provided, is crucial for recruitment and retention.

See below for comment on ECEC staff as NSW Department of Education and Communities employees in particularly remote or difficult to staff communities.

## NSW Mobiles and the National Quality Agenda

Licensed Mobile Children's Services, both NSW Government funded and those funded as 'budget-based' by DEEWR, are out of scope in the roll out of the National Quality Agenda and will not come into the fold until sometime after a review in 2014.

Out-of-scope NSW children's services will be subject to a 'transitional' NSW Regulation after 1<sup>st</sup> January 2012, until they become subject to the National Regulation in 2014/2015[?].

MCSA has argued that the 'transitional' regulation retain the higher than National Quality Standard staff:child ratio and qualification requirements of the current NSW Regulation.

Balancing the issue of out-of-scopes' perhaps being perceived as a second tier licensed ECEC service, the delay in being subject to the NQF, especially the ratings and assessment system in its infancy, will provide a better environment for preparing to come on board the NQF in 2014/2015[?].

Many of the 'demand' factors listed in the Draft Report are in place now and the extra demands of the NQA will be with us in relatively short order.

### Professional Development

Access to professional development has many benefits in supporting the recruitment and retention of staff.

The NSW Government funds MCSA to advocate for and resource NSW Mobile Services, including DEEWR funded services that are licensed.

MCSA provides a variety of professional development activities: Information, advocacy, advice, mentoring, referral, training and networking

Being a small organisation targeting a relatively small number of unique services, we rely heavily on other professional development providers allowing Mobile Services access to their general resourcing, focusing on ensuring that RTO's get their VETAB accredited courses out to the regional and remote communities.

Mobile Services have been invited to and have attended a lot of NQF training provided by other resourcing agencies.

DEEWR's Professional Support Program provides some resourcing for DEEWR funded services in NSW, for the most part of a general nature.

DEEWR also subsidises MCSA's annual conference.

MCSA's resourcing focuses on Mobile Service specific issues, especially risk management associated with manual handling, travel and fatigue as well as adapting a myriad of EC practices to non-purpose built venues.

MCSA also provides a lot of information, advice, coaching and troubleshooting on governance and management issues: Community based management in rural and remote locations has its problems and is often the cause of staff grief and retention problems. See later for comment on system infrastructure.

Given that Mobile Services Australia-wide will come under the NQA eventually, MCSA sees a place for a dedicated national resourcing project focussing on the unique 'systems of work' of Mobile Services. This should be in place well before the NQA becomes applicable and perhaps be part of the Commonwealth's *National Sector Support and Training Strategy* [In development].

An Australia-wide approach would pilot resources specific to the applicable clauses of the National Regulation and help ACECQA, the states and Mobile Services develop specific strategies for the licensing of Mobiles and piloting and applying the ratings and assessment system to Mobile Services.

Although there are ITC infrastructure problems to deal with, MCSA is also keen to be involved in resourcing delivered over the internet.

From another perspective, the NSW Government has no dedicated Professional Development Strategy for the ECEC sector for thousands of licensed ECEC services.

MCSA recommends a sub-regionally based sector support program, managed centrally, providing all the resourcing activities of the NSW Government's *Sector Development Program*.

It is crucial that there are enough funds in the system to replace staff at training as well as meet the costs of training for staff in rural and remote areas that must travel for training.

The same must be said for replacing staff involved in networking activities.

MCSA supports the working theory that upgrading the qualifications of those born in rural and remote areas or providing pre-service experience in these locales through courses is useful and should lead to improved recruitment and retention.

See later for comment on organisational and networking structures and processes that can support ECEC staff, shoring up recruitment and retention.

### ECEC infrastructure

The *National Early Childhood Development Strategy* is good policy.

Implementing the strategy will require sound ECEC infrastructure, for both individual organisations and professional, inter-sector networks.

For individual organisations and for many reasons, poor organisational structures and processes will exacerbate staff recruitment and retention problems and lead to poor service delivery.

Community management is fragile and getting more difficult for Management Committees and management staff, especially for micro-businesses.

Effective networking requires facilitation by dedicated organisations.

Good ECEC infrastructure should support the recruitment and retention of ECEC staff in that organisation's should be better to work for, better managed, provide the opportunity to focus on service delivery because of less administrative burden, offer a career path and offer better professional development.

Unfortunately, the above outcomes will not result from a system comprised of a multitude of micro-businesses.

However, the value of community based management should not be lost or sacrificed to increasing the scale of organisations.

The NSW Preschool 'system', the most likely to be able to expand access to children in outer regional and remote areas, is in dire need of reform. This may come about through the recently announced review of the NSW Government's ECEC funding.

One idea is a cluster management model focused on economies of scale.

Another idea is sub-regionally based infrastructure support organisations which may take on facilitated ECEC and inter-sectoral networking as a core function.

If Preschools are the favoured service type for expanding ECEC access, particularly in rural and remote locations, the operations of the NSW Department of Education

and Communities in those communities should be assessed to see if DEC could employ ECEC staff in Central Schools or for local community-based Preschools.

The employment of 0 to 8 years trained staff could be useful for both Preschool and Kinder: Ivanhoe, Wilcannia, Wanaaring etc.

This arrangement would provide DEC wages and conditions, access to housing, career opportunities, professional development opportunities and perhaps priority for redeployment.

### **3. Conclusion**

The successful recruitment and retention of Mobile Service staff is a result of a lot of preconditions being met.

Working in a rural and remote Mobile Service is a life style choice, more often than not a search for adventure and difference.

If these adventurers are to be attracted to these locations then other elements of employment need to be available: Attractive wages and conditions, incentives for location, good access to professional development, good access to support and well managed organisations and effective networks.

At some point, potential staff need to be inspired to work in isolated communities.

The Mobile 'model' is useful.

In MCSA's experience, more often than not, the biggest issues are recruiting and retaining staff as well as adequate levels of funding.

Some 'necessary conditions' need to be met.

Tim Keegan

**30<sup>th</sup> August 2011**