



Submission to the Productivity Commission Draft Inquiry Report Paid Parental Leave: Support for Parents with Newborn Children

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Productivity Commission (the Commission) *Draft Inquiry Report on Paid Parental Leave*. I would like to add additional comments to the original submission provided to the Commission in May 2008.

Response to a paid parental leave scheme for Australia

The establishment of a paid parental leave system in Australia is critical to the health and development of our children and ultimately to our prosperity and social wellbeing as a nation.

As Commissioner for Children and Young People for Western Australia, I applaud the Productivity Commission's Interim Report, with clear recommendations that the Australian Government introduce a system of paid parental leave. I also endorse the wellbeing of young children and their families being a primary consideration for this recommendation.

The Commission recognises that parental care in at least the first six months of life is critical to the healthy growth and development of young children, and that early attachment and relationships at this time enhance children's cognitive and behavioural development, setting children up for optimum life opportunities. This includes recognition of the importance of breastfeeding for infants and the opportunity for six months of exclusive breastfeeding.

I appreciate the Commission recognising existing family support measures are insufficient to ensure parents have the incentive and financial capacity to take adequate leave from the workforce to meet needs of children in the very early months.

The opportunity for close early relationships and involvement with fathers is recognised as having benefits for children in areas of positive emotional and educational achievement. I welcome this recognition of the relationship of father's with their children as being in children's long term interest, and that father's may need encouragement to take such leave.

I also endorse the understanding of lifetime workforce participation as important from a perspective of ensuring families have sufficient resources to raise children, and the clarity that support is still available to non working parents through other government payments.

Issues with the proposed model

The Productivity Commission acknowledges the importance of six months (26 weeks) paid parental leave to generate maternal health and welfare benefits, to stimulate lifetime employment rates of women, increase retention rates for business and promote social goals for the community.

In the best interests of children, I am calling for a six-month paid maternity system (26 weeks) with a view to Australia moving towards a 12-month paid maternity leave system in the future.



Given the acknowledgement by the Commission that this is the preferred minimum duration of time for a child to spend with a mother for breastfeeding or other primary caregiver, I strongly believe that this should be the period funded by the scheme. Further, the Commission acknowledges that many families have limited resources to fund their own leave.

However, the model proposed only includes 18 weeks in the paid scheme with an expectation that women will utilise other paid leave entitlements to make up the further desired eight weeks.

This proposition is unfriendly to families in that the need for recreation and other leave is critically important for socialising and caring. Families with very young children are likely to require additional leave time to cope with illness or other issues that may not have sufficient access to other (carers) leave.

Given the Commission states the proposed scheme is primarily targeted to low income families, these women in particular are unlikely to have good coverage of leave entitlements. For instance, how would casual workers increase the time to 26 weeks – not having accumulated recreation leave entitlements? How would the self employed or contractors increase 18 to 26 weeks?

I also hold a concern that the Commission's recommendation of no paid leave entitlement prior to the birth, places an onus on women who may be in low paid positions to negotiate unpaid leave or alternate duties. Women should have available an option of taking up to two weeks of paid leave prior to the birth, in the interests of their own and their child's health and wellbeing.

Although the report outlines arguments in relation to an early attachment and development period of six months, there is ample evidence that children's development is strongly impacted well beyond that time, to at least 12 months. For this reason, there needs to be a strategy for reviewing the duration of paid leave in the future, with a view to an extension to a period of 12 months in line with several other developed nations.

In the interim, women and men who access the proposed scheme outlined in the discussion paper should then be entitled to a further period of 6 months unpaid leave, maintaining legislated entitlement to job protection upon return to the employer.

I agree with the Commission's recommendation of an additional two weeks of paternity leave reserved for the father or same sex partner. However consideration could be given to this being provided in a more flexible manner, allowing the greatest capacity to achieve the aim of attachment between the father and child. In some families this might be best achieved through the leave taken as one day a week over a longer period. This would be little more of an impost on a father's employer in terms of payroll administration than taking a two week block.

I believe the recommendation that the 18 weeks of paid parental leave be taken within six months of the child's birth is problematic. Some existing paid schemes extend beyond this period, and if women choose to take entitlements on a part-time basis, this again extends beyond six months. For example, if a WA State Government employee chose to take their 14 weeks paid maternity leave at half pay, they would receive 28 weeks paid maternity leave which would deem them ineligible for the 18 weeks. Staff at some



Australian Universities are currently entitled to six months paid maternity leave and, therefore, would not be eligible for the federal maternity leave scheme.

An option could be a requirement that the 18 weeks paid parental leave be taken within six months of the birth or 'on the finalisation of any pre-existing paid maternity leave offered by their employer', thus not disadvantaging particular groups.

Additional areas for action

The *Draft Inquiry Report on Paid Parental Leave* is of great significance in recognising and supporting the needs of young families, with a growing recognition of the first years of life as being the key to children's growth and development toward a harmonious and productive adult life. The nature of our society will be greatly shaped by the value which is placed on young children and the resources and support offered to them and their parents.

Whilst paid parental leave is a key measure in early childhood support there are a range of other key initiatives and ways of working which need consideration. The National Reform Agenda for Early Childhood developed by the Council of Australian Government (COAG), is driving significant activity and resourcing in the early childhood area and a number of valuable reforms are occurring.

There are still ways we can achieve the best outcomes through:

Whole of Community Strategies

Policies which invest in good quality child care, flexible hours, parental leave and early childhood education programs promote work/family balance. This in turn will alleviate family stress, promote parent-child bonding and enhance workplace productivity.

Measures to improve the quality and availability of childcare are essential. Poor quality care can be detrimental to children's long term development and, if this is their experience, parents can become confused and ambivalent about participation in the labour market whilst their children are young.

Children at the Centre of Services

There is an increasing understanding that relevant services need to maintain a focus on children and their best interests. Whilst many programs are targeted to parents, the outcomes should include the wellbeing and enhanced development of children.

Australian Early Development Index

The roll out of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) across Australia will enable the appropriate assessment and identification of the strengths and vulnerabilities of particular communities of children. The results of the AEDI will be important in evaluating the impact of programs targeted to early childhood. The challenge will be to ensure that implementation of the AEDI goes further than the identification of need, with programs developed to address any deficits or vulnerabilities identified, to ensure good outcomes for children and their families.

Integration

Further investment in the provision of integrated early childhood centres is necessary where families can access a range of support, childcare and education services, rather than a single program operating in isolation. These types of services are developing throughout Australia. However, some national coordination and commitment would allow



for all Australian children and families to benefit from such a model and through a well coordinated plan with a vision for the future.

Sustainability of Existing Programs

Many programs in the early childhood area are evidence based and evaluated as working well. Maintenance and sustainability of these existing programs is important along with the development of new ways forward. However, 'pilot' programs or successful initial projects are often closed - to the detriment and disappointment of their client group. The development of a long term plan for early childhood which can be sustained through changes of government could assist in establishing and maintaining services in the long term.

Community Involvement

Programs have the best outcomes when they are culturally secure and community driven - so local participation in the design and development of services is essential. Communities can integrate their cultural values and local realities. Local ownership has been shown to increase participation, build social connection and retain relevance in that community.

Summary

A system of paid parental leave, along with other initiatives under consideration by government will make a significant difference to the lives of children and their families. I hope that the suggestions outlined above can be considered in implementation, and further development of early years planning.

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