

QCOSS

Queensland Council
of Social Service

Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

*Submission to the Productivity
Commission Inquiry*



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Introduction

The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) is Queensland's peak representative body for the community services sector. QCOSS represents approximately 600 member organisations working across Queensland in a broad range of portfolios. QCOSS provides support for the work undertaken by member organisations to address the causes of poverty and disadvantage. A key part of this role is our engagement with the state and federal governments to secure better outcomes for vulnerable Queenslanders.

As the state-wide social services peak body, QCOSS has long supported investment in early childhood and advocated for a greater focus prevention and early intervention more broadly. Through Commonwealth Government funding QCOSS administers the Indigenous Professional Support Unit, which provides support to early childhood educators delivering services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children throughout Queensland.

QCOSS welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning. Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) makes an important contribution to improving the health, employment, education and housing outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children into the future.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged children, families and communities face significant challenges accessing quality ECEC. This is particularly true for low-income, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and rural and remote families. This submission responds to issues of access for vulnerable and disadvantaged populations in direct response to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

This submission recommends that vulnerable and disadvantaged children, families and communities be provided with free access to high quality ECEC services that enhance and support educational and cultural development wherever they may live.

This submission also recommends that the Australian Government examine the Finnish funding model for ECEC as it is a model that provides choice, flexibility, cost effectiveness and quality. Under the Finnish model all children under school age have the 'subjective right' to childcare. Families in Finland are provided significant support from the state to meet the costs of childcare. Under the Finnish model municipal authorities must provide all children under school age with access to quality childcare, which includes both centre-based and home-based care.

The Finnish model has a number of aspects which could be implemented in the Australian context. Childcare is appropriately subsidised in Finland with low-income families provided with free access to childcare. Flexible funding models exist to provide parents and carers with greater choice about the kind of care they want to provide their children, including subsidies for private care provided in a home-based environment.

This submission also recommends that the Australian Government continue to directly fund ECEC through the Budget Based Funded (BBF) model as an alternative to the Child Care Benefit (CCB) model. Direct funding of childcare services in areas of high disadvantage and to vulnerable and disadvantaged sub-populations reduces the barriers that exist in using a model based on subsidies and tax incentives.

This submission recommends that funding to BBF services be *increased* to strengthen the capacity of these services to meet the needs of rural and remote and

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities as a priority and a means of addressing poverty and disadvantage.

This submission also recommends that the Australian Government examine the feasibility of adopting the New Zealand home-based service model within the BBF model. This may provide a model that is culturally appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people while continuing to improve educational outcomes for children and stimulating self-employment, autonomy and business opportunities in local communities.

Poverty and disadvantage

Poverty is an ongoing issue facing society. Over 430,000 Queenslanders were identified as living in poverty in 2009-10. A significant proportion of the Queensland population living in poverty reside in rural or remote communities. While the overall rate of poverty in Queensland was 12.5 per cent, areas outside of the capital city experienced a poverty rate of 15 per cent in 2009-10. Unfortunately, the poverty rate is much higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. National estimates put the rate of poverty for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at around 19.2 per cent compared to 12.4 per cent for all other Australiansⁱ.

Breaking the cycle of poverty and disadvantage requires targeted interventions that build the resilience, skills and capacities of individuals, families and communities. Quality ECEC is one type of intervention that has been shown to improve outcomes for vulnerable people facing poverty and disadvantage.

Unfortunately, Australia has a very poor rate of participation in early childhood education programs when compared to other OECD countries. In 2011, only 13 per cent of three year olds were enrolled in an early childhood education program compared to the OECD average of 67 per cent. Enrolment in early childhood education in Australia decreased by four per cent between 2005 and 2011, while the OECD average increased by four per cent. Australia also lags behind the OECD average in the proportion of four year olds enrolled at pre-primary and primary level. Only 67 per cent of four year olds were enrolled in early childhood education programs in Australia compared to the OECD average of 84 per centⁱⁱ.

Importance of early childhood development

Participation in quality ECEC services has been shown to have significant positive impacts on children's development, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is strong evidence that participation in quality ECEC improves school readiness, strengthens educational outcomes^{iii,iv} and contributes to improved outcomes in employment, health and other areas^{v,vi}.

Participation in quality early childhood learning provides a means of addressing some of the significant risk factors and opportunities to develop the protective factors critical to improving long term outcomes for children.

Evidence also suggests that targeting interventions at the early years of a child's life brings greater returns on investment. As Carneiro and Heckman have argued (see Figure 1 below) human capital investment in early childhood provides optimal returns on investment than at any other time during a child's life^{vii}. This has led some to argue that targeting investment in early childhood for vulnerable and disadvantaged

children is the most appropriate strategy for improving workforce participation and quality of life^{viii}.

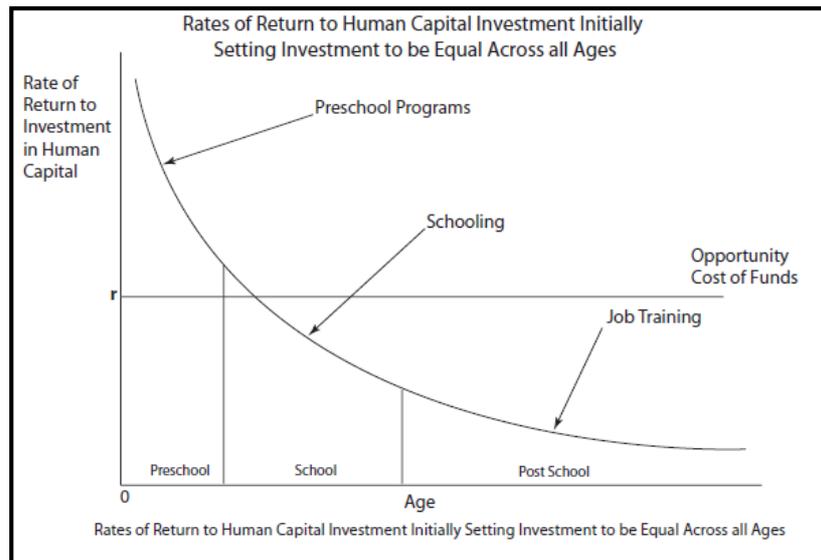


Figure 1: Optimal investment in human capital by life cycle^{ix}

Another benefit of reducing barriers to quality early childhood learning is that it promotes greater workforce participation for parents and carers.^x As de Barros *et al* have found, the provision of free childcare in Brazil increased labour force participation and household income amongst low-income families^{xi}.

In Australia, investment in these early years of childhood development is lower than at any time in a person's life. As Figure 2 below shows, public expenditure in the years before school in Australia is lower when compared with public expenditure in any other time in a person's life. This mismatch between investment and optimal return appears at odds with a prevention and early intervention style approach.

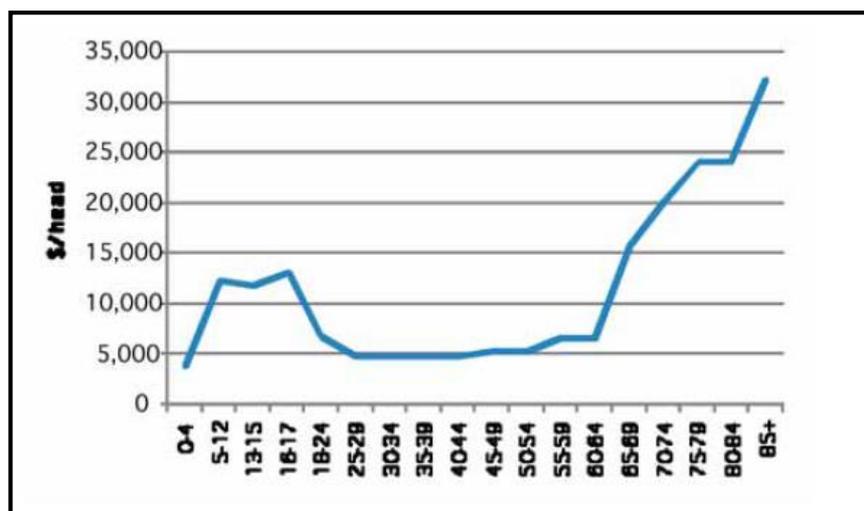


Figure 2: Approximation of Australian Public Expenditure per Head (Excluding Redistribution Through the Tax System), Allocated by Age, 2006-07^{xii}

There is significant reason to be concerned about the lack of investment in quality ECEC. A deficit in language and cognitive skills is problematic as it increases the risk of children struggling to learn once they attend school. According to the Centre for

Community Child Health the early development of capacities that promote school readiness are important because:

[[Life trajectories for children become increasingly difficult to change as differences in skills and abilities become entrenched and initial differences between school ready and school unready children are amplified.^{xiii}

Poor outcomes are not solely the product of poor quality early childhood learning but also the nature of the home environment, including the capacity of parents or carers to support a child's development. Research from the United Kingdom has demonstrated that persistent poverty adversely affects a parents' ability to take an active role in their child's learning^{xiv}. Evidence from the Pathways to Prevention program in South-East Queensland, has shown that outcomes for young children can be improved when high quality early education is combined with interventions to support parents or carers^{xv}.

Vulnerable families need to be supported to ensure better outcomes for children. Access to programs and services, such as advice and information about family functioning and child health and development, as well as referral to health services, literacy and other social services, help parents and carers to engage better in their child's learning.

Participation in quality ECEC can be particularly difficult for children from certain social, economic or cultural backgrounds. In 2012, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in early childhood education programs in Queensland was only 52 per cent compared to 77 per cent for the general population^{xvi}. In some instances this occurs because services do not provide a culturally appropriate environment that provides a culturally safe environment for children and families^{xvii}.

There are a range of strategies to improve the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in ECEC. As Wise has argued, this can be overcome by providing locally based early childhood development initiatives which comprise of multiple programs and services that are responsive to local culture, context, needs and strengths^{xviii}.

The Finnish model

Under the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning the Productivity Commission has been asked to examine international models that could be implemented in Australia and to review options for enhancing the choices available to Australian families. QCOSS has selected Finland as a positive example of a country delivering quality ECEC for all children, providing both choice and affordability, which in turn is creating significant social and economic benefits for families, the broader community and ultimately the entire country.

Many aspects of the Finnish model would be appropriate for the Australian context. The Finnish model provides parents with a flexible system of support, while ensuring that all children, especially those on low-incomes have access to affordable and quality childcare. Finland is also instructive because it achieves both quality child development outcomes along with high levels of workforce participation.

Funding for childcare is part of a broader family policy in Finland. Finnish family policy is highly egalitarian with a focus on promoting equal access to social and economic development opportunities. Finland's overall family policy aims to 'create a

safe environment for children to grow up in and to provide parents with the material and psychological means to have and raise children^{xix}.

Outcomes for children and parents in Finland are among some of the best in the world. Finland enjoys one of the highest female labour force participation rates in the European Union, with a high proportion of labour force participation occurring on a full-time basis. Finland also has low infant mortality rates, a low number of low birth-weight births and a relatively low rate of child poverty^{xx}. The child poverty rate in Finland in 2012 was only 5.3 per cent, second out of 35 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, whereas Australia had a rate of 10.9 per cent, ranking 18th out of 35 OECD countries (see Figure 3 below)^{xxi}

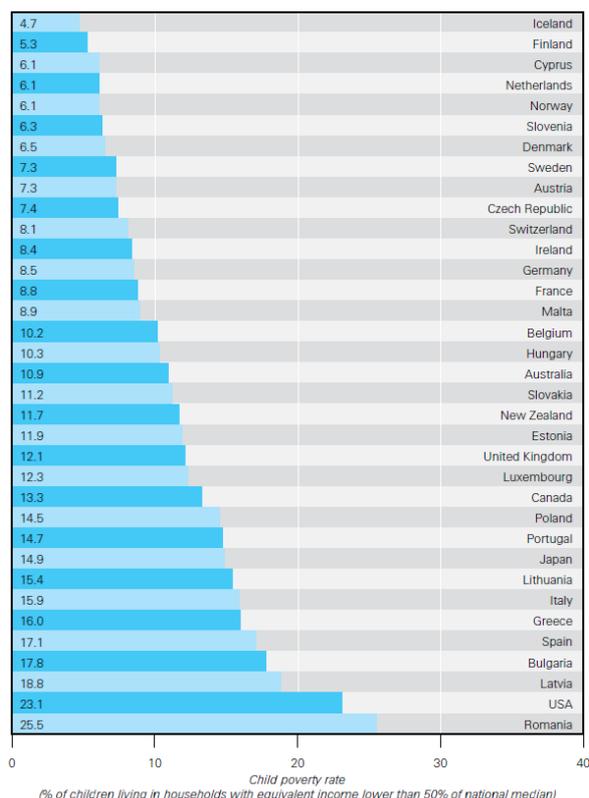


Figure 3: Child poverty rates for 35 OECD countries, 2012^{xxii}

In 2005, benefits to Finnish families with children amounted to about € 5.2 billion, which was about 3 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)^{xxiii}. The level of assistance provided to families in Australia was estimated to be around 1.7 per cent of GDP in 2004-05^{xxiv}. While spending on assistance to families in Finland is significantly higher than both the OECD average and Australia as a proportion of GDP it is likely that the social and economic benefits flowing from this investment, high levels of workforce participation and low levels of child poverty, justify this investment. While beyond the scope of this submission, QCOSS recommends that such analysis be undertaken by the Productivity Commission in preparing recommendations to the Australian Government.

Figure 4 below, shows the various forms of support for families in Finland and Figure 5 provides a breakdown of the various family benefits available to families in Finland in 2005. This includes expenditure on childcare, child allowances, pre-school, housing assistance and other expenditures. A significant proportion of this spending is for childcare or for subsidies to assist parents with young children to promote workforce participation and child development.

Parents with children have continuity of assistance from the state to assist them to raise their children and to meet the costs associated with raising children. Maternity leave is provided from birth for a period of 105 weekdays at a minimum level that is calculated as a proportion of income. After this time, the state provides a parental allowance for 158 weekdays, which again is calculated as a proportion of income.

Parents are also provided with ongoing assistance in the form of the child allowance. The child allowance is used to even out the expenses of families with children versus families without children. The child allowance is tax exempt and is not means tested, but is adjusted to account for the number of children in each family^{xxv}. The child allowance is provided from birth until the child reaches the age of 17.

Aside from these payments and subsidies, families are also eligible for assistance to meet the cost of childcare. From 1997, all children under school age in Finland have the subjective right to daycare provided to them by a municipal authority. If they choose not to use municipal daycare, families have the choice to receive a subsidy to help pay for private daycare or they can choose to receive an allowance to help them to look after their child at home.

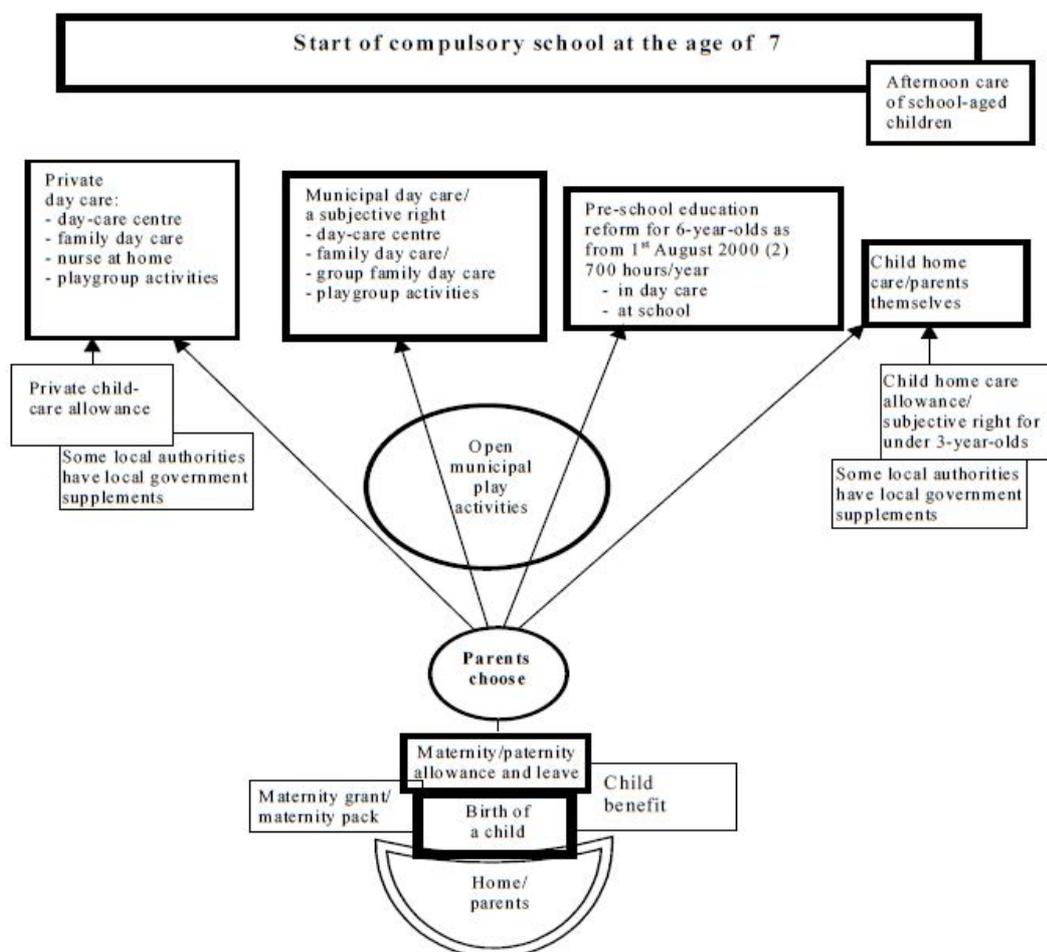


Figure 4: Family policy system in Finland^{xxvi}

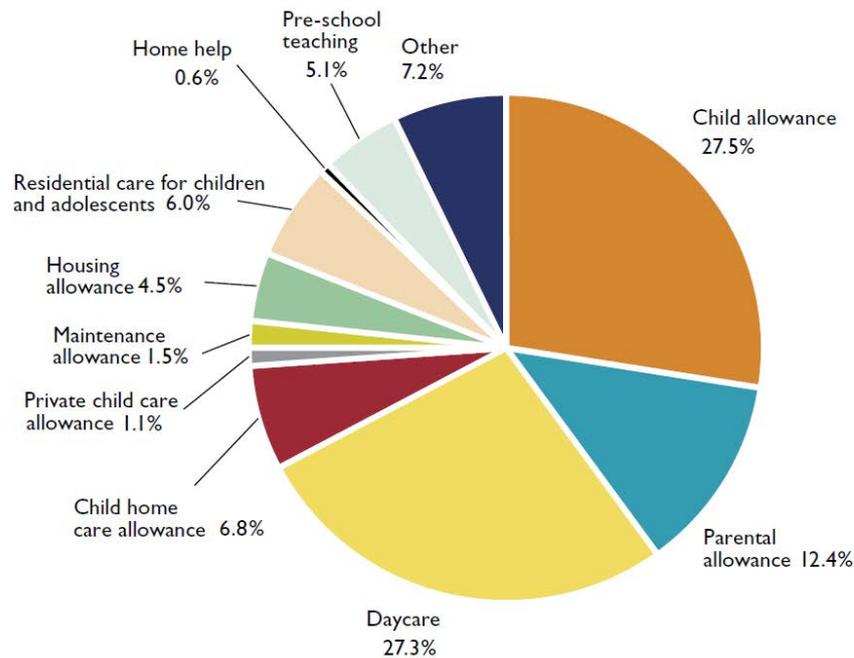


Figure 5: Distribution of family benefits in Finland, 2005^{xxvii}

Child Home Care Allowance

Parents who wish to stay at home with their children can do so and receive a modest subsidy in the form of the Child Home Care Allowance until a child reaches the age of three. Eligibility for the allowance is withdrawn if a child is enrolled in municipal daycare or if the parents choose to receive the private childcare allowance. Families receive the Child Home Care Allowance on top of the Child Allowance, which all parents receive to support child raising activities until a child reaches the age of 17. A Partial Home Care Allowance is also available if the parent's average working week does not exceed 30 hours due to childcare.

Private Child Care Allowance

A parent can choose to receive a Private Child Care Allowance to provide care for a child under school age by a private carer or a private daycare centre if this is offered by a municipality. This can be private centre based care or private in home care. The Private Child Care Allowance is paid directly to the childcare provider^{xxviii}. Private childcare is primarily delivered by non-governmental organisations and associations in Finland^{xxix}. In 2005, about 3.5 per cent of all children in daycare were in private daycare.^{xxx}

Municipal daycare

Parents who choose the public system can use either centre based care or family daycare (including group family daycare). According to the Finnish Government, by 'extending the unconditional right to daycare to cover all children under school age, the educational aspect of daycare is emphasized in addition to its practical aspect'^{xxxi}. Finnish daycare combines educational and care functions into an 'educare' model, which uses play-based learning to enhance child development opportunities for children.

While daycare in Finland is predominantly public, some is delivered through the private sector. Local municipalities deliver services directly through either municipal daycare centres, family daycare or pre-school groups. Municipalities may also outsource the delivery to private providers or support voluntary services^{xxxii}. Services that are outsourced are considered to be part of the municipal network, and are partly administered by the municipality^{xxxiii}.

An interesting aspect of Finnish daycare is that a significant proportion of children use family daycare from the age of one to three. Of the 24 per cent of children in municipal daycare in 2001, 54 per cent were in family daycare compared to 46 per cent in centre based care^{xxxiv}. While municipal daycare is always an option it is interesting to note that a significant proportion of children under the age of three are cared for by parents or grandparents in the home with the assistance provided by the Child Home Care Allowance (see Figure 6 below).

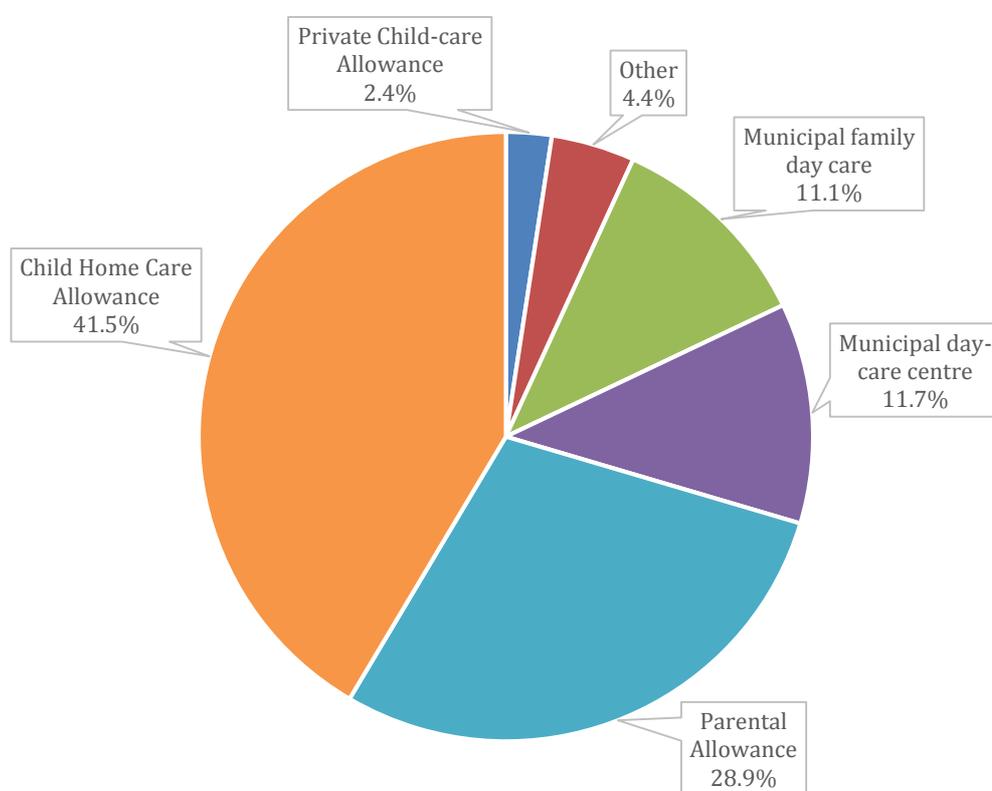


Figure 6: Daycare arrangements for children aged under three at the end of 2005, Finland^{xxxv}

While there are fees for using municipal daycare, they are heavily subsidised. Not only do fees vary by family income and size, but low-income families are exempt from paying fees^{xxxvi}. According to Grierson, families are only required to cover on average 15 per cent of childcare fees in Finland^{xxxvii}. By comparison, it has been estimated that out-of-pocket fees for childcare in Australia currently range from 19 per cent to 50 per cent depending on income and are likely to only increase^{xxxviii}.

Daycare services are also regulated to ensure quality care. The carer to child ratio for children under the age of three is one 'child nurse' for every four children. The ratio for children aged three to six is one 'child nurse' for every seven children. Staff are required to have at least a secondary-level qualification, one in three staff members must have a post-secondary qualification and kindergarten teachers must have a university degree. Family care minders must also have an appropriate

vocational qualification. While the basic services required to be delivered by municipalities is defined by law, there is flexibility for municipalities to deliver daycare that is tailored to the needs of local communities^{xxxix}.

Budget Based Funding (BBF) model

While the Finnish model provides some important lessons for the Australian system, it is important to note that even in Finland there are difficulties in delivering services in remote communities. Some small rural municipalities in Finland are unable to provide parents with the option of a daycare centre^{xl}. Australia has been more progressive in this area providing direct funding for childcare services under the BBF model, many of which are located in rural and remote communities. This section discusses the importance of continuing and strengthening the BBF model as an alternative to models relying on subsidies and tax incentives.

The BBF model was introduced to support the establishment of quality childcare services in areas where the market would otherwise fail to do so. It is recognition that the mainstream CCB model does not adequately support rural or remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to access childcare. Of the 269 Non-mainstream Child Care Services (NMS) supported under the BBF program around 80 per cent of these are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services^{xli}.

Families living and working in remote and isolated communities are often presented with a lack of choice in regards to the type of care that is offered in their community. In remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities, for example, there is usually only one choice for younger children and one for older children. Childcare for younger children is usually provided by an institutionalised long daycare service that has been set up and funded by various federal departments over many years. Older children are usually cared for by an Outside School Hours Care service (OSHC) that is associated with the childcare service.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families living in more urban areas are also faced with limited choices when it comes to accessing appropriate childcare and early learning opportunities. A lack of culturally appropriate childcare and early learning services is compounded by a lack of economic resources to pay fees charged by mainstream providers. The economic disadvantage faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people creates barriers for families who would benefit from these interventions.

While a formal review of the BBF program has been under way for some time, the final report has not yet been released by the Australian Government. This has caused significant anxiety for BBF providers. Service providers do not know if any changes to the BBF model will occur as a result of the review and are therefore unable to plan ahead.

Ultimately, the review of the BBF program should result in greater investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities and greater flexibility for BBF funded services, as this will enable services to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities to overcome disadvantage.

SNAICC provided a submission to the BBF review making a number of recommendations based on consultation with BBF recipients and other support services (including Indigenous Professional Support Units located in each state and territory)^{xlii}. QCOSS supports many of the key recommendations from this submission.

In particular, the SNAICC submission recommends that the level of funding available to BBF services should increase and that greater flexibility be given to service providers to enable them to tailor services to children, families and communities. The submission calls on the Australian Government to strengthen the BBF model by^{xliii}:

- instituting longer funding cycles
- providing funding for the delivery of additional services
- providing resources for the development and maintenance of infrastructure
- improving funding for staff wages
- reducing the reporting requirements of services.

SNAICC found that services are poorly served by the requirement to renegotiate service contracts on an annual basis. This makes it difficult for services to plan ahead and creates a significant administrative burden on staff. This recommendation is supported in a review of the BBF, undertaken by the Auditor-General in 2010, where it was argued that the Australian Government should consider changing the single year funding cycle to multi-year funding agreements to enable services to better plan ahead for the future and to reduce administrative burden^{xliv}.

SNAICC has argued that the BBF model provides limited funding to deliver services that support access to and use of childcare services^{xlv}. Unfortunately the BBF model does not reflect the current running costs associated with the delivery of quality care. While childcare is the primary activity funded through the BBF program, there is strong evidence to suggest that the effectiveness of a service depends on its capacity to provide a range of supplementary and complimentary services to children, families and communities^{xlvi,xlvii,xlviii}.

The provision of transportation, nutrition and various family support services all encourage the use of childcare services within a community. As Leseman has noted, family support programs 'work to protect children against adverse child rearing conditions in high stress families, preventing dysfunctional social-emotional development'^{xlix}. Integrated service models have been used internationally, such as in Canada, as a means of improving outcomes in First Nation communitiesⁱ. Unfortunately, current funding arrangements for the BBF program do not even, in some cases, provide adequate funding to cover the provision of core childcare services, let alone complimentary support services. This is partly because funding has not kept pace with changes in the cost of running services over time.

In this regard, it is important to recognise the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A one size fits all approach fails to acknowledge this diversity. Funding arrangements should be flexible so that services can tailor education and care to the needs of their particular community.

The SNAICC report also identifies a need for extra resources to fund the development and maintenance of infrastructure. As highlighted in the SNAICC submission to the BBF review, services have little funds available to maintain existing infrastructure or cover depreciation costs of infrastructure, such as buildings. This is compounded by the short funding cycle, making it difficult for BBF services to plan aheadⁱⁱ.

SNAICC have also identified the cost of staff wages as an area of concern. The cost of staff wages is increasing however funding allocations have not kept pace with these increases. This has meant that a larger share of a service's budget is being spent on staff wages at the expense of other items. Inflexible budget models are

undermining the capacity of services to retain or attract highly qualified and experienced staff, making it difficult to deliver higher quality services to childrenⁱⁱⁱ.

A final recommendation made in the SNAICC report was the need to reduce the administrative burden caused by reporting requirements. Repetitive and onerous reporting requirements have placed significant burdens on services with limited administrative capacity. By reducing the reporting burden staff will have more time to spend attending to the needs of children, families and communityⁱⁱⁱ.

SNAICC have also argued in its submission that the CCB model is incompatible as an alternative to the BBF model^{iv}. This is a position that QCOSS strongly supports. The requirement to pay fees under the CCB model creates significant barriers for families facing economic disadvantage. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still experience significant economic disadvantage, with significantly higher unemployment and lower income than the non-Indigenous population^v. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can least afford to miss out on the developmental benefits accruing from participation in quality ECEC simply because funding models are incompatible with their capacity to pay for these services.

Under the BBF model, recipients are required to establish and implement a fee setting and collection policy to ensure that those families with the capacity to pay contribute to the operating costs of a NMS^{vi}. Yet, it is unrealistic to expect that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, particularly those living in rural and remote areas, have the capacity to do this, given the high levels of disadvantage they face.

Making low-income families facing poverty and disadvantage contribute to operating costs is at odds with a recent PwC Australia (2011) report that recommended that ECEC be universally accessible regardless of a family's capacity to pay because of the significant benefits of participation to individuals and society as a whole^{vii}. In this regard, QCOSS strongly supports the position that ECEC services be freely available to all families on low-incomes, especially those in rural and remote communities.

QCOSS would argue that families experiencing poverty and disadvantage should have access to quality childcare and other early learning opportunities on a no fee basis. Those families that can least afford it would, in many situations, be the families who would benefit the most in the short and long term. This should occur outside of the CCB model as the reliance on subsidies and tax relief makes it less likely that low-income households will participate. As it was noted above, countries such as Finland provide free access to childcare for low-income families. Such a model would prove beneficial in Australia, should it be adopted.

In considering how best to deliver ECEC services to rural and remote communities, the Australian Government should also consider reviewing the BBF model to ensure that alternatives to centre based care can be adopted where these are appropriate and beneficial.

New Zealand's model of home based care provides one option that could be used to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in remote communities. The model is compatible with the Finnish model, which strongly supports the use of family daycare. This model builds onto traditions and language within the family and home structure/environment, while still being supported by local pedagogical educators, teachers and leaders promoting culturally appropriate education and learning.

Under the New Zealand home care model there are three levels of responsibility which provide accountability and ensure that the quality of education and care is at an acceptable standard. An 'educator' is responsible for delivering education, care and comfort to children in their care in a home environment. A 'coordinator' oversees the education, care, comfort, and health and safety of the children, by providing professional leadership and support to 'educators'. A '*service provider*' is the body, agency, or person who arranges or offers to arrange education and care for children by 'educators'.^{lviii} This type of model would promote self-employment and autonomy as well as business opportunities in local communities. This model could be used to support younger age groups especially children under the age of three. As it was noted earlier, a large proportion of children aged under three in public daycare in Finland are cared for using a family daycare model.

Conclusion

As this submission has shown, quality ECEC makes an important contribution to improving the health, employment, education and housing outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children into the future. Yet it is vulnerable and disadvantaged children who struggle most to access quality child care and early childhood learning opportunities.

This submission recommends that the Australian Government consider the following recommendations:

- Provide vulnerable and disadvantaged families, particularly low-income and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, with free access to high quality ECEC services through the direct funding of childcare places.
- Investigate the feasibility of adopting those aspects of the model used in Finland, which provide greater choice, flexibility, cost effectiveness and quality to families.
- Continue funding the BBF model as an alternative to the CCB model and strengthen the model to better meet the needs of rural and remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.
- Examine the feasibility of adopting the New Zealand home-based service model within the BBF model to provide a more culturally appropriate model for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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