

Wanslea Early Learning and Development Inc
Submission to Productivity Commission Inquiry, Childcare and Early Childhood
Education
February 2014

Wanslea Early Learning and Development

Wanslea is a long-standing not-for-profit organisation in Western Australia that, in addition to the provision of early childhood education services, works with vulnerable children and families through a range of human service programs. Wanslea's early learning services include Centre Based Care, Outside School Hours Care, Family Day Care and In Home Care for young children. Wanslea has over 200 Educators working across the metropolitan, Great Southern, Peel, Goldfields and Esperance regions of WA. These services offer care and education to over 1200 children each week across the state. Wanslea has first-hand experience of the issues surrounding early childhood education and care. Further, the organisation has experience regarding (i) the particular needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children (ii) the needs of providers and the community in rural and remote areas and (iii) the particular position of not-for-profit organisations operating in the sector. This submission highlights key issues impacting the service, educators, and the communities in which the programs operate.

Key Issue: The role of different levels of government in childcare and early childhood education

Wanslea supports the ongoing role of the Regulatory authority to ensure consistency and high level care across all of Australia. A national approach can assist in ensuring that services targeted to vulnerable children and families, and in areas, such as rural and remote areas, where accessibility is an issue, meet clear and universal quality standards and can be adequately and fairly resourced. Given the importance of early childhood education to individuals, families, communities and economy, the Federal Government should also be a leader in supporting research and development within the sector.

Government – state, federal or local – does not provide financial support or incentives to not-for-profit organisations to operate in the ECEC sector. Accessing funds for capital works for not-for-profits is a significant barrier for improving and enhancing the play and care environments provided.

Recommendations:

1. Priority areas for research and development in the Early Childhood Education sector be identified

2. Adequate funding be provided for implementing a research and development strategy in the sector
3. The Federal Regulatory Authority remains in place
4. Not-for-profit providers of ECEC be provided access to no-interest loans for capital works

Key Issue: Accessibility of ECEC

As noted in the Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Productivity Commission Issues Paper, there is consistent research evidence of the improved educational and social outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds when they have access to early childhood education. Children who are in foster care represent some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in Australia. These children often come from backgrounds of trauma with multiple social and environmental factors that can impact on their social, cognitive and physical development. Consistent access to reliable, affordable and quality childcare can assist in mitigating against some of these poor outcomes.

However, the system of seeking financial support and/or subsidies for childcare are too complicated, and made more complicated by the number of stakeholders and authorities involved in the care of children in foster care. Childcare subsidies could be much easier to access; and safer if the subsidy were to match the additional costs of providing care to children who have special needs or are disadvantaged.

To ensure the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children, or children with special needs are met, staff must be adequately trained and supported to provide appropriately safe and quality care.

Recommendations:

1. Children in foster care be provided with access to free quality child care to ensure their developmental and safety needs are adequately met
2. The system for seeking and receiving financial support and subsidies for childcare be simplified, and the number of organisations/systems involved streamlined
3. Enhanced training (or resourcing for training) for staff to provide safe and quality care for vulnerable and disadvantaged children

Key Issue: How the sector has responded to growth in demand, including changes to types of care offered, cost and providing structures used by different types of providers and any viability pressures and barriers to providing more flexible care options.

Wanslea services have experienced an increase in demand for part-time care and flexible care arrangements. However, care arrangements offered outside normal

working hours are not a viable service provision model. Wanslea is not currently able to provide centre-based care outside normal working hours. The centre-based services are quick to respond to changes in demand and change room configurations as per demand on age groups. More resources for services that cater for children with special needs are required, as well as a review of the funding for the extra staff member to be employed to care for the child. This funding currently does not cover the full wage of the Educator for the time the child is booked into care.

Staff costs are an issue with providing care outside normal working hours. Further, it is difficult to recruit staff who are willing and able to work unusual or highly flexible hours. Staff availability and adequate coverage is therefore an issue in providing more flexible care options. Wanslea advocates Family Day Care as an appropriate option for families requiring flexible or non-routine care, as traditionally it has been able to offer care outside of normal working hours.

It is difficult to offer flexibility in price in response to demand and/or to meet the particular care and learning needs of individual children as fixed costs remain, and quality care standards must be met. These standards require human, capital and training resources in order to be adequately met. This means while there may be some capacity to *subsidise* care for particular families based on need, there is limited capacity to routinely adapt prices.

Recommendations:

1. Enhanced funding models for children with special needs that include the full costs of providing additional educators/staff to care for a child with special needs
2. Enhanced business models be developed that recognise the increased need for flexible child-care arrangements (e.g. part-time, care outside normal hours) and that support be given to Family Day Care as a model of flexible care provision

Key Issue: Initiatives of governments to address workforce shortages and qualifications including the cost and effectiveness of these initiatives

It has been very effective to encourage staff to increase their qualification from a Certificate III to a Diploma in Childcare when the government offered subsidies. It is not an easy task encouraging staff to take on further study when there is no subsidy for the training: staff will not take on the training if they have to pay for it themselves as they have limited economic capacity to do so. Rural child care services find it extremely hard to attract diploma qualified Educators, especially if the employment is part time or casual. Attaining a childcare qualification whilst living remotely is very difficult and although there are online components travelling to training can often be an issue.

Recommendations:

1. The Federal government reinstate subsidies for staff to increase their qualifications
2. Accessibility to training and qualification be enhanced for rural and remote educators by developing courses that can be taken purely on-line and/or where practical components are able to be undertaken in their existing workplace or community

Key issue: Initiatives of providers to address their workforce shortages and skill needs, including the cost and effectiveness of these initiatives

Wanslea has training incentives whereby staff are paid to attend training or to increase their qualification. It would be beneficial if staff members who are studying teaching degrees are able to complete a bridging course to become qualified and attain a diploma so they can work within the industry whilst doing the degree. Staff who are studying a degree in teaching are not motivated to complete a Certificate IV in childcare or a diploma when they are studying for a degree. It would be greatly beneficial if, after 12 months of commencement of a teaching degree, they could apply for a Certificate IV or Diploma bridging certificate.

Recommendations:

1. The qualification pathway for ECEC staff to include easy transitions between university and diploma/certificate training/qualifications

Key Issue: Other workforce and workplace issues, including any aspect of government regulation that affects the attractiveness of childcare or early learning as a vocation.

Wage and demands of the job is often a big factor in the industry not attracting people to the workforce. It would be of great benefit to the sector, and children, to see more men take on roles within ECEC.

Recommendations

1. Workforce retention and sustainability be recognised as a significant current and future issue impacting ECEC. Diversity in the workforce also needs to be recognised as part of this.