

**Rosny Child Care Centre
Submission
Productivity Commission Inquiry**

Rosny Child Care Centre is a community based, not for profit centre operated by the Clarence City Council. We have places for 38 children each day and currently have 70 families using the centre. Rosny CCC is located in Southern Tasmania, 10 minutes drive from Hobart. The centre has a staff of twelve educators and a centre cook. We have a comparatively low staff turnover with several staff members nearing ten years service and two who have been at the centre for twenty years.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to discussion around the future of the Early Childhood Education and Care sector.

Quality first

I have over twenty years' experience working in Early Childhood Education and Care in Tasmania, in both Long Day Care and Outside School Hours Care. I have worked in privately owned and not-for profit, community based centres. I am currently the director Rosny Child Care Centre.

I have stayed in the ECEC sector because I find it very rewarding to play such an important part in the lives of the families I work with. Working in a long day care centre is never boring and each day requires me to be part educator, child health and development expert, child (and often parent) psychologist, artist, cook, gardener, small business manager, receptionist and plumber. I am not stuck behind a desk, can go outside and play with the children if I want and get lots of hugs during the day – not something that happens in many workplaces!

On the other hand working in ECEC can be emotionally and physically draining as there are constant demands for your attention, the workplace can be noisy, smelly and we are exposed to sick children on a regular basis, we are expected to remain calm and happy in the face of a room full of crying children, we strive to meet the (often competing) expectations of different parents, remember the likes and dislikes, family history and daily routines of many children, cope with a constantly changing and expanding regulatory and training requirements and all to be paid less than people are paid for working behind a supermarket checkout.

I believe that relationships are key to quality in all ECEC settings. If you have positive, caring relationships between educators and the children, between educators and families, between the children and amongst the educators themselves then you have a quality service. Relationships are formed through trust, respect, shared knowledge and experiences and finding common ground with each other. This does not happen overnight and has to be built up over time.

The problem of high staff turnover means these relationships are not able to be formed and quality becomes impossible to achieve. Educators are leaving the sector because the low wages are not enough for them to survive on and there are other jobs that are far less stress full that pay more. In general these educators are sad to leave the sector but cannot justify staying in a position they love when it is not financially viable. As director I am paid at the highest rate of all my staff and I know how tight my budget is each week so I can only begin to imagine how the other staff are managing.

Staff changes are the most unsettling events within a centre. Even if you are able to find a terrific new person there is still the sadness of the loss that is felt by the children, families and other staff,

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renegotiating of roles within staff teams, the time to build up the relationships and the cost of advertising, orientation and induction of a new person. Currently the reality is that terrific new people are hard to find as they are not choosing to come into the sector in the first place.

Children and families build relationships with the staff. The most amazing building and playground, the greatest toys and equipment, the most educationally sound, child centred program will not compensate for these relationships being compromised by staff changes. I have worked in a centre where the building was an old converted house with serious problems, we had a tiny budget for resources yet we were constantly full because the staff team was made up of experienced, committed educators who had terrific relationships with the children and families. The families' knew that we would care for the children like they were our own, that they would be loved and that at all times we would have the children's needs at the heart of our work. For this they were prepared to overlook the leak in the ceiling that occasionally flooded the toddler room!

As a director for over fifteen years I have shown a lot of parents around a lot of centres, answering their questions about child care as they make the decision to choose a centre for their child. Parents want to know about the people that will be looking after their children, what their child will be doing during the day, whether their needs will be met and if they will be safe and secure. The financial cost may get a mention at the end of the conversation but only if they are satisfied with the other answers. I have never had anyone ask about the centres license/accreditation/assessment results.

Parents are looking for quality care above all other factors. For most parents returning to work when their child is below school age is already a compromise. Given a free choice they would rather be at home with their child. If they have already decided to return to work they want to know that their decision will not adversely affect their child and this means ensuring quality of care. Accessibility and flexibility are secondary considerations and many parents spend a lot of effort negotiating with their work places so their return to work can be done in the way that works best for their child. Parents, particularly mothers, realise that with the cost of child care added into their expenses returning to work before their child is school aged means a very small amount of cash in hand after fees are paid. They realise that this is what they need to do to maintain their place in the workforce for when the children are older and sometimes the after child care money is enough to make difference to the family budget.

Parents who are pressured by work commitments into accepting child care places in care settings they are not entirely happy and confident with are stressed and unhappy. Returning to work is very stressful at the best of times and if you have to do it wondering if your child is going to be happy and safe through the day then this is magnified. The parent's effectiveness and productivity at work is going to be seriously affected if they are constantly worried about their child. I have known parents resign rather than have their child be unhappy in care.

Increasing accessibility and flexibility of childcare through more centres, longer opening hours, seven day a week centres or an increase in alternative forms of care will not achieve any positive outcomes if there is not quality at the heart of them. I do not believe that parents will choose a centre just because it is close to home or because it is open longer hours if they do not have confidence it is meeting their child's needs.

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Parents put their children's needs first. This where we start in ECEC too – children first is our mantra. Policy decisions around ECEC should have this at the heart too. Instead of finding places to put children so parents can work sooner, for longer hours on more days per week we should be looking at ways to make work places more responsive to the needs of children and parents. Our children are our greatest resource as a country and their wellbeing should not be the trade-off for increased participation in the workforce.

If this is not possible the question still remains as to how new centres or more hours will be staffed. There is already a significant movement of educators out of the sector and we cannot find suitable staff to fill the positions we currently have. Where will the educators come from to work in these new centres or to cover longer opening hours? Without professional wages we will be unable to stop the movement of staff away from the sector let alone attract new staff.

The other issue around increasing accessibility, flexibility and affordability in childcare is the viability of centres themselves. The biggest cost for centres is staffing and this is fixed by the legislative requirements around ratios. There is pressure for fees to be "affordable" and this is largely governed by the level of fee support provided by the government. Caught between these opposing forces viability is a constant struggle now for most centres. Half day bookings and holiday rates that gave parents some flexibility have gone, centres have to charge everyone full fees all the time to remain viable.

Longer opening hours would only be financially viable if the centre was fully occupied for these hours and I do not think the demand is great enough in the majority of areas. If only a couple of families were using extended hours and staff were being properly compensated for working outside of normal hours then the centres viability would soon be in jeopardy. The same applies to employer sponsored childcare. In Hobart there would be few, if any, employers that would be able to generate in house enough demand for a centre that would be financially viable.

Centres rely on the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate payments for their weekly cash flow. I believe that these payments should always be paid directly to the service. A lot of time is spent chasing up debts of people who are being paid their CCB and CCR but are failing to pass it back to the centres in fees. This simple measure would make a big difference to a lot of centres.

The background notes to the inquiry talks of the current ECEC system needing improvement because a "small but significant number of children start school with learning and developmental delays". In my experience ECEC are the most proactive bodies in getting early intervention for these children. As ECEC professionals we see a large number of children and are able to more readily identify children who are outside the normal range of development in all areas than perhaps parents whose knowledge of normal is limited to their own child/children. We recently had a 3 year old boy start at the centre who was none verbal and was exhibiting a range of unusual behaviours. His mother had been told by her GP that he would start talking "when he was ready". We advised her to access local support and diagnostic services and he was identified as being on the Autism Spectrum. He started intensive therapies and was able to enter Kindergarten the following year with his peers.

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If there is any problem with children with learning and developmental delays not being identified before school age then I would say it was because parents are reluctant to leave these children with people they do not know or because the current system around funding support for children with additional needs to be included in centre programs is inadequate. There is only a limited pool of money to fund additional staff. If you are lucky enough to receive any funding it does not fully cover the costs associated with having that extra person to assist the child. This is a cost most centres cannot absorb.

The notes also talk of the need for a system that has “clear and sustainable business arrangements, including regulation, planning and funding.” My time in the ECEC has been characterised by a constantly changing regulatory environment. I believe that with the NQF and EYLF we have reached a system that is sustainable. A nationwide system allows the ECEC to speak and work from a single common ground. Any further changes at this time would just add to the stresses already in the sector, not mention the amount of money that each change costs.

Kati Dunn, Full-time Director – BA, Dip Ed. (ECE), 20 years experience

Experience and qualifications matter

Before I moved to Australia from Nepal, I worked in a bank. However when we arrived here in Australia, I decided to spend time with my own children for a few years. I changed my career away from finance because I was focused on children. I love the bond you can share with children as you watch them grow, through interaction and communication.

The biggest challenge the sector faces is that earnings are so low for the contribution we make. I have considered pursuing a different career by studying something else as this is a very physical, mental and emotional job. Unfortunately, the low wages make educators feel like there is a choice between money and passion. While we love our job, many educators train and then leave the sector. A friend who I studied with has recently gone to work in retail. They are going there because they can earn more in that sector.

When educators leave a service, or there is temporary replacement with casual staff, children can be very insecure. They don't know the new educator. Secure relationships take time to build - sometimes it can take months before trust develops. Then, if that educator leaves they have to start all over again.

Professional wages would mean educators will want to continue in this job. More experienced staff would remain which is critical in our sector. I learn from other educators I work with. Experienced staff share their knowledge and expertise. We are losing this experience which is difficult to replace. High levels of temporary or casual work in our sector cannot be sustained because it affects quality care for children.

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Families need to also build secure relationships. They must be able to trust that their child will have one to one care with time and attention devoted to individuals. This leads to a happy and comfortable environment for everyone.

Samhita Sharma, Full-time – Studying Diploma, 3 years experience

Staff turnover issues

I am one of two main casuals working at Rosny Child Care Centre. While I would prefer part-time work, I regularly work full time hours to cover staff absences. I have significant experience at a range of centres and service types. I have worked in Family Day Care and Long Day Care. I have considered other career paths but have remained in early childhood education and care because I enjoy interacting with children, providing what I know to be high quality care and forming trusting relationships with families.

There are not enough qualified educators who want to stay in the sector. I know of an educator who has studied and trained over a number of years and has had a few decades of experience. Her dedication and commitment to the sector was outstanding. She recently left the centre and now works for Vodafone in a call centre. She left her job in ECEC because wages are so low. She could earn thousands more working in a call centre. I believe it is a big loss to the sector to lose educators like her.

We know that children often become distressed and don't respond as well to staff changes, particularly when it is frequent and ongoing. When there is a new educator in a room, children are rarely trusting of that person, and they don't know who they can turn to if there are no familiar faces. I experienced a troubling and difficult issue a number of years ago related to this problem. At the centre I was working at, there was no focus on consistency of staff, and very large room numbers. There was a three year old child in my care whose parents had recently broken up. Both parents were not speaking to each other. At the same time there were a number of staff changes at that centre. There were regularly casual educators in his room. His behaviour became very unpredictable. One day I asked the child would he like to put on some sunscreen and go outside to play. He said didn't want to put on sunscreen and then broke down. He started belting other children, and smashing and trashing the room. He upended tables and chairs, threw equipment at walls. We had to evacuate the room. He was very distressed and difficult to calm down. I believe that if this child had a direct and ongoing relationship with a trusted educator and felt safe at the centre where he spent most of his time, he would not have felt so out of control.

For me, quality early childhood education and care equates to qualified staff, low room numbers and the lowest possible staff to child ratios. When parents look for a service, they want individual attention to be given to their child, with a focus on care and support for their child's learning and developmental outcomes. This should not be too much to ask. Quality also means a strong connection between management and daily operation of a service. Experienced, trained and

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qualified educators will remain in the sector if professional wages were addressed. Retention of staff would give parents confidence. The issue with turnover and the problems associated with quality outcomes for children, is going to get worse, if the pay gap is not recognised and dealt with.

Gillian Hickman, Casual - Diploma, 30 years experience

Nutrition

I am a horticulturalist by trade. I work in the early childhood education and care sector because I believe our community should focus on health from a young age. This means eating the right kinds of foods and looking after ourselves. We have the capacity in early childhood centres to educate children and families about health. Nutrition is an important part of that. We are linked in to Tassie food programs and provide nutritious, full and diverse meals that the children enjoy.

I enjoy interacting with children from different age groups at our centre. We are open-minded about parental input and we have regular contact with parents and families through our newsletters where we talk about food and nutrition, we have a menu board so that families know exactly what their children will be eating each day. We also communicate through recipe swaps and food celebrations throughout the year. One to one conversations are also very important to maintain contact with families about children's needs. We are allergy aware. This means being constantly diligent to meet the needs of all children in our centre.

Many early childhood centres are now encouraging children to bring lunch boxes. This cost saving initiative worries me because there is no regulation around what young children are eating. In centres where this occurs there is no focus on health and nutrition. Parents often send inappropriate food with their children and the educators cannot regulate the food that children in their care are eating.

On the other hand, by providing meals, we can ensure that children are receiving good nutritious food and are learning at the same time about health and what their bodies need. Providing meals also gives the opportunity for educators and parents to discuss together about how much a child is eating, how regularly, what meals they like and their taste preferences. Parents find it much easier to not have to prepare meals and snacks for children to take to the centre. They often comment to me that they appreciate the meals that are prepared and value this aspect of the service.

A parent and young child starting last week came to the kitchen while exploring the centre for the first time. I gave the child a sample of the lunch that I had prepared that day so that he could try to food being made for the children in the centre. This assisted the child and parent to understand the importance our centre places on nutrition and healthy eating options. The long term plan at our centre is to plant a vegetable garden. I am looking forward to this and it would be helpful to have the resources quickly to get this up and running.

Cynthia Direen, ECEC Cook, 5.5 years experience

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Working with children with special needs

I work with children because I get great enjoyment from seeing them change and develop, and interact with each other. It is very satisfying to see the delight they get from the difference experiences we provide for them and to form the strong relationships and bonds with children, particularly those with additional needs.

I worked with a little girl a number of years ago, who was autistic. She had hardly ever spoken a word to us. She had been here a couple of years and was playing with play dough one day. She looked up to me and said “Lynne. A star.” It was a special moment for me as it was then obvious that our programs were making a difference to this little girl. Another child I have worked with had global developmental delays. He was kinder aged. His father told me one day that he is able to do more here at our centre than he could during the days he attended school. It was very fulfilling to hear this from a parent.

There are some challenges to our work in the early childhood sector. Finding time for program planning can be hard. There is a lot of reporting to do and we probably expect more of ourselves than is required. There doesn't seem to be any real outline of requirements for reporting, across the sector, so we are never really sure about what we are actually required to do to meet regulations and requirements. I believe the highest quality services have consistent dedicated staff with a genuine commitment to children, and smaller room numbers so that strong attachments and relationships can be formed. The sector must preserve the lower staff to child ratios introduced through the national quality framework and there must be a focus on staff retention.

The sector and government must also address the big issue of professional wages to ensure quality outcomes for children. My niece recently told me that she had received a pay rise. She works in a bakery. She is now paid \$26 an hour. If we are to keep hold of qualified, trained and experienced staff and keep teacher trained staff in our sector, we must look at wages at the most significant contributor to staff turnover in early childhood education and care.

When staff retention is high, like it is in our centre, it means children know who is going to be there in the morning. There is consistency. And if centre numbers are low, children know most people in the centre. At our centre, we work together in the playground and talk to children from a range of age groups. We are familiar faces to most children. This means children are more settled and they are happier because they know all staff at the centre. Parents also have strong relationships with the educators and communication is very open.

Lynne New, Room Leader – Associate Diploma, 20 years experience

Respecting the individual child

When I was 24 I worked in the formal school system and then transferred to Early Childhood Education in a long day care service. This was probably a crazy decision at the time because comparably, I was earning very little. I didn't keep my qualifications up to date, so this change I have

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never re-entered the education system (of older children) but I love the early learning environment. Little children are like sponges. They learn constantly. I also enjoy working with families and other staff at our centre. I should be retired by now and yet I cannot afford to retire. This is because we are not respected for what we do as educators by Governments and the broader society or at least such respect is not realised in our pay rates. The importance of our role is not realised.

I believe quality in the sector results in happy, secure and settled children. Quality learning environments mean that children are extending their knowledge and development appropriately for their age. Quality is also about respect for the individual child through programs which tap into individual interests and encouraging exploration and investigation. We need exceptional staff to make this happen – qualified educators who love working with children, families and the broader staff team. Something must be done to retain exceptional staff who are interested in quality and the best outcomes for children.

Retaining staff is directly linked to wages. Early childhood educators who are less qualified than teachers are not asking to be paid the same as teachers, but most educators need a higher income to remain in the sector. Even if we are to go on holidays, there is concern and questioning about our cover. Because of my age, parents often ask me “You are not going, are you?” or “You will be here next year, wont you?” They insist they I should still be there to look after the younger children who are also coming through the centre. It can be distressing for families, and particularly children to be forced to form a new relationship with an educator they are unfamiliar with. Families want the comfort of trusted and secure relationships. This issue is worsened by staff turnover.

Lisha Behrens, Part-time - Teaching Degree, 30 years experience

Forming secure relationships

I work in ECEC because I enjoy the children’s discovery and learning. I know we are doing something positive for the children in our care and their families. Parents and families can go out and work knowing that their children are safe and secure and that we are helping their children along with their learning development.

The biggest challenge facing our sector is the retention of qualified, experienced and committed staff through very poor pay. There is little recognition for the contribution we make to the development of young children, and role of educators in keeping our society at work.

Quality early childhood atmospheres are supported, safe, consistent, and secure. If a staff member leaves, even temporarily on holiday, the reforming of the educator – child/family relationship needs to start again. Families feel uncomfortable and unsure with educators they do not know. Parents should not have to second guess whether they are doing the right things by going out and working. I also believe quality equates to smaller numbers (or staff to child ratios) in rooms or groups. A smaller size helps the environment to feel more like family. Because our centre is small in numbers, children get to engage and play with siblings, and build relationships with different age groups.

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If professional wages were addressed, we'd be able to keep the right people in our sector – those who are qualified, educated and experienced, those training to be teachers would want to stay. We then would not have the 'inbetween staff' – those training in other areas and only planning on staying in ECEC for the short term. If there is high staff turnover in a service, parents and children lose the confidence and trust. They are nervous about having to go through the process all over again. There was one little boy I worked with who took almost a year to form the relationships needed to be interacting and engaging with other children and educators. Had there been staff turnover during this time, I doubt very much he would have reached this stage in his social development.

Katie Watts, Full-time – Diploma, 7 years experience

Our Recommendations

1. Put children at the centre of any decision making process concerning ECEC. Their emotionally and physical wellbeing, and their right to be children should be the primary concern when making decisions that will shape their childhood.
2. Look at ways of making work places more family friendly instead of making families and children have to be organised around the needs of the workplace.
3. Remember that quality in their ECEC setting is the main concern for parents returning to work.
4. Educators deserve to be treated with respect and our knowledge of children, families and the sector valued and considered by decision makers in government.
5. Early Childhood Educators need professional wages. Professional wages are the only way to retain existing educators and attract new people into the sector.
6. Remember that any changes to the ECEC sector must be financially viable for services and those additional services or extended hours will require more staff. Currently there is a shortage of staff in existing services.
7. Investment in Early Childhood Education and Care will provide a long term return to society that far outweighs its cost