



Submission to the
Productivity Commission Inquiry into
Child Care and Early Childhood
Learning

UnitingCare Australia

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UnitingCare Australia

UnitingCare Australia is the national body for the UnitingCare Network, and is an agency of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia.

The UnitingCare Network is one of the largest providers of community services in Australia. Over 1,300 sites provide services and support to more than 2 million Australians each year. The network employs 35,000 staff and 24,000 volunteers. We provide services to older Australians, children, young people and families, Indigenous Australians, people with disabilities, the poor and disadvantaged, people from culturally diverse backgrounds and older Australians in urban, rural and remote communities.

UnitingCare Australia works with and on behalf of the UnitingCare Network to advocate for policies and programs that will improve people's quality of life. UnitingCare Australia is committed to speaking with and on behalf of those who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged for the common good.

It is of critical importance to broader considerations of productivity and full participation that children in their early years should receive quality early childhood education and care that make a lasting difference. This is particularly relevant to disadvantaged and vulnerable children, who research shows have the most to gain from participation in quality early childhood education programs. It may be the most important educational investment we can make. Quality early childhood education and care services, such as preschool and long day care, not only help children make the best possible start to school, but also support learning throughout the school years, and into their adult lives.



1 Introduction

UnitingCare Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector.

UnitingCare Australia commends the Government's commitment to the development of a Child Care and Early Childhood Learning system that enhances outcomes for children and families, and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to any process that informs such decisions. We have a significant presence in the Child Care and Early Childhood Learning sector and considerable experience providing quality services for children across Australia.

UnitingCare Australia believes that the provision of high quality child care and early childhood learning is of critical importance in creating positive outcomes for the development and wellbeing of all children, but particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged children, enabling their full participation in later life as contributing members of society. Child care and early childhood learning are also a key element of today's "productivity puzzle", or workforce dilemma, by providing parents with a reliable and quality-driven service that assists employment responsibilities. The benefits of quality early learning experiences will mean that children transition to adulthood with more choices, and can therefore actively contribute to their communities and economy.

The following submission represents the views of the network of UnitingCare agencies that provide ECEC services across Australia. It outlines our thoughts on key issues for child care and early childhood learning in general, and the implementation of the National Quality Framework and regional and remote services more specifically.

A more detailed analysis of the issues, including research evidence and case studies, has been prepared by UnitingCare Children's Services (UCCS). UnitingCare Australia endorses the UCCS submission. UnitingCare Australia and the UnitingCare agencies involved in ECEC service provision across Australia would be pleased to engage in further discussion to address any specific issues raised by the Productivity Commission.

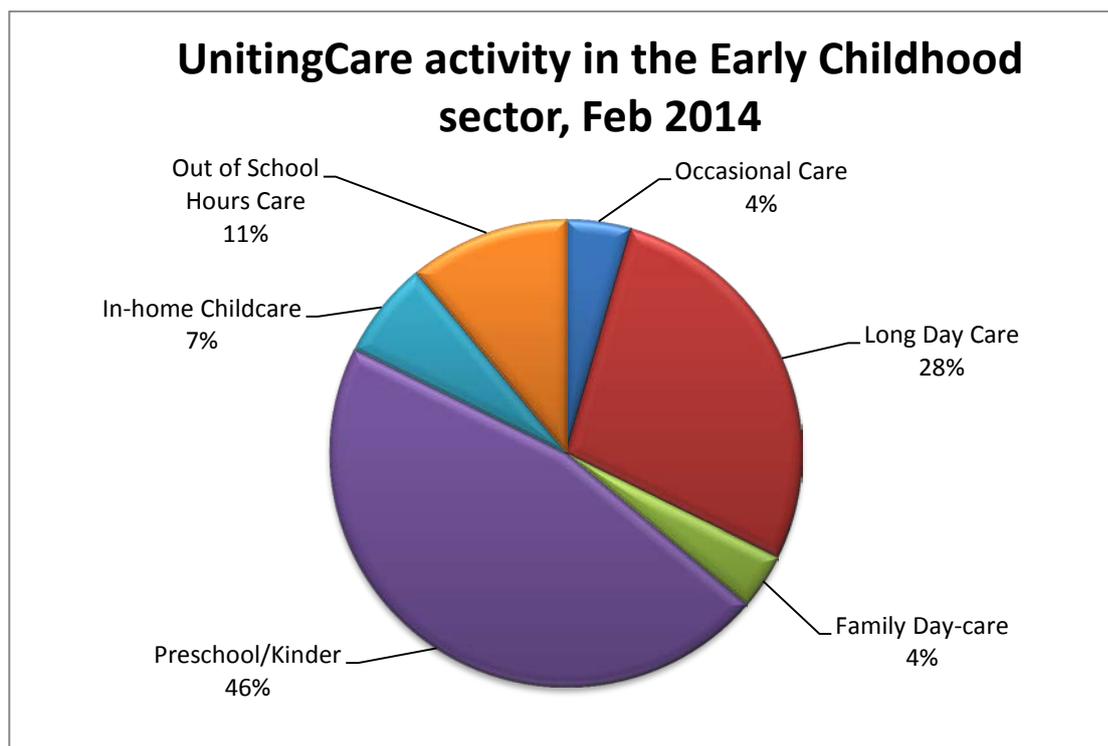
2 UnitingCare: Early Childhood Learning and Care

UnitingCare Australia has a significant presence in the Child Care and Early Childhood Learning sector across Australia, with sites in all states of Australia. The chart below outlines the spread of our services across Preschool/Kindergarten, Long Day Care, Out of School Hours Care, Family Day Care and Occasional Care.

UnitingCare employs more than 1,000 staff specifically in these services. About 20% of these are Early Childhood Teachers and 33% are Diploma Qualified Educators.

We have more than 180 sites, the majority of which are in metropolitan areas, but include about 30% in regional areas and remote sites in NSW, Western Queensland, NT and WA. We provide early childhood services to Indigenous and non-English speaking families.

We also provide a range of other services for vulnerable children, young people and families across Australia, which can interface directly with our early childhood work.



Our experience at the coalface is that the group of children who gain the most from high quality early learning opportunities are those from disadvantaged and vulnerable households, which augers well for boosting productivity and full participation in the economy and society in the longer term. The experience of our network of service providers is that parents are more likely to find and hold work over the longer term if they are satisfied with their children's child care arrangements and the quality of care.

It is critically important to invest early, creating a system of high quality, developmentally appropriate child care and early childhood learning opportunities for all children. Early childhood development is of central importance to the wellbeing of Australia's children and to the future wellbeing and productivity of the nation.

3 Principles for an effective Child Care and Early Childhood Learning system

UnitingCare Australia believes that a robust Child Care and Early Childhood Learning system would be underpinned by:

- Acknowledgement that quality early learning is critical to children having opportunities as adults to fully participate in the community and economy;
- Access to affordable, quality care for all children;
- Increased participation in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) by Indigenous and disadvantaged children, including those with additional needs and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families;
- Access to affordable, equitable, quality early education and care programs for children living in rural and remote communities.
- Emphasis on appropriately qualified staff in nurturing education and care environments;
- Acknowledgement that early childhood services, including maternal child health and early intervention services are part of an integrated service system, and need to link with other platforms/policies that interface with this area;

The UnitingCare network supports the National Quality Framework (NQF).

The NQF has been effective at improving staff ratios and qualifications to support better outcomes for children. These quality measures are evidenced widely in research.

UnitingCare Australia supports evidence-based policies and practices. The NQF has achieved a common assessment and rating tool with an emphasis on continuous improvement in all areas of service delivery including parent/carer feedback and inclusion. The NQF has a strong emphasis on consultation and engagement with families and community.

Overall the NQF provides a good structure for ongoing quality improvement. The Quality Improvement Plan is a living document that drives quality upward.

The NQF is still in its implementation phase and has wide sector support. Any new program that is as large as the NQF needs at least five years to implement and should be given this time.

Quality is driven through qualified staff

The experience of our service delivery network, which also reflects the outcomes of research, is that appropriately qualified staff are critical to achieving better outcomes for children.

Qualification requirements introduced through the NQF are having a number of other positive outcomes:

- The status of the child care profession is being lifted, increasing its desirability as a profession. Qualified staff are also mentoring and providing capacity building in staff teams. This supports the attraction of quality staff and reduces staff turn-over, further enhancing quality of care and learning.
- Parents are able to continue in or return to work with confidence, satisfied that their children are in professional, quality environments which provide the opportunity for learning and development.

Optimising children's learning and development

Learning frameworks are a positive inclusion to the NQF, as they provide national consistency in both service delivery and parental expectation.

There is a substantial amount of research showing that access to quality early childhood education makes a significant difference to the experience and engagement of children when they attend primary school, which leads to improved outcomes for high school and improved prospects for work for that child as they get older.

Access to services for vulnerable and disadvantaged children

Research shows that children from disadvantaged families benefit most from quality early childhood education and care. However, because early childhood education and care is not provided free-of-charge in all states and territories in Australia, children from disadvantaged communities and vulnerable families are most likely to be missing out.

By improving access to quality child care and early childhood learning services, vulnerable and disadvantaged children will be given the best possible start in life and will be less likely to be left behind or caught in a cycle of poverty.

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children exposes sharp variations in access. Children from families of low socio-economic areas were seven times more likely (12.8%) to have not attended an education or care program prior to starting school than children from families in the highest socio-economic areas (1%). Similarly, 24.4% of Indigenous children did not attend an education or care program compared to 5.9% of non-Indigenous children.

Engagement of Indigenous communities in early childhood learning has been positive when additional support such as transport is provided. An investment of staff time in the development of relationships is a critical element. Attracting Indigenous staff is critical and is enhanced with capacity building and support in gaining qualifications or further study.

It is difficult to attract quality staff to areas of significant disadvantage. This could be improved with incentives such as those used in public education and health sectors, and the provision of increased funding to assist in support and mentoring of staff.

Funding models need to prioritise access to high quality care for vulnerable families. Increased investment in Child Care and Early Childhood Learning has long-term benefits for families and children, enhancing participation and the longer-term productivity of our nation.

Rural / remote solutions

Families in regional and remote areas require access to quality child care and early childhood learning opportunities.

The Issues paper noted that the Government has a role in supporting children and families in regional and remote areas due to the special circumstances of this type of service.

In our experience, there are a range of issues that make it difficult for centres in regional and remote areas to maintain viability and attract qualified staff.

Issues include:

The small population sizes in regional/remote locations to support centres, and changing demographics of these population, including seasonal work and younger families moving away, mean that child numbers are small and fluctuate, making it difficult to plan and budget for these programs. For example, in one UnitingCare centre in a regional area there are 42 places, but it currently averages 22 children a day.

Management structures. There are economies of scale for larger agencies with centralised management that run several services in regional and remote locations. This also provides staff with access to collegial support, training, and professional learning as well as general

systems support. However, travel and support costs can be excessive in this centralised model. Local management and ownership can also provide a range of benefits through connection to and commitment from the local community, but this model has added costs in managing businesses, and staff can be more excluded from training, networking and career opportunities. Current resources in rural and remote areas are insufficient.

Rural and remote areas have particular difficulty finding and retaining qualified staff. This could potentially be remedied via:

- Incentivising positions in rural and remote areas;
- The provision of financial and other incentives for staff to undertake further qualifications, such as diploma or degree qualifications, including pay parity with school teachers;
- Continuation of flexible online learning opportunities and recognition of prior learning; and,
- Provision of access to mentoring and stronger supports to assist in the development of skills and understanding and as a key contribution to staff retention.

Agencies who run and manage ECEC services often run and manage a range of other services, often unrelated to ECEC services, either in the same communities, or in other communities in the same regions. Business decisions in one community or program area can affect business decisions in unrelated programs.

It was noted in the Productivity Commission Issues Paper that four UnitingCare childcare centres in Gippsland (Bass Coast, South Gippsland and East Gippsland Shires) are closing due to increased costs associated with new regulatory requirements. These centres are in the process of being transferred to other providers. The decision involved the range of issues discussed above, and should not be attributed to the NQF, which UnitingCare network providers support.

4 Recommendations

UnitingCare Australia recommends that the Inquiry:

- Recognises that early childhood development is of central importance to the wellbeing of Australia's children and to the future productivity of the nation;
- Recognises that quality is driven through qualified staff;
- Notes that the National Quality Framework has been effective at improving staff ratios and qualifications to better support outcomes for children, and acknowledges that the NQF in its current form has wide sector support;
- Recognises that learning frameworks are a positive inclusion in the NQF, as they provide national consistency in both service delivery and parental expectations;
- Highlights that by improving access to quality child care and early childhood services, vulnerable and disadvantaged children will be given the best possible start in life and will be less likely to miss out and be caught in a cycle of poverty;
- Notes that families in regional and remote areas, in particular, need better access to quality child care and early childhood learning opportunities;
- Develops recommendations to address workforce shortages, in particular the fact that rural and remote areas have particular difficulty in appointing and retaining qualified staff.

UnitingCare Australia welcomes the opportunity to participate in this Inquiry and looks forward to further engagement with the Productivity Commission. UnitingCare Australia would welcome the opportunity to provide specific details or examples of particular relevance to Commissioners in their ongoing investigations.