



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Response to the
Productivity
Commission's *Early
Childhood Development
Workforce* draft report

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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The Brotherhood of St Laurence and early childhood development

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, with a national profile, the Brotherhood continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty, guided by principles of advocacy, innovation, inclusion and sustainability. Our work includes direct service provision to people in need, the development of social enterprises to address social exclusion, research to better understand the causes and effects of inequality in Australia, and the development of policy solutions at both national and local levels.

The early years has been identified as a key life transition towards which the Brotherhood will focus research and services. Engagement with children and parents as they navigate the challenges of family life, especially in difficult circumstances, has been an enduring part of the work of the Brotherhood. This is evident from our pioneering work in the early 1970s with the establishment of the first family day care scheme in Australia to the recent national rollout of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

This submission

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is primarily concerned with the social inclusion of those most disadvantaged in society, which involves the organisation in striving to improve access to both employment and quality services for those most in need. This submission responds to those recommendations in the Productivity Commission's *Early Childhood Development Workforce* draft research report (June 2011) that would most affect this group.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence maintains its unequivocal support for the recent reforms that will provide a framework for managing the quality and consistency of early childhood education and care (ECEC) across Australia. Our particular concern remains that urgent consideration be given to ensuring access to and affordability of ECEC for Australia's low-income parents.

Chapters mentioned in headings refer to those in the draft research report.

1 Access and affordability of ECEC services

As stated in our previous submission in response to the *Early Childhood Development Workforce* issues paper (ECDW issues paper), the Brotherhood fully supports national early childhood reform commitments. We also support the recommendation made in the draft report: '*To achieve the goals of the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) ECEC reforms without disadvantaging low-income families through the anticipated increase in fees, governments will need to ensure that there is adequate financial support for such families*' (draft recommendation 3.2).

We reiterate the statement made in our previous submission: fair and equitable access to ECEC services is essential. This is important not only to enable all families to participate in work (be it paid or voluntary) or study, but also to enhance developmental trajectories for young children.

Immediate action is required in the short term, in the current taxation and transfers system, to provide adequate financial support for low-income families to enable them to access high-quality ECEC services; removing cost barriers completely should be considered for families experiencing multiple disadvantage. A longer term solution should focus on providing universal access to high-quality ECEC services for up to 24 hours per week for children over the age of three.

2 The family day care workforce (chapter 6)

Reduced supply of FDC workforce

Family day care (FDC) in the state of Victoria will not be affected by the changes in staff-to-child ratios being implemented through the National Quality Standards—Victoria has been operating at higher staff-to-child ratios for a number of years. However the number of educators operating FDC programs in Victoria has gradually declined since 2002 (when FDC had its highest national workforce statistics). Provision of FDC in Victoria has been impacted significantly by this decline.

Lower staff-to-child ratios, while contributing to higher quality environments for children, result in reduced capacity to earn for carers. For FDC to remain an attractive employment opportunity consideration needs to be given to the conditions and support available to FDC educators and their schemes. Increased regulatory, administrative and higher qualifications requirements create additional disincentives to entering the FDC workforce. In recent years the federal government also removed the set-up assistance of \$1500 for educators starting out in their own FDC business, meaning that all start-up costs are born up front by the contractors/educators themselves. This is an additional barrier for low-income workers who may otherwise be suitable for a position in FDC.

Cost of supporting high-quality FDC

Implementing the quality reforms and minimum qualification requirements for all FDC staff is likely to increase the direct cost to families accessing FDC. Nevertheless FDC is likely to continue to be a lower cost alternative to long day care (LDC), which may result in more families using FDC as an alternative to LDC. Due to the changes in National Quality Standards the costs of coordinating and managing budgets of FDC schemes has become increasingly challenging. Higher staff-to-child ratios have meant more FDC educators are required to care for existing levels of children, which means that schemes have to support more FDC educators on the same budgets. Many council-based schemes are scaling down operation or closing completely due to the excessive running and administrative costs of FDC programs.

Demand and place for FDC

FDC provides a valuable service to families and offers an alternative model to centre-based ECEC services. Home-based environments support the care and education needs of children, allowing their individual needs to be met in a small group environment. FDC also provides flexible support for parents and families who need to juggle changing work shifts or hours of work.

Unique experience of providing FDC

In the Brotherhood's FDC schemes approximately one-quarter of FDC educators and contractors are from a CALD background and require a more tailored approach to training and support as well as a higher level of administrative support. FDC provides a unique opportunity for people from

these backgrounds to enter the workforce, gain financial independence and for such parents to provide care for their own children. Reduced revenue and increasing demands and costs for supporting educators are making it increasingly difficult to sustain and manage FDC schemes to a high standard. Supporting a tailored approach to recruitment adds an additional level of complexity and cost to providing an FDC service.

In our previous submission we raised concerns about language being a barrier to achieving the minimum level of ECEC qualification and we recommended that additional support be provided to potential educators and that training be linked with Workplace English Language and Literacy programs. Many educators coming from low-income households have been unable to fund or take time out of their working hours to engage in further studies. The Brotherhood's FDC scheme in City of Yarra has already seen a withdrawal in the number of educators due to language barriers. While operational subsidies are available to support ongoing training and development, the level of funding and calculation on which it is based are not adequate to support the needs of FDC educators from CALD backgrounds. Additional resources and ongoing support are required to ensure that compliance, regulatory and quality requirements are met and to support the inclusion of a diverse workforce of educators.

3 The occasional care workforce (chapter 7)

The Brotherhood does not support recommendation 7.2 in the draft report: *'Given that children typically spend limited time in occasional care, occasional care has relatively limited scope to contribute to cognitive development. As a consequence, governments should not impose additional mandatory qualification requirements on occasional care workers'*. We disagree with this recommendation on a number of points.

Typical use of occasional care

We question the premise of recommendation 7.2 that children typically spend limited time in occasional care. While occasional care services certainly provide a structure for occasional attendance, the reality for many occasional care services is that they regularly support the ECEC needs of some families in an important way.

The reason that families choose occasional care varies. The flexibility of occasional care enables families to attend appointments and go shopping as well as participate in casual or shift-based employment (for example working on oil rigs), without committing to and paying for regular childcare fees. Other reasons for choosing occasional care include respite care for parents and providing support during an emergency or time of crisis (Care for Kids, 2011). It is because some families depend on occasional care in emergency and respite care situations that the Brotherhood is concerned that highly trained staff might not be available to support children in these circumstances.

For parents experiencing temporary or more entrenched difficulties in caring for their children, full day care, as provided in LDC settings, does not always provide the best solution. The Brotherhood's model of occasional care is tailored to families needing further support and is offered in combination with other services, for example family support services, or opportunities that enhance parent-child relationships, for example supported playgroups. For services such as ours it is vitally important that children and families have access to the best possible care from highly qualified staff.

Other important users of occasional care are parents who are studying English as part of the refugee settlement programs run by AMES. The Brotherhood provides classes for their children that only run for half a day—parents do not need to have children in long day care. This occasional care program includes high staff-to-child ratios and tailored activities that aim to build strong child–carer attachments and enable the program to work with children to address their own settlement needs. It is also important for refugee parents to spend time with their children as part of addressing their settlement needs together and occasional care provides a flexible model to enable this.

Our services shows that occasional care can be an essential, tailored service for families in need, one that also requires children and parents to access the best possible care from a well-trained and supported, highly qualified staff. With this in mind, we reject the conclusion of recommendation 7.2 and suggest that the same qualification standards be in place for all ECEC workers.

Limited scope to contribute to cognitive development

We further question the conclusion in recommendation 7.2 to not impose additional mandatory qualification requirements on occasional care due to its limited scope to contribute to children's cognitive development. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) conceptualises the learning and development of children occurring in the context of play-based learning (Early Years Learning Framework, 2009). All early childhood practitioners are considered 'educators' and are working towards the same learning outcomes for children under the framework. Occasional care is included as an early childhood setting as defined in the framework; it should therefore be considered as an equal player in the suite of ECEC services. To frame occasional care as a 'care only' service removes it from the context of the EYLF and away from the current conceptualisation of ECEC provision, which aims to integrate what have traditionally been separated into education services and care services.

Various elements of child development are integrated and cannot be addressed in isolation. To adequately address the developmental needs of children in their first five years of life the recommendation needs to be reconsidered to include the whole child not discrete parts of child development.

Description of the Brotherhood occasional care model

In responding to the Productivity Commission's request for more information about the occasional care workforce, we provide here a brief description of the model of occasional care provided by the Brotherhood through our Napier Street Child and Family Resource Centre. While we are aware that this model is not a typical model of occasional care provision, we put it forward to highlight an alternative story of provision which we hope will reinforce the place of occasional care in the suite of child and family support services and reinforce the need for occasional care services to be high-quality services that are staffed by well-trained and qualified staff.

Napier Street Child and Family Resource Centre—occasional care

Occasional care is provided four mornings a week, 8.30am–12.30pm. As well as enrolling in child care, parents are linked with a range of support services and programs, for example those offered at Napier Street Child and Family Resource Centre (playgroups, outreach worker and HIPPY), other Brotherhood services (Ecumenical Migration Centre (EMC) Family Support and Counselling, Centre for Work and Learning and Financial Inclusion) and local support services (Maternal and Child Health Centre, Yarra City Council Family Support and Library Services). Typically, families would attend child care for four mornings, playgroups for one session or more, and be linked to a support worker—either within the Brotherhood or with other local support services.

Staffing and qualifications

Current regulations require two staff members to always be present and children under three years require a 1:5 staff–child ratio, while children aged over three years require a 1:15 staff–child ratio. However our model requires three staff members at all time for 12 children in a family grouping setting. Due to the high needs of the children enrolled, most of whom are from refugee backgrounds, we require a minimum Certificate 3–trained staff, but our permanent staff are all diploma-trained. Stability of staff is also important. A strong element of our staffing is employing bicultural and multilingual employees.

Support and ongoing training are provided. This includes first aid training, in particular for asthma and anaphylaxis; early learning program training, for example Baby Bounce and Let's Read; and Free Kinder Association Training sessions for working families, for example encouraging parent participation, working with vulnerable families, maintaining first language and culturally diverse practices.

All staff members have one-on-one supervision and attend staff meetings, daily briefing sessions and are given significant support in finding extra part-time work, as our child care program is only run in the mornings.

4 Workforce for family support services (chapter 13)

The Brotherhood supports recommendation 13.2 that *'In order to facilitate better workforce planning by services and the attraction and retention of staff, governments should increase the certainty and duration of funding for family support programs wherever possible'*.

Furthermore, the Brotherhood supports recommendation 13.3, to obtain *'high-quality evidence about the effectiveness of different programs through longitudinal studies and robust program evaluation'* and recommendation 13.4, to evaluate family support programs delivered by volunteers and peers *'on a wider scale with a view to the expansion of such programs if they prove effective'*. The Brotherhood would like to draw the Productivity Commission's attention to a recently completed robust evaluation of one type of family support program delivered by peers, the Home

Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), which is funded by the Australian Government and currently operates in 50 communities across Australia.

HIPPY is a combined home and centre-based early childhood enrichment program that supports parents in their role as their child's first teacher. The program targets communities that have experienced various forms of social disadvantage. Home tutors who have been recruited from the local community work with parents as peers over two years during the critical period of the child's transition to full-time school. HIPPY aims to ensure children start school on an equal footing with their more advantaged peers, as well as to strengthen communities and the social inclusion of parents and children. The evaluation of HIPPY employed a rigorous methodology, using a quasi-experimental design, interviewing children, parents and tutors. It made comparisons to a matched control group derived from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. The results of this federally funded national evaluation are now with the Minister.

5 ECD workforce for Indigenous children (chapter 14)

The Brotherhood supports both findings 14.2 and 14.3 and recommendations 14.2 and 14.3 in relation to ensuring culturally competent and funding-assured services. The Brotherhood would like to draw the Productivity Commission's attention to the HIPPY evaluation mentioned above, which includes an examination of the program's implementation and acceptability in five Indigenous communities. The findings from the evaluation are currently with the Minister. They provide insight into key workforce issues facing ECD programs in Indigenous communities.

6 The integrated ECD services workforce (chapter 15)

The Brotherhood, in partnership with Yarra City Council and Broadmeadows UnitingCare, is working to develop an integrated children and family community hub. While it is not expected to be operational until 2013 there are a number of potential workforce issues that have surfaced through the planning and development, particularly in relation to the cost of integrating services.

Alongside the issues of attracting and retaining staff to integrated models of provision as raised in the draft report, there are the higher demands and expectations placed on staff working in integrated service settings compared to those working in stand-alone services. There are potential cost imposts that come with the requirement for additional training, additional time for collaboration, and additional work associated with working in an integrated context.

Further to this is the issue of leadership. It is widely recognised that leadership has a significant impact on and is required for effective integration of services (Moore 2008; Press, Sumsion & Wong 2009; Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford 2010); however, there is currently no source for funding leadership positions that potentially sit across a number of services. As a number of different models of integrated services are being established nationally, the Brotherhood strongly recommends that a source of funding be established to support both the training demands of staff working in integrated services and the leadership roles required to support the cross-discipline approach of integrated service delivery.

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