



Submission to Productivity Commission Review into Early Childhood Education & Care

Submission made by Dr Carina Garland MP, Federal Member for Chisholm, on behalf of the Chisholm electorate

This submission provides a community perspective on the Early Childhood Education and Care Productivity Commission Report. It is informed by a range of engagement activities undertaken across my electorate of Chisholm, including direct feedback received via electronic correspondence and mobile offices, feedback received during a public webinar held with the Minister for Early Childhood Education and Care and the Minister for Youth the Hon Anne Aly MP, but primarily via the results of a comprehensive Early Childhood Education and Care Survey conducted by my office throughout the Chisholm electorate to which 70 responses were received.

The Chisholm Early Childhood Education and Care Survey provided respondents with the opportunity to provide both quantitative and qualitative feedback about their experiences and challenges from the viewpoint of parents and carers, early childhood educators, professional staff at early childhood education and care centres, and community members. It also provided an opportunity for the community to suggest potential changes that might help improve Australia's early childhood education and care system into the future. Subsequently, insights from the Chisholm Early Childhood Education and Care Survey have been instrumental in shaping the recommendations presented in this submission. By way of

background, 71% of respondents are or have been parents, guardians or carers of a child in early childhood education and care, and 34% of respondents work in the early childhood education and care sector.

This survey, in combination with direct community feedback, identified six key areas which need to be addressed to help chart the course for universal affordable early childhood education and care in Australia. These areas of priority include availability, affordability, flexibility, inclusivity, workforce challenges and regulation.

1. Availability

Waiting lists for early childhood education and care centres are commonplace in the Chisholm electorate. Feedback highlighted the distress that the uncertainty of waiting lists causes families. Respondents suggested that early childhood education and care centres could adopt a practice like primary and secondary schools regarding zoning. This would guarantee local families a place at their local early childhood education and care centre, and enable waiting lists for those that live outside of the zoning for that centre.

Additionally, feedback indicated that children moving from 3-year-old to 4-year-old kindergarten were not guaranteed a place at the same centre for their next year.

Respondents detailed the anxiety this caused parents and carers and their children. Practices could be adopted to ensure that children who attended a centre for 3-year-old kindergarten, are guaranteed a place at the same centre for 4-year-old kindergarten.

2. Affordability

According to the survey results, families in Chisholm are spending an average of 21% of their income on early childhood education and care.

Respondents indicated that they require additional financial support to access early childhood education and care for their children. Whilst the Federal Government's Child Care Subsidy has been helpful, respondents felt that care was still costly for their children.

Families accessing Occasional Care are not eligible for the Child Care Subsidy. Feedback indicated that the expansion of the subsidy to include Occasional Care would be beneficial for families.

Feedback also indicated that additional subsidies for single parent families would be welcome support.

Families have described limitations with the current scope of funding from the Victorian State Government. They explained that they rely heavily on fundraising, as Free Kindergarten does not cover incursions, excursions or enrichment programs for children. This additional funding could be considered as the government charts the course for universal affordable early childhood education and care.

Concerns were raised about private providers increasing fees and booking profits without fee increases being reflected in increased staff wages. Regulations in this space may therefore be required.

3. Flexibility

Feedback from the Chisholm electorate indicated that early childhood education and care was not flexible for all families. Shift workers, part time workers and casual workers expressed challenges finding care for their children that fit their work schedule. Measures to increase flexibility of early childhood education and care for all types of workers could be considered as the government maps the future of early childhood education and care.

Additionally, families expressed a desire for flexibility for absent days, holidays and suspending care, and a review of the requirement for students to attend a minimum number of hours.

Early childhood educators detailed that flexibility for families required sufficient staffing, space, and administrative support. Limitations in these areas impacts flexibility available for families.

4. Inclusivity

Overwhelmingly, early childhood educators described the significant burden of providing education and care for children with additional needs under the current ratio requirements. Educators stated that they do not receive enough support to provide for children with additional needs, that educators were not trained to provide support for children with complex needs, and that children with undiagnosed behavioural conditions place additional burden on educators.

Suggestions provided by the Chisholm community to improve inclusivity in early childhood education and care include:

- Review ratio of children to educators, increasing number of educators per child.
- Prioritise continuity of staff for children with additional needs.
- Upgrade facilities and technology to accommodate children with a physical disability.
- Provide paid professional development training for educators around supporting children with additional needs.
- Integrate early childhood education and care with early intervention and allied health services, such as psychologists, occupational therapists and speech therapists and other allied health professionals. This could facilitate wrap around support for children and their families and ensure early intervention is made possible.
- Review process of early childhood education and care centres accessing NDIS funding for children that are part of the scheme.

The Chisholm electorate is one of the most diverse communities in the country, with a vast number of languages spoken. Early childhood educators in Chisholm have expressed a need for additional support for CALD families to ensure clear communication between parents and carers and educators.

5. Workforce retention and recruitment

I received significant feedback from early childhood educators about changes that are needed to improve retention, recruitment, and quality of education in the sector. This feedback is outlined below:

- a) Wages for early childhood educators should reflect the importance of their work.**

I heard from experienced early childhood educators who are not able to save money on their salary and are living paycheque to paycheque. They expressed dreams of one day being able to own their own home – but on their current wage, this is out of reach. Early childhood educators have an important role in the education and care of the next generation, and their pay should reflect this important role.

b) Staff shortages in the sector have flow on effects for the quality, availability and flexibility of early childhood education and care.

Constituents have shared stories with me about the significant impacts that staff shortages have had on their early childhood education and care centres. Staff shortages reduce the quality of care that educators can provide. Staff shortages creates issues with availability of early childhood education and care in communities, as there are not enough early childhood educators for the number of children requiring education and care. Without enough staff, centres are unable to provide families with flexibility for care.

c) New early childhood educators are not adequately prepared for the workforce.

Early childhood educators have expressed significant concerns about the quality of new early childhood educators who are entering the workforce. They have shared with me that in rushing to resolve staff shortages, new educators have not had sufficient practical experience in an early childhood education and care setting. Differences in the quality of new early childhood educators depending on which institution they attended, and this has an impact on the education and care provided to children. To retain new early childhood educators, sufficient paid work experience in the sector could be implemented to ensure educators are prepared for the demands of the role.

d) There is a need for funded professional development.

I have heard from many early childhood educators in Chisholm who wish for funded professional development. This professional development could be in people management, caring for children with additional needs, or other areas. Professional development funding for educators could be demand driven, and would ensure that educators receive the skills and knowledge to educate children in our communities.

e) There is a need for more non-contact hours and easing of the administrative burden of educators.

Some early childhood educators reported feeling overwhelmed by the burden of administrative tasks that are required by them. Some educators are not given enough paid hours for planning, set up and pack down, report writing, and other administrative tasks. Introducing more non-contact hours could create more balance in the workday of educators.

f) The sector needs better access to quality relief educators.

I have heard distressing stories from early childhood educators in Chisholm about their colleagues not being able to take a day off when they are sick or injured because there are simply no relief educators available. A review into the relief educators for early childhood education and care may be necessary to ensure educators are retained, and that student and educator safety is maintained.

g) Early childhood educators would benefit from mentorship programs for managers and educators.

Many early childhood educators in Chisholm have expressed a desire for a mentorship program available for them to participate in. This includes both managers and educators.

Peer to peer support, and support from more experienced educators, could provide better quality care for children, and could also aid retention of new early childhood educators.

6. Regulation

Early childhood educators provided feedback about the regulation of their centres and indicated that a review of the assessment and rating process is required to ensure it is fair and clear for educators. Pressure to exceed the ratings means that focus is often not on the children, but on meeting the regulatory requirements.

Additionally, early childhood educators in Chisholm have identified that there is an opportunity for the Department of Education to fulfill more of a support and guidance role, in addition to being the regulator. Support and guidance from the Department could provide better outcomes for educators, children and families, and could aid retention of educators, as they would have the support they need.