



# Out of School Hours Care Overlooked and Undervalued

The Productivity Commission Inquiry into  
Early Childhood Education and Care

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# Network



## About Network

Network of Community Activities (Network) is the peak representative body for Out of School Hours Care providers in NSW. Network is a recognised leader in the field of school age care and is the largest membership organisation in Australia dedicated to the advocacy, promotion, resourcing and development of play, recreation and leisure activities for 5-14 year olds. Established in 1974, Network is one of the oldest not-for-profit peak bodies in the Australian Children's Education and Care sector. Network strives to resource and facilitate Out of School Hour Services in NSW to enrich, inspire and support children to engage in creative arts, play and learning.

Network is the proud representative of New South Wales on the National Outside School Hours Services Alliance (NOSHSA), which represents the collective interests of OOSH Services across all States and Territories.

We believe High Quality After school programmes have become an important part of childhood and are rich environments providing essential play opportunities to help children thrive!

Network is a Charity, A Company limited by Guarantee and Not for Profit entity.

## Acknowledgement to Country

Network acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we work, and of the lands on which the Services we supported throughout this project reside. We pay our respects and thanks to elders past, present and future.

## Acknowledgements

Network of Community Activities would like to extend our sincerest gratitude to the Out of School Hours Services sector who provide Network with regular feedback about the issues affecting the sector. We draw on our members collective voices to inform this response and our intention is to cover each area within the scope of the inquiry

- affordability of, and access to, quality ECEC services
- developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children
- economic growth, including through enabling workforce participation,
- children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage,
- the efficiency and effectiveness of government investment in the sector.

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# General Comments

## Overlooked and Under Resourced

The Out of School Hour Care is continuously overlooked and under-resourced. The workforce is in crisis and Covid has had a significant impact on the sector with reduced enrolments making some services unviable for some smaller stand-a-lone operators.

The economic stability of Out of School Hour Care services providers has been shaken and this is particularly so in regional and remote areas. A different model is required as the centre-based model is expensive. We need to re-think the Out of School Hours sector and future proof it.

## Investment needs to be well planned

Investment in our sector is ad hoc! This investment varies considerably from state to state and is complex to navigate. In many cases the government is making it more challenging by over regulating and putting unrealistic compliance measures in place.

There is National inconsistency across the states in particular the laws and regulations as well as other components of the NQF. This combined with the lack of professional recognition and professional status of Educators drives our workforce into other professions. Educators are often isolated and unsupported which then impacts the recruitment and retention of the workforce.

## We need a bold and ambitious plan for OOSH

The facilities services often operate out of are often not purpose built or fit for purpose – some do not even have access to running hot water. This impacts quality and is makes providing care for the individual needs of children a challenging to manage.

*Our sector remains undervalued and under resourced! With long-standing issues continuously not addressed which impacts the quality, access and outcomes for children.*

We believe the Out of School Hours sector requires a bold and ambitious plan with significant investment to address the long-standing inequities that children, families and providers continually face. Now is the time to strengthen the Out of School Hour sector to ensure that parents (particularly women) who wish to work can remain or return to the workforce, The sector needs to be valued and requires the appropriate public investment and proper recognition given to the workforce. It should not be underestimated how these services can support academic achievement and the overall well-being of children.

## Recommendations

- Taking a child centred approach to service delivery based on local context and need
- Increase pay and conditions for Out of School Educators
- Professional Recognition for OOSH Educators
- Strengthen Professional Development opportunities tailored to the Out of School Hours Sector
- Take a more consistent approach to Educators qualifications across Australia
- Promote and support Educators Health and wellbeing
- Capitalise on Out of School Hours potential in supporting children's holistic development
- Build research and evidence specific to children in middle childhood and Out of School Hours Care
- Breakdown the silos between government departments and relevant agencies
- Simplified CCS system
- Better support for inclusion, and vulnerable, and First Nations children
- More research & financial support for flexible models of care in regions and remote area



# Affordability

The community based and NFP sector are more affordable and offer more flexibility for parent users. Our sector is increasingly unable to offer casual or irregular bookings as permanent booking give a reliable source of income. This impacts shift workers and other families who have irregular patterns of work and require casual or flexible bookings. The cost of living and increased public school rents have added to the operational costs of running a service and this impacts affordability especially in Vacation Care. We believe strongly that Out of School Hour services should be for all children and currently vulnerable and low socio- economic families miss out.

## Parent Managed Services

Network is extremely concerned about these entities which are fast eroding and being tendered out. This is being driven by governments who do not value a parent model of operation or community choice. We believe this also impacts affordability for families as there is no doubt these services are more affordable and also understand the local community context and needs.

There is a significant growth in large off-shore corporations taking over the Out of School Hours market. and this is not in the best interest of children or community or the workforce.

## For Community

A community-based model of management made up of parents is a cost neutral management model as the Board of Directors are all volunteers and all funds are reinvested back into the service, community and the quality of care.

There are huge benefits to these models of operation building community capacity, understanding community context and needs. It is also good for children to see their parents involved in their service and create a community of giving back!

## Vacation Care

Vacation care is the most unaffordable component of care within the Out of School Hours sector and often restricts parent access. Excursions which are beneficial can be costly as can be the staffing costs this combined with unaffordable rents in public schools can make Vacation Care unaffordable for parents. This can lead to children being left home alone! The activity test also restricts vulnerable children's access – this was proven in COVID when Vacation Care was highly subsidised and more accessible for children.

We need to grow provision in rural and remote areas of NSW and there needs to be financial support for organisations such as Network to support these communities establish and meet the community need.

## Privatisation of the Sector

Our sector has seen a significant growth in for profit making entities.

These entities put profits before children. Many Educators working in the NFP and Parent managed services do not wish to work for these large corporations. If they lose their jobs they leave the sector and do not return. In a workforce crisis this is not ideal. Many of the NFP and community-based sectors retain staff. These entities are often the preferred employers.



## Partnerships with schools

The increased costs of rents charged by public schools is also impacting the overall fees. Services are often seen as the cash cow for the school which is deeply concerning. Rents in NSW are often inconsistent and rent increases are given without adequate notice.

## Accessibility

We know from our membership engagement that the current policy for supporting children with additional needs is woefully inadequate and is not fit for purpose. Many services choose not to access the funding for the following reasons:

- Application and ongoing administration – it is complex and time consuming for services to navigate and complete. It is often outside Educators skill sets and the ongoing reporting is burdensome and irrelevant. And the Service Inclusion Plan is repetitive..
- One-on-one support – some children require one-on-one support. It can be for the short, medium or long term to be fully included. They may need support with toileting, feeding and the current policy does not allow for this. Which hinders inclusion.
- Demand exceeds supply – There are not enough places for children who require high support needs and some schools who educate children in a special school need provision on site with higher Educator to child ratio.
- Educators Wage subsidy – does not cover actual costs and services are often out of pocket. Sometimes specialist expertise is required and Educators need to have the relevant specialist training however, the subsidy is woefully inadequate to meet these cost
- Inadequate facilities and lack of dedicated space– the majority of OOSH services are located on school sites and there is a perception that facilities are fit for purpose. This is often not the case and many of the facilities offered. can be located in school halls which do not allow for quality programming, they can be long distances from toilets, without

adequate space to do complete administration, manage children's behaviour or speak privately with parents. Some do not have kitchens, hot water which makes offering nutritiously appropriate food difficult. Lack of security of tenure or short term licences can hinder quality care and access.

- Relationship with schools – this varies. Considerably. The Out of School Hour Care sector needs to be recognised as an equal partner and valued within the school community. These relationships impact every aspect of operations including accessibility for children with additional needs.

All of the above issues impact accessibility.



## Quality Developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children

*Outside school hours care (OSHC) is a significant site of care, play and learning for children aged five to twelve years.*

The Out of School Hour Care sector has many educational and development benefits for children. They provide play rich environments and can support children struggling at school to engage more with school like. We need a to shift mindsets in relation to the Out of School Hour Care sector and it should be valued for the benefits it offers children:-

- Supporting children’s wellbeing
- Fostering relationships
- Learning through play
- Connecting to community

Middle childhood is often overlooked. There needs to be stronger links between the school and the Out of School supporting the holistic development of a child.. We need a more integrated approach and more linkages for all the different agencies contributing to the health and wellbeing of children.

There are numerous recent reports highlighting the mental health and wellbeing concerns of pre-pandemic children. One in seven children was found to have a mental health disorder.

Our sector can not continue to meet the needs of these children without the adequate resources and support. We need a more child centred approach for children to enable them to thrive.

Children can arrive at OOSH hungry and lack nutritional food. There is an escalation in concerning conditions including eating disorders, obesity. Our sector is often trying to navigate these growing complex needs.

## Economic growth, including through enabling workforce participation

After school care is still limited in supply restricting workforce participation. Many do not offer flexibility or cater to the needs of seasonal workers. Educators struggle to find care for their own children and can leave the sector when having their own children. Low-income families are often working unpredictable schedules and this can lead to leaving children home alone or using unregulated arrangements. Services need direct funding and support to support disadvantaged children.

## Children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage

Vulnerable children – the workforce participation model does not always support children who are vulnerable. This is concerning as Out of School Hours services can provide a safe and supportive environment. They provide positive social, emotional and learning through play for children. They provide nutritional food to support children whose families are struggling. Over all they can broaden educational opportunities, provide social and emotional learning and create a safe place for children.

Some children struggle at school and attending Out of School Hour services can add value to children’s overall health, wellbeing and learning. We know children benefit hugely from spending time with other children. We believe all children deserve access to Out of School Hours and promoting the concept of a “whole child and whole of school approach” which should include the Out of School Hour Care sector.

## First Nations Children

Data indicates that first nations children are under-represented in Out of School Hours Care. This is for the following reasons

- Workforce participation model
- Out of pocket cost
- Lack of Educators who identify as indigenous as part of the workforce.
- Lack of knowledge and limited awareness about services
- Administrative complexity

## The efficiency and effectiveness of government investment in the sector.

COVID has certainly highlighted some of the limitations and flaws of the current systems. The CCS is too complex for families to navigate and administratively burdensome to services to administer. This takes Educators away from important work with children. It requires Business Management skills and many Educators do not have specific training in this. In Covid the CCS system had to be put on hold due to being inflexible! Services should have the ability to waive fees for children in crisis, vulnerable children or at risk children. Policy is often poorly thought-out and not reflective of the needs of the sector. We can do better!

There is little collaboration between the commonwealth and states for example In NSW voucher scheme was made available to families with fee relief. A good idea in theory however the administration was a manual process and added hours and hours of administration to services. Providers were costly to administer.

There was no consultation and this is a clear example of a poorly thought-out government policy. Out of School Hour services are further disadvantaged as the subsidy does not reflect the real hourly rate to operate a service and there needs to be a special subsidy given to services to support children who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or require additional support. The current system does not address the needs of these children or families.

## Breakdown the silos between government agencies

In the Education and Care sector there is a fragmented tapestry of inconsistent services, to support the sector and families. These are difficult to navigate and Educators parents and community members shouldn't have to understand the complexities of government just to find the right services. Creating a connected government is a core responsibility of our public sector and at the very heart of government. and often there is little to no expertise and all too often consultants are used who make recommendations that are not shared or followed through on.

This is very frustrating for the NFP and community sector who often give their time willingly for little reward. We need a system that is child centred with integrated approaches that focus on the wellbeing of children and improved outcomes for children. We should be striving to change to a wellbeing system that focuses on early intervention.

## Conclusion

Every-day Out of School Educators play a significant role in nurturing children and helping children to succeed. Children's time out of school is often overlooked and not valued as a significant part of childhood. Out of School Hour services support children's development in many ways.

Time out of school is a significant part of a child's time and Out of School Hours care investments are essential to creating an aligned and accessible Education and Care system. Stable, affordable, quality Out of School Hours care provides economic stability for families by allowing parents to have fewer work interruptions due to a lack of before-school, after-school, vacation care. It also provides safe, healthy environments for children as they grow older and their needs change. These investments can also support higher wages, increased benefits, and greater professional development opportunities for providers.



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