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Early Childhood Education and Care
Productivity Commission
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Dear Commissioners,

RE: Submission on the inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission as part of the public consultation on the Productivity Commission inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care. I have worked in the sector for more than 10.5 years. For 9.5 years I worked primarily in long day care (community centre based care) progressing from a trainee to team leader and acting assistant director for an ECEC community centre. Then I worked as a OSHC co-ordinator and nominated supervisor. Prior to my profession in the ECEC sector, I worked for an Australian Apprenticeship Network Service in SEQ, the Welsh Local Government in the U.K., and a global certification and verification engineering company in Wellington, NZ in senior business administration and human resources roles, spanning over 17 years in 3 different countries (Australia, New Zealand and Swansea, Wales U.K.). I am currently taking a break from the sector due to burnout.

The work needed to address the challenges and failures of the sector is one of great enormity. Underpinning this work is the amazing work of the workforce, in particular the early childhood educators who are often praised for their efforts, however are left behind when it comes to addressing the wages crisis. I'd like to take the opportunity to highlight that without addressing the wages crisis all other measures in early childhood policy are as a result will be impacted. The impact will be financially through policy drive that can't be implemented to increase financial benefits economically, as an example increase in child care subsidy allowing families to attend extra days but are unable to due to lack of staff, or quality impacted because of a weakened workforce, as an example developmental outcomes being effected due to lack of consistency of staff. If we don't have a strong and stable workforce underpinning all the great policy work in early childhood, the investment and time will be diminished and an opportunity wasted. This opportunity isn't just economic, which I feel is the missing part of the discussion, the missed opportunity is children's outcomes and therefore societal outcomes. We are already seeing a breakdown in community, a failed ecec sector will only add to this.

I'd now like to address some of the key points of the Terms of Reference:

Affordability of, and access to, quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children

- *We must work hard at bringing back community led services. When we are looking at expansion of new developments local community services should be earmarked for these areas and not left to private and corporate interest. We should be putting community first as we do local schools.*
- *In addition to this we need to look at the current model for planning.*
- *We could also be looking outside the box to a 'buy back' type scheme to get community services in heavily corporate operated areas.*

- Developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school
 - *We need to look at 'school readiness' in terms of not just getting a child 'ready' for school but getting the schools 'ready' for the children. For most, this is being done in a fantastic way. However, for children who have inclusion needs and diagnosed challenges, we need to do better. We need a more streamlined approach to funding for children with additional needs to reduce the stress placed on our Prep teachers, who are often left with little to no support in the transition first term.*
 - *We have a growing number of children who have behavioural challenges and additional needs yet we are failing them in preparation to mainstream school. We have extensive wait list for allied health support and a sector under extreme pressure in knowing how to work with children and families.*
 - *We need a review of all levels of funding, State and Federal, as well as the NDIS, and see how we can streamline support to children and families 'through' their early year's services to provide a wrap-around approach in the kindergarten years.*

- Economic growth, including through enabling workforce participation, particularly for women, and contributing to productivity
 - *We won't meet the targets in this area without first addressing the wages issue and securing the best and brightest educators to work long term in the sector.*
 - *Educators are some of the lowest paid professionals in the country, a boost to their wages will be a direct boost to the economy. We will also see the return of many educators to the sector which will relieve the workforce crisis.*
 - *Solution: Introduce wages funding, introduce a wage sign on bonus to encourage educators who have left to re-entre the sector. A win/win. The funding will be going straight back into the economy, and we will have educators re-entre opening up the rooms needed for increased workforce participation for those who currently can't access additional days due to not enough staff in services.*

- Vital cornerstones
 - *Early childhood educators are the builders of our future, establishing the essential foundations for cognitive, emotional, and social development in children during their most influential years.*

- Levelling the playing field
 - *By boosting pay for early childhood educators, we recognise their key role in shaping a fairer society, where every child, regardless of their socio-economic background, has access to top-notch education and care.*

- Drawing in talent
 - *Competitive remuneration is indispensable for attracting and retaining highly skilled, devoted, and empathetic educators who possess the potential to create a lasting impact on the lives of young Australians.*

- Investment in future prosperity
 - *Federal government funding for early childhood educators' pay increases signifies an investment in Australia's future, ultimately fostering a more educated, skilled, and capable workforce that drives the nation's progress.*

- Strengthening the profession
 - *Remuneration that aligns with workload, will empower early childhood educators to further their professional development, access better resources, and utilise innovative teaching strategies, thus enriching the overall educational experience for our youngest citizens.*
- Reducing educator turnover
 - *Enhanced pay for early childhood educators combats the high attrition rates in the sector, ensuring continuity in education for children and fostering stronger relationships between educators, children, and their families.*
- Positive flow-on effects
 - *Increased remuneration for early childhood educators can lead to greater job satisfaction, reduced stress, and improved overall wellbeing, all of which contribute to a more nurturing and effective learning environment for our children.*
- Mitigating youth crime
 - *Investing in early childhood education and increasing educators' pay is a proactive strategy to tackle youth crime. A strong educational foundation, nurtured by highly skilled and well-compensated educators, promotes social cohesion, encourages positive values, and fosters resilience in children. This, in turn, equips them with the tools necessary to resist engaging in criminal activities and make constructive life choices, ultimately leading to a safer and more harmonious society.*
- Holistic approach to learning
 - *By adequately compensating early childhood educators, we enable them to create stimulating, engaging, and diverse learning environments. This holistic approach to learning contributes to the development of well-rounded individuals who possess strong problem-solving, communication, and critical-thinking skills, positioning them for success in their future academic and professional endeavours.*
- Long-term economic benefits
 - *Supporting early childhood educators through increased pay can lead to long-term economic benefits for Australia. A well-educated and skilled populace drives innovation, productivity, and competitiveness on a global scale, ultimately boosting the nation's economic growth and prosperity.*
- Demonstrating national priorities
 - *A commitment to raising the pay of early childhood educators through federal government funding sends a powerful message, illustrating Australia's dedication to its children and their future. This investment highlights the nation's recognition of the value of early childhood education and the crucial role it plays in shaping the country's future.*
- Outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability
 - *Again we need to look at how best to streamline funds to have a wrap-around support network in the early years.*
 - *We need to drop access hours for all of the above, and have this opened for families how require more hours than is currently available.*

- *We need to streamline all of ACCS, not just 'child wellbeing'.*
- *We also need a more streamlines approach to Inclusion Support Funding. The whole system needs a complete overhaul. Currently we have a system that has no backdating on initial entry, no backdating on annual roll over, which impacts services financially, impacts staff as they have the additional staff taken away while the rollover of funding is being processed, impacts children who don't get the additional support needed, and impacts families who are left stressed that their child isn't being cared for appropriately. The administrative burden placed on educators is absolutely ludicrous, there is no simple manual or guidance available, nor is there any online training or support. This should all be accessible in PRODA. Services who are the deliverer of the ISF are heavily burdened with time management and spend most of their valuable time administrating the red tape, as opposed to supporting educators in services helping them with strategies and supporting them. Too much time is allocated to administration which is absurd. The children need support. Currently the support is going to the educators and service providers in administration support. We have got this all wrong. As a result, children are not being accepted into services. Families have no way of knowing that this is wrong and have nothing to fall back on in terms of support or knowing how to report this discrimination. This is happening and needs to be addressed.*
- The efficiency and effectiveness of government investment in the sector.
 - *I have been a private owner and operator for 10 years. We need to introduce profit caps for private and corporate providers. We can't have a sector licenced to print money for greedy operators when educators aren't paid well and reinvestment into resources and training isn't happening. A line needs to be drawn on how much profit can be made from services whose primary funding stream is tax payer dollars.*
- Impacts on demand, supply, and fee growth.
 - *We need to again, go back to the planning and treat ecec like we do the school sector. We don't have private schools popping up on every corner, we need the planning to reflect how we manage the development and planning of schools.*
- Interactions with existing and planned Commonwealth, state and territory ECEC policy settings and funding, including recent commitments by the New South Wales and Victorian governments to expand access to 30 hours of preschool for children in the year before full time school and support more 3-year-old children to participate in preschool, and any commitments in response to the South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.
 - *We need a more Nationalised approach to ecec. Strength in unity. At the moment we are seeing State lead the way for others to follow leaving a divide in children's outcomes.*
 - *We also see States advertising for staff in other States, which is fine, but again isn't helping with the overall problem of attraction and retention, you're just applying band aid solutions to an overall National problem, that needs an overall National solution.*
- Interactions with other incentives and disincentives to join or increase participation in the workforce.

- *You can have all the incentives in the world but you aren't going to attract and retain educators long term, as a career, if the overall wages crisis isn't addressed.*
- ECEC sector workforce requirements and the capacity to meet these requirements within current Commonwealth, state and territory initiatives.
 - *We wouldn't have a capacity issue if the overall wages crisis is addressed.*
- Required regulatory settings, including to manage compliance and integrity risks for Commonwealth programs.
 - *We need to have a more robust, regular, systematic approach to Assessment and Ratings. We currently have too long a wait between assessments, too much stress is placed on services and educators throughout this process. We need to make this more streamlined, more supportive, more regular, in order to build on relationships with services, and support services in receiving the training or resources they need in order to achieve the best quality outcomes for children. More investment is needed to support a better system.*
- Impact on access to quality ECEC, including by remoteness and access to flexible (non-standard hours) services.
 - *We need more community services operating that are funded on a deficit, as most of these areas are abandoned by private operators as they provide not clear profit.*
- Whether different settings are required based on the location of services or family circumstances.
 - *We need more community services operating that are funded on a deficit, as most of these areas are abandoned by private operators as they provide not clear profit.*
- The operation and adequacy of the market, including types of care and the roles of for-profit and not-for-profit providers, and the appropriate role for government.
 - *We need a better overall planning system when looking at market viability and need.*
- Activity requirements and other ECEC policy settings, including to reduce system complexity and debt for families.
 - *As mentioned previously – refer to ISF administration complexity*
 - *Family debt is a huge administrative burden for service providers. Work needs to be done with software providers, **alongside** service providers, to come up with a better solution on debt management.*
- Impacts on the economy, including workforce participation, productivity and budgetary implications.
 - *No comment to provide*
- A pathway for implementation
 - *Start at the core of the problem, educator wages.*
 - *Work with the sector, create a Ministerial Advisory Committee to liaise with Government on the steps forward and how best to implement recommendations. This Committee must have educator representatives and not*

just organisation representatives. The impacts and implications of recommendations must be discussed with educators.

I hope that the summary of my input and opinion, gathered from my 10.5 years' experience of working in the sector, is of benefit to the inquiry. If you would like to discuss any aspect of my response, or would like further information please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,
Shirley Cornelius