

Recently we invited Nationals Senator John Williams alongside his chief of staff and local Nationals Candidate Matthew Fraser to our service to discuss our concerns and what we wanted to bring up in our response to the Productivity Commission Enquiry and some of what we were able to bring up at the meeting is briefed below. We have also added our other concerns that we were not able to cover in the time.

We have read it said that the NQF provides the minimum structural elements of what has been researched to be high quality education and that these should not be standards that quality early childhood educators should want to compromise or back away from. We want to acknowledge the need for access to quality early childhood education and care for all children and its significance in long term outcomes for children across Australia.

1. The Productivity Commission was told that there has been a financial disincentive for families to work more hours. Without a doubt, this is correct. The current 50 hour model should be lifted to 60 hours as most long day care services that create access for work participation across 52 weeks a year rather than the preschool model, operate on a 12 hour day model.
2. Insufficient support for children with additional needs – we have found this to be true, the support we receive is only partially funded and only limited hours is the access we receive. Different to QLD which seems to fund for the entire day from what we have been told. This creates a disincentive for inclusion of those with additional needs as it generally costs a service money to include a child or they make no money for the placement. It is purely goodwill that continues to support these children.
3. Inflexible hours – we operate for 11.5 hours and whilst I can see the benefits behind 24 hour care for those doing shift work, I would only recommend this for workforce participation as I am already seeing those not participating in the workforce using 8-10 hours of care for their child and using the earlier/later times for pick up and drop off (7am/6:30pm). Possibly one service granted 24 hour licencing per suburb until demands increase and proof of working rosters to ensure that the children's best interests are at the centre of this proposal. However this creates more paperwork.
4. Lack of an efficient system to easily “dob in” those abusing child care benefits/rebates funding with some non-working families managing to access 50 hours of subsidised care.
5. Suggested ways for reducing increasing costs of child care for the tax payer - if we are continuing in the partially parent funded system - we would like to see a reporting system through CCMS for services to report families who do not pay or contribute to fees, creating a block from Centrelink's end for families when they try and enrol at a new service. This prevents families who have no interest in contributing to fees from accessing child care unless they repay a past debt, reducing the cost of CCB and CCR for those who are known in the industry as "centre hoppers" - "hopping" from centre to centre accumulating bad debts between each one. Bad debts increase running costs for child care centres potentially inflating the cost of fees as well as increasing administrative costs, legal costs if pursued and the worst part is taxpayers via Centrelink are partially funding the fees of those who are not contributing themselves.
6. Cost of child care rising fast for Australian Tax Payers. This is not rocket science.. more families are using child care = more cost in CCB/CCR. Child care was initially for working families or the privileged – now most families access some kind of early childhood education and care regardless of income. As a nation we need to decide what the future of early childhood education and care should look like – will there be access for every child available? Will it be beneficial for the future of Australia – without a doubt the research seems to be pointing

towards its benefits. If we acknowledge the need for all children to have access then we need to budget for this reasonable cost accordingly as it will be significant and it will increase.

7. We do acknowledge that it has been noted that the increasing cost is unsustainable for taxpayers however, as mentioned above – if we are looking to move forward to progress like European countries – Early Childhood should be fully subsidised like the school aged years of care creating greater participation opportunities in the workforce and long term higher outcomes socially, educationally etc according to research for children
8. I have read it suggested that as a Nation to be able to afford the increasing cost of child care that it would be wise to invest in the child care sector the way a private investor would.
9. Child care fees are rising faster than CPI – Child care wages did not rise this year in NSW. NSW dropped their wages to match QLD for new employees. Currently I work with a university degree and 7 years of experience for \$29.62 per hour. I am responsible for the service as the Nominated Supervisor and can be financially responsible and fined thousands of dollars despite not being an owner of a business. Employee wages are not the cause of child care fees rising. I get paid similar to night shift at Woolworths or only a few dollars an hour more than an unqualified Aldi worker. I could be responsible for CPR or First Aid at any given moment in my shift. We already face a large turnover in the child care industry due to conditions offered for employees – burdened with paperwork and low wages – this turnover affects children who develop bonds with educators and we need to address this.
10. Child Care providers submitted that they were having difficulty finding suitably qualified staff – with wages so low and expectations high, is it surprising?
11. Parent concerns – the cost and quality is not what they want. I think the NSW licencing requirements need to be brought more in line with QLD requirements about the quantity of resources. The idea behind the National Quality Framework was for it to play a strong role in ensuring that no parent ever has to choose between cost and quality care for their kids. However regulations are still different between states when it comes to licencing requirements.
12. Determining the reasonable cost of care - I would like to know what the reasonable cost of care would include and that it is developed by those responsible for the assessment and rating reports for what they consider would be the cost of running a centre receiving an exceeding rating. All services should be aiming for exceeding - private and community and reducing the amount contributed by the government could see services reducing the standards to simply just meeting the national quality standards.
13. Addressing long waiting lists – we feel that this report needed to acknowledge the diverse range of care needs across Australia and what is on offer. The long waiting lists whilst felt in the heart of cities, are not experienced by most private long day care centres in our rural-regional postcode. Without a doubt, the beginning of 2014 was a particularly quieter year in Northern NSW for private child care with most centres commenting on the change. Nonetheless despite where we live, the community sector does not experience the same fluctuations that we do as they are able to offer more resources, above ratio staff and other aspects that appeal to families operating under a not-for-profit model. Competing with such services can be difficult at times. However we address a different need which is for working families as most not-for-profits do not operate on a 12 hour model.

14. Priority of Access – As a parent myself of a child in another centre, I have not seen the priority of access implemented or forced to be implemented – I cannot secure the days I need for work, I would like the option for a non-working family to swap days when I am needed to work. Particularly as I am the ECT in my service and some days I am required to work when we have more than 25 children present.
15. Parents also were concerned that it is difficult to find a place for children under 1. We do not offer places for babies as there is minimal profit and not worthwhile pursuing in that age group. Possibly more government funding for places in that age group, rather than dropping the qualification requirements would help. We do not believe that it is advantageous to drop the qualification requirements in the early years as these are formative in shaping long term developmental outcomes.
16. Shift workers are disadvantaged from being able to find care due to vacancies available. At our centre we are able to offer flexible care for working families as we are advocates for the priority of access policy working and we believe that this creates a fair system for those using child care for work.
17. Access to Nannies should be Australian Nannies and for those with multiple children who might struggle to find vacancies for children between age groups - needs to be used with caution to ensure that children are always safe, similar requirements for child care staff and also needs to ensure that the professionalism of the early childhood sector is not worked against in implementing this.
18. Reducing Qualifications - Again, will reduce the professionalism of the sector and often qualifications can indicate someone's dedication to the industry. We do not want people in the industry who are not committed to children's wellbeing.
19. Ratios - whilst as an Educator I welcome wholeheartedly the drop in ratios for the Toddler age group. I can also sympathise with the increased cost of this move and feel that a 1:6 ratio drop would have worked better as a 1:5 drop at our service means more than \$200 in profit lost per day. The problem with the ratios is when centres begin to create large amounts of children in the one space for example having 2 staff and 16 Toddlers is incredibly difficult. When one staff member is busy changing a nappy the other 15 Toddlers are left to the one staff member and if they are then changing wet pants, then other 14 are left to bite, etc each other as 2 year olds do. I have worked in a centre where they had 3 staff to every ratio. 3:12 babies, 3:30 preschoolers - it was a disaster. There were way too many children in every room. At my current service we only have the 8 children with one staff member in the room by herself. Perhaps restrictions on this kind of mass-scale grouping would have been cheaper way to implement higher quality care for children.
20. Concerns about the Means Test - As a taxpayer, I feel that it is fair to expect 24 hours of contribution to society in return for part of fully subsidised child care fees, there were exceptions within the means test and I felt this was a fair proposal if we are choosing a model where not all children have access to care. Obviously if as a Nation we decided that all children in Australia should have access to Early Childhood Education and care then this would then be nullified.
21. Concerns about Means Test continued - working in a regional postcode, we do have a large majority of families unable to secure employment - so documented looking for work to be an indicator for participation would be important for our service to continue to operate because as the media has reported, we would be at risk of a "mass exodus" from child care centres as most families would be unable to secure employment.

22. Concerns about Means Test continued - from an Educators' perspective and a Child Right's perspective, children could potentially be at risk of missing out on quality early childhood education opportunities due to parents unwillingness to take part in the activities suggested in the means test.
23. Acknowledgement of the NQF and Preschool Funding model - The idea behind the framework and funding for preschool aged children was to acknowledge the importance of early childhood education and create opportunities for all preschool aged children to participate regardless of social status through the universal access funding model. Are we going to take this right away from children through the means test?