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Bubup Womindjeka Family & Children's Centre Association Inc

Response to Draft Recommendations of Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare in Australia

Bubup Womindjeka Family & Children's Centre welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Productivity Commission's inquiry into Childcare in Australia.

Bubup Womindjeka Family & Children's Centre is a new integrated children's service that opened in Port Melbourne in January 2014. The centre is located in a purpose built, state of the art facility, which was funded by Federal, State and Local Government. The facility is owned by the City of Port Phillip Council and the childcare operations are managed by Bubup Womindjeka Family & Children's Centre Association Inc which is a volunteer governed, not for profit organisation. The centre's vision is to create a welcoming and vibrant community centre that nurtures the lives of young children and their families.

As an integrated children's services centre, Bubup Womindjeka provides children and families with access to long day care and kindergarten programs, as well as playgroups, new parent groups, maternal child health and other family support services all under one roof. This model not only allows for the earlier diagnosis of children's health and developmental problems but it allows streamlining of services to meet the demands of the local community. As a service provider with an outreach of almost 300 families in the Port Melbourne area with a diverse socio-economic make up, Bubup Womindjeka Family & Children's Centre is well placed to provide comment on the Commission's draft recommendations.

There is a growing body of research that shows that participation in early childhood education is critical to developing the mechanics of the brain which in turn results in a healthy, happy fully integrated child. The learning patterns established in the first five years of life set the foundations of lifetime learning which can have far reaching benefits for children later in life.

In 2013 the OECD¹ reported that Australia's spend on pre-school education is the lowest of all OECD countries amounting to only 0.1% of GDP. Enrolments in pre-school education are also one of the lowest of all the OECD countries at only 51%. In many countries pre-school education is provided by the public sector free of charge, but in Australia the industry relies heavily on privately operated institutions such as Bubup Womindjeka.

The current funding structure for early childhood education is fragmented, and Bubup Womindjeka fully supports the proposal to move to a single childcare subsidy. The current approach involves many different departments across government and as a result significant administrative effort is required to ensure all of funding streams are effectively managed. The proposed model will help simplify the process for service providers and families alike, and hopefully help improve access and affordability. In order to drive equity across Australia the funding of childcare needs to be driven at a Federal Government level with less reliance on State governments to fill the gaps. The commitment to support 15 hours of kindergarten education for all 4 year olds was a step forward for early childhood education and any attempt to now withdraw funding for this initiative would be a significant backward step, which would only serve to negatively impact levels of participation in Australia.

Whilst there have been a number of advances in early childhood education in Australia in recent years with the introduction of the NQS and EYLF, there does not appear to be a cohesive approach to funding, regulation and access across all of the different childcare settings. The recommendations in the Commissions draft report suggest that lower standards could be acceptable in certain settings. Whilst flexibility in the regulations would be welcomed by all service providers this should not be achieved at the expense of high quality education and care.

Bubup Womindjeka Family & Children's Centre would like to see the Federal Government take a leadership role in driving industry wide change to support improvements to access, affordability and the quality of early childhood education and care. One of the biggest challenges in delivering a high quality service is the establishment of a skilled, experienced and cost effective workforce. As a result of the demands of the job and the low rates of remuneration, staff turnover in the childcare industry is generally very high. Service providers often need to rely on contract staffing in order to meet ratios at more than double the normal rates of pay. Staffing costs typically represent at least 85% of the costs related to the provision of service.

¹ OECD 2013. How do early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies, systems and quality vary across OECD countries? Education Indicators in Focus, No. 11, February.

Bubup Womindjeka believes that in order to establish a strong, sustainable childcare industry in Australia, the government needs to invest in training and remuneration of the workforce. In our experience there is a shortage of diploma qualified staff to meet demand. Many staff only meet the minimal requirements for a Certificate III qualification which can be achieved in just 6 weeks and does not prepare staff for the demands of the job. Greater investment in childcare training would not only create improved career prospects for those entering the industry but would create a more stable and efficient workforce which would in turn result in improvements in the quality of care.

Bubup Womindjeka believes that all children in Australia have the right to access high quality early years education and care. Over the last five years there has been a significant shift in thinking in regards to the value of education in the early years and as a consequence Government support to the industry needs to change accordingly. With the appropriate investment the childcare industry has the potential to thrive and nurture future generations of happy, healthy and well integrated children.

Bubup Womindjeka Family & Children's Centre looks forward to the final recommendations of the Productivity Commission inquiry and a cohesive, sustainable long term plan from government which will early childhood education and care the focus and investment required to provide for future generations of Australian children and families.