

12 August 2010

Roberta Bausch
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2601

Dear Roberta

INQUIRY INTO DISABILITY CARE AND SUPPORT

The Autism Early Intervention Outcomes Unit (AEIOU) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission's public inquiry into a long-term disability care and support scheme to fit within the Australian Government's National Disability Strategy.

AEIOU is a not for profit organisation that is dedicated to providing a professional, full-time early intervention and learning program of the highest quality for children aged 2 ½ to 5 years who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Our role as a service provider for children with a developmental disability means that we have a strong interest in the future arrangements for the provision of funding and services for children with disability.

AEIOU has engaged Synergies Economic Consulting to prepare an independent submission assessing the potential for the inclusion of a program to facilitate the delivery of Early Learning and Care services to children with autism in the National Disability Strategy. The submission proposes that an Early Learning and Care program, which combines Best Practice early intervention with specialised childcare, should be included in the national scheme and that the program should be fully funded by government to ensure that all eligible children can access these services, regardless of their social and economic circumstances.

There is a large body of evidence indicating that significant benefits can be achieved from the provision of intensive early learning and care services to children with autism. In addition to benefits associated with improved short-term outcomes and enabling children to integrate into mainstream schooling, intensive early learning and care services produce significant long-term benefits for these children, their families and the wider community. A key issue that needs to be addressed is the funding of the cost associated with the program. Synergies' submission assesses current funding sources available to families of children with autism and compares this with the estimated cost of providing Best Practice Early Learning and Care services. The submission identifies a significant gap between the estimated cost and the funding that is currently available, with the key shortcoming identified as being the exclusion of organisations providing Best Practice Early Intervention within a specialised childcare setting, such as AEIOU, from accessing the Inclusion Support Subsidy (ISS) under the Inclusion Support Program (ISP).

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The purpose of the ISP is to assist 'mainstream' childcare service providers in the inclusion of children with additional development needs, with the ISS paid to support the employment of additional staff for children with high ongoing support needs. Early Learning and Care services would not be eligible for funding under this program because they are delivered in a specialised childcare environment, not a 'mainstream' environment. While integration of children into a mainstream schooling environment is the ultimate goal of Early Learning and Care, Best Practice Early Intervention cannot necessarily be successfully provided in such an environment. In particular, providing funding for an additional staff member in a mainstream childcare centre for a child with autism, which is the basis of the ISP, does not only fail to meet Best Practice requirements, but could fail to deliver any long-term improvements based on the specific needs of that child.

The exclusion of Early Learning and Care service providers from the ISP means that funding is not being provided to facilitate the delivery of services to children with autism that are consistent with the Australian Government's Best Practice guidelines. The ISP in its current form is therefore failing to facilitate the delivery of childcare services to children with autism in a manner that maximises their long-term outcomes.

The development of a National Disability Strategy presents an opportunity to address this funding gap by enabling children with autism that are receiving Early Learning and Care services from an accredited service provider to access ISS-equivalent funding, either through a reformed ISP or through an alternative funding program. It is important to note that while this will require additional government funding, the long-term benefits from the universal provision of early learning and care services are significant.

Yours sincerely

Dr James Morton
Founder / Chair
AEIOU Foundation