



**Darwin City Council
Submission to the Australian Government
Productivity Commission on Early Childhood Development
Workforce January 2011**

Darwin City Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the future requirements of the early childhood sector through the Australian Government Productivity Commission examination of Early Childhood Development Workforce issues.

Darwin City Council's Community and Cultural Services Department facilitate a wide variety of programs for children including :

The Fun Bus

A mobile playgroup service for children 0 to 5 years and their parents and carers. The program is jointly funded by Darwin City Council and the Northern Territory Government. The Fun Bus operates weekdays between 9:30am and 11:30am for 45 weeks per year between January and December and participation is free.

Fun in the Parks

Provides a range of free activities for primary school aged children and is held each Monday, Wednesday and Friday of school holidays.

FREEPS

Free Recreation and Entertainment for Everyone in the Parks is a program that gives both young and old the opportunity to enjoy and participate in free recreational activities and entertainment in Darwin's local parks.

Community Libraries

Provide story times, Babes'n'Books, holiday programs, book clubs, awards, author visits, special events, school and child care centre visits and a summer reading club.

Child Care Centres

Council sponsors seven child care centres across the municipality via the provision and maintenance of buildings. Council also assists the centres with grant administration and the project management of major capital works. Community-based management committees oversee the functions of each centre and, given Council's role to support the provision of community services, the buildings are leased on a peppercorn lease agreement basis.

In response to the Early Childhood Development Workforce:

Staff Qualifications

The introduction of new requirements for staff qualifications is a positive development which will provide significant benefits for centres in terms of quality and learning outcomes. However, it is likely to place additional stress upon services which already find it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff, especially casual and relief staff. Services such as Council's Fun in the Parks, which operates three days a week during school holidays relies upon casual staff, and may be especially susceptible to difficulties in recruiting and maintaining qualified staff.

Due to an acute skill shortage in the NT child care workforce, Council's seven sponsored child care centres currently struggle to retain sufficient qualified staff. Currently, many child care centre staff are unqualified or in the process of gaining a qualification. There have been several incidences where a centre has been forced to close all or part of its service for several days due to staff absence and the inability to access qualified relief staff. On these occasions, parents/carers must make alternative arrangements at short notice.

The severe skills shortage in the Northern Territory childcare workforce would benefit from adequate incentives and support to enter the childcare profession.

Staff Development

Council's sponsored child care centres are community-based centres led by a Director who is employed by a volunteer-run Board of Management. Directors are often new to the role and have varying levels of experience in managing a child care centre and providing pedagogical leadership to other staff within the centre. As Directors and senior staff are often occupied with their own work load and inexperienced in management tasks and functions, they may have little time or experience to provide adequate mentoring to less qualified staff.

Staff Retention

Stability in early childhood education and care has been associated with positive child outcomes (COAG 2009). The seven Council sponsored child care centres constantly comment on the high staff turnover. Two of the centres have had a 95 per cent turnover in staff in the past 18 months and three new Directors within 12 months. Both the child care centres and the Fun Bus service experience particular difficulties recruiting and maintaining relief staff.

Infrastructure

Council's child care infrastructure is ageing and has largely outgrown its original requirements. The capital works upgrading of what are distinctly ageing child care centres is based on priority of need and subject to licensing compliance. This system does not enable forward planning for projected localised community needs or account for the requirement to undertake major refurbishment projects as required.

The centres are ageing and less than contemporary in terms of structure or design having been constructed to meet community needs 20 to 30 years ago. Whilst adequately maintained, the centres require major refurbishment to ensure contemporary and quality care and financial viability. In addition, the limited scale and purpose of the Northern Territory Government grant funding systems can mean that, whilst small to medium size works are undertaken each year, broader planning for major centre upgrades is not achieved. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that applications by centres for grant submissions will be successful as all centres compete for the same pool of funds.

Management Committee

Council sponsored child care centres are managed by community-based management committees. The management committees administer the centres whilst drawing substantially on the contribution of volunteer parents. The composition of each committee changes annually which limits the capacity of the centres to develop service delivery, administrative and management, etc, expertise. Whilst community-based management models have historically worked well, the increasing complexity of managing child care centres subject to quality reforms requires enhanced and broader management skills.

The required level of responsibility placed on volunteer community management committees, including Council's child care centres, could be described as onerous and difficult to meet. Volunteer management committee members are often employed, have their own family commitments and frequently volunteer for other community organisations. In this role they are responsible for a range of mid to high level tasks including staff recruitment and management, administrative functions including the development and implementation of policies and procedures, report writing, financial management and ensuring adherence to funding and licensing requirements.

Additional support may be required to ensure adequate training and support as well as compliance to standards, particularly those linked to administration and governance.

Limited Funding

The Fun Bus operational funding from the NT Government has not increased beyond CPI for over a decade. In the Dry season, the attendance rates are beyond the supervisory capabilities of 2 staff and there is a clear need to bolster the service. Council has requested that supplementary funds be made available to provide additional staffing to the service on a permanent basis, to ensure safety requirements are met, maintain a quality service and implement participant engagement activities to cater for the families' needs. The request for additional funding has not been met due to limited funding available from the Northern Territory Government.