

Education and Training Workforce: Early Childhood Development –

Submission

From Occasional Child Care Australia Inc

Occasional Child Care centres across Australia provide a very unique service and are committed to providing quality childcare. All centres are licensed and adhere to the Children Services Regulations. Many services are not for profit, community based or Council managed. Qualifications of staff in Occasional Child Care Centres consist of Early Childhood Teachers, Diploma, Certificate III and untrained. Occasional Care Centres employ staff on a full time, part time and casual basis. Occasional care does not yet come under NQF and we believe the Government should look at staff qualifications to determine minimum qualifications.

Funding for occasional care services is minimal and there does not seem to be a set 'template used' to identify funding given to services. Some services receive a substantial amount of funding whilst others do not and therefore families pick up the costs through fees for costs such as staffing, employing additional staff for programming and administration time. The Government needs to address the issue of funding to ensure that occasional care services remain viable and / or have attached funding for staff wages. Irregular childcare bookings make financial management of centres difficult. Cancellations make this task even more difficult as, unlike in LDC and preschool, parents don't pay fees if they cancel their booking. The Director/Authorised Supervisor of these centres are included in the child:staff ratio so administration tasks are completed out of operating hours or additional staff are employed as relief. (Many Directors/Authorised Supervisors do this in their own time.) Employing additional staff adds to the cost of running the centre.

All occasional care services are funded very differently – some services are able to offer CCB for families and receive federal funding whilst other occasional care services receive state funding and are unable to offer CCB. There needs to be a uniform approach to funding which does not disadvantage occasional care services or families. Funding subsidies are essential to the viability of community-based occasional child care. "Occasional care services have unique cost drivers that place them at a competitive disadvantage with hourly rates for Family Day Care and Long Day Care – many are operating at or below break even levels." (Butlin et al, 2007, 27) The Amity report found "Providing funding to services based on utilisation, without recognition of the inherently higher costs of occasional child care, may cause many services to cease operation, particularly those who are currently delivering occasional child care according to the accepted definition and those in higher need areas with low socio-economic status (Butlin et al, 2007, 6). Cutting funding will certainly have these results as many Neighbourhood House & Learning Centres (NH&LC) child care services already operate at a deficit (Clausen 2008,17). The NH&LC occasional child care viability in a small rural community is already 'marginal' (Butlin, et al, 2007,33) and the "current funding models for rural and remote areas are limited in their ability

to provide adequate access to flexible child care for working parents” which “acts as a barrier to economic participation and has important consequences for the rural economy.” This is especially the case in areas where the occasional child care service is the only child care service in the area (Butlin, et al 2007, 43) The loss of subsidies like TAB funding can only exacerbate this situation.

Occasional care services provide educational programs for children in line with Children’s Services Regulations as do LDC, Preschool, etc. Whilst it is not a requirement of occasional care services, many have begun to implement the Federal Governments National Quality Framework and Early Years Learning Framework. Many occasional care services document individual children’s learning through portfolios and daily programs through visual diaries. Services provide programs that foster children’s learning through participation in music, language, construction, physical activity, creativity, science/math experience which encourage children to explore, imagine and be curious about the world around them. Occasional care services provide transition to school programs and provide education foundations for successful life long learning. Rural economies depend on occasional child care. “Working parents in small rural and regional areas have very limited access to any child care which has a direct economic impact on these communities” (Butlin, et al, 2007, 6)

Occasional child care meets a broad range of community needs. Centres address the gap in the availability of child care and are unique in their flexibility in providing short term, ad hoc and unpredictable care (Butlin, et al.2007,35) Subsidised occasional child care offers essential affordability and flexibility. There is a “genuine and continuing need among families for non-standard, flexible and affordable care for their children” (Butlin, et al, 2007. 46) NH&LCs provide occasional child care to a “higher proportion of people vulnerable to financial stress than in the general community who are drawn to this service because it is affordable and flexible” (Clausen 2008, 16). “If child care systems are not responsive...these (working) parents, who are usually not the high income earners, are disadvantaged in managing child care and work” (Butlin, et al, 2007 6). Others who rely on occasional child care are single parents, custodial grandparent carers, families in crises and emergency situations, and the parents of children with a disability seeking respite care. For small rural and remote communities, occasional child care is often the only child care provided in the area. (Butlin, et al, 2007, 16).

Occasional child care services “deliver a range of other community and family support services including parent assistance, courses, community signposting, linking parents of other services, work experience in child care, pathways to other support services and local sector representation ...in the context of its regular services” (Butlin, et al 2007.35) Occasional child care enables economic and social participation. Services promote family and women’s health and wellbeing and volunteering. Occasional child care in NH&LCs is an avenue for volunteering in itself, as well as enabling volunteering elsewhere, which may be the first step for parents in participating in the life of the community (Butlin, et al. 2007. 46). Occasional child care in NH&LCs provides opportunities for community participation, volunteering and student placements as well as paid employment (Clausen 2008. 4) Occasional child care enables participation in other government programs. Most NH&LCs provide either educational or other developmental

activities in addition to occasional care (Clausen 2008, 13), the majority of which are government funded to meet specific policy objectives. Occasional child care is critical to the participation of many families in these programs. NH&LCs currently deliver over \$140,000,000 of State Government programs. Occasional care services also facilitate training and skill development as well as pathways to broader community participation.

Victoria has the highest number of children using occasional child care (Butlin, et al. 2007. 25) predominantly for work related purposes. Many shift workers and other in irregular or non-traditional employment rely on occasional child care for affordable, locally-based care. Children can attend on an irregular or session basis and some for as little as an hour. Long day care is not an alternative. “Only a small proportion of care provided in Australian Government funded occasional child care could be met by LDC (Butlin, et al, 2007, 9). Occasional child care fills gaps that are not able to be filled by the current provision of LDC (Butlin, et al, 2007, 6). In addition “parents had very valid reasons for choosing occasional child care and were articulate about their reasons for not using other forms of care: flexibility, relative affordability and 3 year old activity groups were the key deciding factors in their choice of occasional child care (Butlin, et al, 2007, 46).

The figures in chapter 7 show that there has been a decline in employment in occasional care as many centres have closed due to financial viability. Generally occasional child care centres are small so opportunity for career advancement is limited.

Occasional Child Care Australia Inc is a voluntary association made up of committee members who have full time roles within the services they currently work. There is little support for occasional care centres as they make up a small percentage of the childcare industry. Implementing new government requirements is challenging simply because of the very nature of occasional care. To assist the occasional care association it would be beneficial that Governments (both Federal and State) contribute funding to OCCA to create a paid position for a full time manager and part time secretary to advocate, raise issues, disseminate information to occasional care centres and attend meetings on behalf of occasional care services across Australia.

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