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Childcare Inquiry  
Productivity Commission  
GPO Box 1428  
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I am writing to you on behalf of Occasional Child Care Australia (OCCA) in response to the Productivity Inquiry into *Childcare and Early Childhood Learning*.

As the peak body for occasional care services, OCCA promotes and supports its members by acting as a resource, disseminating information and advocating on matters pertaining to occasional care services across Australia. OCCA currently has over 40 members across Australia.

The unique nature of occasional care services provides flexible and *responsive education and care arrangements which meet the needs of the general community and allows families to meet their work and non-work related commitments. Families have an option of enrolling their children into an occasional care service for as little as 1 hour to attend an appointment or more hours to go to work. No other children's service allows this flexibility for families.*

### **Government involvement in child care and early learning**

We believe that all levels of Government have a role to play in early childhood education and care. The National Quality Framework (NQF) has provided a consistent system for all early childhood education and care (ECEC) services which are in scope and all levels of government.

We believe that out of scope services including occasional care (OC) services should be brought into the NQF as soon as possible. Most OC services implement the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and use the National Quality Standards (NQS) to guide the curriculum and practices for children, families and the wider community. Resourcing, financial support and realistic timelines would be required from all levels of government to ensure that

there was a smooth transition to the NQF. This would be similar to the support offered to in scope services in the beginning of their journey.

The inclusion of out of scope services in the NQF would reduce the 'red tape' of the various levels of government. Having one system would also support and reduce the administration costs to organisations who have various service types under their auspice.

### **Demand for and expectations of child care and early learning service / Impacts on workforce participation**

Occasional care services provide flexibility for families which is often not available in other services types. This uniqueness enables families to meet work and non-work related commitments.

Our members provide a service for families who are shift workers, employed on a casual/ contract basis or are studying. OC services provide emergency care for families who work with child protection agencies and family services. OC services support children with additional needs and their families, and are preferred as they are a small service type with less than 29 children enrolled. Most OC services offer places for children birth to 2 years. Finding an ECEC for this age group is often difficult for families and many other service types choose not to or are unable to enroll babies and toddlers.

Whilst there has been a recent allocation of occasional care places, there has been a decrease in occasional care services throughout the nation. This is due to the cap placed on occasional care places and limited allocations of places. It is very important that the occasional care service type is not lost to the community but rather supported and places increased.

A targeted approach to provide and fund services should be implemented. This will allow for services/service types to be considered and established in areas of need rather than the current ad hock building of services. For instance it may be deemed that a community requires a LDC and an OC service to meet the needs of families whilst another community requires a service which provides an OC services which operates within other services types to meet the changing needs and flexibility of families. This would be similar to the Neighborhood models set up 20 years ago.

Many OC services were established in conjunction with family support services. This was to deliver a holistic approach to supporting children and families. Consideration for future funding and approval of services should reflect the "human ecological theory" of Bronfenbrenner (1917 – 2005), as the community surrounding a child impacts on their learning and development.

### **Children's developmental needs**

Access to quality educational programs for children is imperative. Research has demonstrated that children who are enrolled in a quality ECEC service achieve better learning outcomes to those who have not.

Continued implementation of the NQF will ensure that children are accessing quality services. Accessibility for vulnerable families needs to be targeted and barriers (eg affordability and location/transport) removed for children to attend ECEC services.

Qualified educators are employed in OC services, providing and documenting educational programs for children based on best practice and research. A preschool program is included in the curriculum ensuring a smooth transition to school.

OC services focus on learning through play creating physical and social learning environments that have a positive impact on children's learning. Partnerships with families are developed ensuring children are supported in their learning and families are supported in their parenting.

### **Availability of child care and early learning service**

OC services are community owned not for profit services and struggle to balance the requirement of meeting the everyday costs of providing a service whilst ensuring affordability for families. OCCA believes in establishing a nationally consistent system for funding services will support services in meeting their cost and therefore provide affordable services for families.

Currently OC services receive funding from state or federal governments and this varies depending on the historical allocation made to the service since the last review. A consistent system would provide equity to all OC services. It is important that the current allocations of funding to OC services are not decreased in any way.

Currently budget based OC services are not entitled to access Child Care Benefit (CCB) or Child Care Rebate (CCR). Access for all services to CCB and CCR will benefit families and reduce their outgoing expenditure. This will also support the viability of services that currently are unable to access this for their families.

OC services provide the flexibility and accessibility that other service types don't.

- Families who use OC services only pay for the education and care that they require. This is often an affordable option to families as they are not paying fees for the operation hours of the service.
- OC services enable families who are not a priority in terms of access attend a quality education and care service rather than waiting on long waiting lists.
- Families are able to attend appointments and other commitments as casual bookings are always available. One of our members shared an example - a new mother enrolled her 3 month old in an OC service casually for 2 hours per week to go swimming at the local community pool. As the mother had no close family to care for her baby the service provided an important service for her physical health and wellbeing.
- Grandparent who care for their grandchildren use OC services for respite.
- OC services are inclusive to all children. Families with children who have additional needs utilise OC services as they provide unique and flexible options.
- OC services provide support to families who may not have extended family close by, encouraging positive parenting and providing resourcing.

- Family services and other agencies who work with vulnerable families, when paying for care prefer to use OC services for placements as it allows for their funding to stretch further and support more families.
- Emergency care is a priority.

Additional funding is required for ECEC services to effectively support children with additional needs and their families. Current government funding does not cover the full cost of an additional educator to be employed to increase the educator:child ratios which is requirement when a child with additional needs is enrolled at the service. Additional educator/s are required to ensure the child with additional needs and other children's need are supported and development is enhanced.

We would also encourage increased funding for early intervention agencies allowing for the agencies to be able to work with educators at the service to support children with additional needs. This would benefit the child as a collaborative program will be developed and implemented in a familiar service and families will not need to attend many individual appointments.

### **Government regulation of child care and early learning**

We strongly believe that OC services and other out of scope services must be included on the NQF. This will provide a consistent system across the country and across service types. Families will benefit in having a consistent system no matter what service type they use.

Financial support, realistic timelines and training must be provided by the government to ensure a smooth transition for out of scope services into the NQF.

Funded training must be offered to educators to up skill. This will ensure that out of scope services will be able to comply with the qualification requirements of the NQF. Some OC services employ or have access to an Early Childhood Teacher or are working towards this requirement in preparation to becoming an in scope service. Additional funding from the government is required to ensure that the cost of staffing increases is not funded by families.

Educators in out of scope services have committed to the NQF voluntarily. This is because it is based on research and best practice models and children who attend out of scope services deserve equal access to education and care as those children who are enrolled at in scope service. Also educators have chosen to implement the NQF so that they are not professionally disadvantaged by not being up to date with current requirements.

### **Government support for childcare and early learning**

We believe that the Government must combine all funding for early education (e.g. National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education and State and Territory Government preschool and education funding) and childcare into the one funding pot.

It is the Government's role to ensure that Aboriginal children and their family's access ECEC services. The NQF has a strong emphasis on 'closing the gap' for education and learning outcomes for Aboriginal children. There is still more work to be done. Investment from the Government to put strategies in place to overcome the identified barriers such as access,

affordability, lack of qualified Aboriginal educators working in ECEC services and understanding of the Aboriginal culture by educators will support the inclusion of Aboriginal children and their families into ECEC services.

Yours Sincerely

Kathryn Barker  
On behalf of the  
Occasional Child Care Australia