

BOARDING SCHOOLS/SCHOOL TERM HOSTELS REPORT

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The greatest disadvantage faced by boarding families is the lack of access to an appropriate education where they live when compared to urban families who can access a wide variety of educational alternatives, sometimes at little or no cost. ICPA Federal Conference 2017 motions continued to request that this disparity be addressed despite growing governmental awareness in regional, rural and education.

Federal Council thanked the Federal Government for supporting families who need to board their children away from home with the 50% increase to the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Additional Boarding Allowance, which began in 2017. However, we continue to remind the government of the ever increasing cost of boarding school education and that more needs to be done to assist all students who must live away from home to access schooling.

Other motions requested the Department of Human Services (DHS) implement an online AIC application option and streamline the processing of the AIC application and renewal. Once again Federal Council was alerted about difficulties families were experiencing in AIC Boarding and Second Home Allowances applications. Our members' situations were referred directly to the Department of Human Services, who were able to assist with many specific cases. The Department has informed Federal Council that while the online option for AIC is in the pipeline, it is still a few years from fruition.

In response to the difficulties reported by members with the AIC application process, Federal Council completed a survey of members to better understand the issues of the AIC application/renewal process and the phone and service centre assistance. The survey was publicised through the Branch Bulletin, Facebook as well as State and Federal websites and was well subscribed with 331 responses. The survey results and a cross-section of the 750 comments were presented to the Minister for Human Services' office and the Department of Human Services at the delegation trip to Canberra. They were extremely impressed at the survey response and grateful for the feedback which should identify opportunities to improve their processes going forth. ICPA (Aust) has offered some suggestions to the Department of Human Services to hopefully see improvement in the promptness and efficiency of the AIC payment as well as communication with families. We urge members to contact Federal Council if they have problems with their AIC applications or renewals so that these situations can be referred to the Department of Human Services for investigation. Federal Council will continue the positive collaboration with the Department and have thanked the DHS for their prompt and timely assistance whenever a query from ICPA is made.

In response to motions regarding the Fringe Benefit Tax (FBT), Federal Council has had discussions with other stakeholder groups, such as the National Farmers' Federation and Australian Boarding Schools Association. Federal Council asked for their support in advocating to have FBT removed from employers who assist employee families with the huge out-of-pocket boarding school costs. The FBT issue was further raised in the Pre-Budget Submission 2018-19 lodged late last year and during delegation to Government.

The Boarding Schools/School Hostels portfolio has continued to investigate strategies to raise a better awareness of the necessity of boarding school for a quality secondary education for rural and remote students, who do not have daily access to an appropriate government school because of geographic isolation. The portfolio is in the early stages of a project aiming to highlight the multitude of reasons why rural and remote students need to board.

Despite continued lobbying for an increase to the AIC Boarding and Second Home allowance through submissions, letters to Government and delegation, at times we have not been able to gain much traction due to misconceptions around why our rural and remote families pick the boarding schools that they do. Geographically isolated families choose the boarding schools their children attend for a variety of reasons, some of which can include: closeness to home, cost, transport links, availability of enrolments, family support and lack of availability of a school term hostel place. Families living in rural and remote areas need to be able to make these choices around where their children attend in order to ensure they can access schooling that meets their needs when they do not have an appropriate school nearby.

Federal Council has been pleased to see the government showing a significant focus on rural and remote education. An election promise from the 2016 federal election which was made by the former Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon Barnaby Joyce, pledged funding for geographically isolated families to help them access education. It also saw the announcement of the Review into Regional Rural and Remote Education lead by Professor John Halsey. In our submission to the Review, ICPA (Aust) stressed the widening gap between the allowances available to families and the actual cost of boarding for their students and how unsustainable this is for rural families. We also provided a link to our ICPA *Boarding School Access Research for Geographically Isolated Students* paper, which can be found on the ICPA website <https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/94/final-boarding-school-survey-icpa-aust-with-comments-2016> which highlights many of the challenges our boarding students face when trying to access an education. While there are no specific recommendations from the Review with regards to boarding or AIC allowances, Federal Council is hopeful that with the Government accepting all of the recommendations put forward by Professor Halsey that more equitable opportunities are on the horizon for geographically isolated children who must live away from home in order to access schooling.

The cost of obtaining and education is felt even more intensely by families when they are dealing with difficulties such as drought. With large parts of Australia currently undergoing one of the worst droughts remembered, ICPA (Aust) continues to call for the immediate creation of a Rural Hardship Education Fund to assist rural families with the cost of their children's education in times of long-term drought, periods of recovery and other rural hardship. Such a fund may be provisioned for under the current Federal Drought Package or a special circumstances criterion within the AIC Scheme. Drought declarations are not made in every state, despite properties experiencing extremely dry conditions. This assistance, however it is distributed, must be available to all of those being affected by extreme rain deficiency events over a period of time.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Wendy Hick and my fellow Boarding School Portfolio Councillors Kate Thompson, and Judy Sinclair-Newton for their instrumental and considerable support, guidance and patience as we work towards better opportunities for boarding school families and improving the AIC process. I cannot thank these ladies enough for being there whenever they were needed.