

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (ECEC) REPORT

Jane Morton

ICPA (Aust) is working hard to ensure rural and remote families can and will access high quality, affordable early childhood learning and child care; whether that be through Preschool or Kindergarten, Long Day Care in rural and remote areas, Mobile Early Childhood Services including Mobile Playgroups or In Home Care.

AIC Distance Education Allowance for Pre-Compulsory School Students and Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

ICPA (Aust) is continuing to advocate the Federal Government for the extension of the AIC Distance Education allowance to pre-compulsory distance education students and increased access to Preschool/Kindergarten in rural and remote areas, particularly as the Federal Government has provided \$449.5 million to states and territories in 2020 and committed \$452.3 million for 2021 under the National Partnership Agreement to provide Universal Access to Early Childhood Education. This funding should ensure that all children have access to 600 hours of early childhood education prior to formal schooling.

Federal Council met with relevant Ministers, Senators and Members of Parliament with an interest in rural and remote education on delegations in Canberra last November where the need for an Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Review which would include the extension of AIC to those pre-compulsory distance education students studying a recognised program, was discussed along with all the other early childhood education and care concerns.

Long Day Care in Rural and Remote Areas

Concerns regarding the plight of Long Day Care (LDC) services during the prolonged drought were brought to the fore at the last Federal Conference. The Department of Education, Skills and Employment informed child care services including In Home Care in rural and regional areas that they can still apply for a one-off Special Circumstances grant under the Community Child Care Fund to address any current viability or natural disaster issues such as drought and then bushfires, however this closed on 3 April 2020. Federal Council expressed our members' concerns in the recent Universal Access National Partnership Review and the National Quality Framework consultation. It was good to see that the transitional provisions for Early Childhood Teachers have been extended for 2 or 4 years depending on the state or territory.

In Home Care (IHC)

Federal Council continues to advocate for flexibility within the new Home Care model since its inception in July 2018. Many letters have been written to the Minister for Education, rural politicians and the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and we have followed up with this on delegations and whenever the opportunity arose. Federal Council was pleased to hear the announcement just before Christmas that the Transitional Provisions for IHC have been extended for two years until December 2021. However, some service providers have been slow to accept this and there has been confusion over the definition of 'remote and very remote areas' where families reside. According to the [IHC Handbook](#) on page 25, "IHC Support Agencies will use the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) (2016) as a measure to guide the consideration of remoteness and isolation from approved child care services. Families that live in a location designated as Very Remote, Remote, or Moderately Accessible (Outer Regional) in the ARIA+ (2016) measure may be able to demonstrate that they are isolated from approved child care services primarily based on the distance from their home to the nearest available, appropriate approved child care service."

ICPA (Aust) has also been seeking government assistance regarding the plight of two or more families on a single large remote property who require child care, as one IHC educator is unable to care for more than one family's children at one time and having more than one educator accommodated on a property proves very expensive and is not feasible. Family Day Care has been suggested by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment but this would still be difficult to set up in the circumstances.

Since seeking clarity in the issue of IHC educators supervising distance education, the Education Minister has reinforced the legislation from the Family Assistance Law citing that only caring for children completing their homework and regular child care, but not supervising formal schooling, is permissible in order for the family to receive the Child Care Subsidy (CCS). The Department of Education, Skills and Employment has recommended that a private arrangement between a family and the IHC educator be made to ensure continued care during those 'formal schooling hours' but families will not be able to claim the CCS during that time.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic hit! The [ECEC Relief Package](#) announced on 9 April 2020 with its provision of about 50% funding for services, really affected IHC and Family Day Care services in rural and remote areas where there was not a reduction in educators and children requiring child care, so providers had to look elsewhere for extra funding in order to pay their current educators properly. [JobKeeper](#) or the [Exceptional Circumstances](#) supplementary payment became available for eligible providers and educators but there was much confusion and applications took a long time to be processed with some being rejected with others requiring reapplication and providers would not employ extra or replace much needed educators for rural and remote families during that time. Families were not allowed to supplement the educators either, so despite back payments being promised, some educators saw a reduction in their income to only 20% of their regular wages during this time.

By late May the ECEC Relief Package 4 Week Review Report recognised that Family Day Care and IHC services required extra funding, so \$12 million was provided for child care services that had more than 30 per cent of full-time equivalent staff ineligible for JobKeeper payments and \$800,000 provided to IHC services to increase their level of funding. However, some families were still unable to access a replacement or new educator due to lack of funding from the providers in early June as payments were either rejected or had to be applied for several times.

The ECEC Relief Package concluded on 12 July with JobKeeper payments for services and sole traders finishing on 20 July 2020. The Child Care and Additional Child Care Subsidies returned on 13 July, however a Transition Payment was also provided to child care services from 13 July and runs until 27 September 2020 on top of the Child Care Subsidy, amounting to 25% of the fees received in the reference fortnight in February. For the period of the transition, there are several conditions, as per media release:

- "Child care fees will be capped at the level of the reference period (17 February to 1 March).
- Services will need to guarantee employment levels to protect staff who will move off the JobKeeper Payment.

The Government will also ease the activity test until 4 October to support eligible families whose employment has been impacted as a result of COVID-19. These families will receive up to 100 hours per fortnight of subsidised care during this period.

This will assist families to return to the level of work, study or training they were undertaking before COVID-19." See <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/return-child-care-subsidy>.

ICPA (Aust) recently discussed the unique needs of IHC in rural and remote areas along with other educational issues with the new Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education, the Hon Andrew Gee MP; hopefully he will address these concerns and the need for IHC families in rural and remote areas being regarded as a separate entity from other child care services.

Mobile Early Childhood Services

Federal Council has recently received assurance from the Federal Government that funding for ex-Budget Based Funded Early Childhood Services such as Mobile Playgroups is ongoing. Future funding arrangements are being considered and the department is committed to ensuring service providers are forewarned. Future grant opportunities will be announced as they come available at www.communitygrants.gov.au and www.grants.gov.au. Federal Council will continue to advocate for the funding to expand the Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS) and other Mobile Early Childhood Services into geographically isolated areas and communities where there is no Early Childhood service at all and for the continuation of opportunities for future funding for their current services.

Working with Children Check (WWCC)

ICPA (Aust) continues to work with the Federal Government in the implementation of a national WWCC certification. A national working party is working on this, but it will take some time to complete due to the different rules and regulations of states and territories. Unfortunately, we have received no further news regarding a national certification at this stage, even though an announcement is due, but we will forward any information as it comes available.

Working Holiday Maker Visas

Despite not receiving any motions last year (but there have been in previous years) changes have been made in regard to [Working Holiday Maker Visas](#), which were announced on 17 February 2020 following the bushfire crisis. This ensured that paid or 'bushfire recovery volunteer work' would qualify as 'specified work' for overseas workers and the visa would be increased to 12 months.

Unfortunately, these changes still do not apply to nannies and distance education tutors, though the Minister has indicated that the government will see how recent developments pan out before considering any more changes.

ICPA (Aust) will continue to work with the Federal Government and other bodies available to us to further ECEC concerns and we will share any more developments with you. I would also like to thank my portfolio members for their support during the year.