

# **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION and CARE REPORT**

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I am pleased to present my first report as the Early Childhood and Care portfolio leader. Federal Council was inundated by motions at the 2016 Conference in Perth. Access and affordability for families living and rural Australia wanting their children to take part in early learning and the care of their children continues to be a concern for many of our members.

## **EARLY LEARNING**

### **Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) – Distance Education allowance for 4 year olds taking part in early learning programs the year prior to starting school.**

We have had some decisive action in relation to the AIC Boarding Allowance by the Federal Government and Federal Council is currently working closely with the Government as to the allocation of the remainder of the funding promised in a pre-election commitment made to us last year. Some of the funding has been allocated for this year and the remainder of this funding will be allocated after the Federal Government has conducted a review into rural and regional education issues in the middle of this year. The AIC for pre-compulsory students has no funding commitment at this stage unfortunately, but Federal Council will have representatives involved in this review and we are hoping this will be an opportunity to further push for funding for this cohort. Federal Council has also had the opportunity to meet with Professor John Halsey who is the Chair of the Regional, Rural and Remote Education Review which was another opportunity for us to put forward the importance of this lobby.

### **Universal Access to Early Childhood Education**

There has been some concern amongst members in relation to the continuation of the current National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education. The Federal Government has stated that it currently “makes \$840 million available to states and territories to support all children’s participation in a quality preschool program for 600 hours per year throughout 2016 and 2017.” “Significant progress has been made since the first National Partnership in 2008, with more Australian children enrolled in quality preschool programs each year. The Government is currently considering funding arrangements for preschool from 2018.” Currently the Federal Government “tops up” the existing funding arrangements the states and territories already have in place and into the future and as such this will be a matter for all Governments to decide the way forward for this agreement.

## **CHILD CARE**

### **Nanny Pilot Programme**

ICPA (Aust) has been lobbying the relevant ministers and authorities to ensure the Review of the Nanny Pilot Programme (NPP) considers the following criteria to ensure the NPP and the incoming replacement program can meet the needs of families living in rural and remote Australia:

- That the Nanny Pilot Programme is affordable.
- Flexibility that allows the Nanny to assist in the distance education classroom.
- Providers do not insist that Nannies employed under the scheme have Cert III qualifications and pass on the costs of ensuring this certification.”

This program has not delivered for rural and remote families the way it was promised; in fact of the 3 000 families that applied at the start of the program, only 200 signed up in total - a fraction of what was expected at the inception of the NPP. Federal Council is pleased that government has responded to our

concerns regarding affordability and have increased the rebate, however, at present none of our member families are taking part in the trial, citing it as still too unaffordable. We have been advised that the current guidelines and structure of the Program will not change till the completion of the pilot in mid-2018.

### **In Home Care Scheme**

Due to the Nanny Pilot Programme being unable to meet the needs of rural and remote families for child care, there were many motions at our 2016 Federal Conference in relation to the In Home Care Scheme. Members have requested that:

- The In Home Care Scheme is retained and maintained to run alongside the Nanny Pilot Programme into the future.
- In Home Care places for rural and remote families be increased and existing places reallocated where places are not required, in order to meet shortages elsewhere.
- That the In Home Care criteria are extended so carers can supervise Distance Education in the classroom.

The Federal Government has assured us that the In Home Care Scheme will remain in place and at this stage has been extended until June 2018, however, Federal Council would like to hear from any members who have problems finding services to assess them. We have also been told by the Department that In Home Care places are undersubscribed, so once again, if any members are being told by services that their places are full, please do not hesitate to contact us.

### **Rural and Remote Early Childhood Services**

Federal Council acknowledges this is a very important issue for our members and related services and we are pleased to report that we have had many letters and communications with the Federal Government to reassure us that these services will be catered for and they will also be assisted in the transition process. Minister Birmingham has sent a letter to all BBF funding recipients and services, stating that “the Prime Minister, the Hon Malcom Turnbull MP, has given a firm commitment that we will identify alternative funding sources for these services and support them to transition to these new arrangements.” The mentorship process has been slow and there have been delays in services receiving follow up information, but we are confident that no rural and remote services should be forced to close by the transition to this new funding model. Most politicians from rural electorates were aware of this issue because of the lobbying of local ICPA branches and other organisations. Cathy McGowan MP, who has been a great advocate for rural and regional child care currently has some amendments tabled with this new bill that will benefit our young members.

ICPA has been assured on many levels that the government will find a way of continuing support after June 2018 for mobile playgroups in rural and remote areas but that support may not be through the Jobs for Families Childcare Package. In the meantime, the government has contracted PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) to interview all affected groups and produce a review. ICPA Federal Council would urge members, if they have any information about any service that is not being supported to this level, to contact Federal Council as this information will assist with our lobby.

### **Working with Children Certification**

The current state-specific ‘Working with Children’ Check (WWCC) requirements hamper timely employment or act as a deterrent, further increasing the difficulty already experienced in sourcing such employees in remote areas. It is also difficult for information sharing mechanisms across state and territory borders.

In his response to Federal Council's enquiries regarding Working with Children Checks, the Federal Attorney General referred to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses for Children Sexual Abuse: (<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/7ecd3db9-0b17-483e-9a0e-8fb247140f3e/Working-with-Children-Checks-Report>).

The Attorney-General acknowledged the difficulties families faced in getting staff to work in rural and remote areas. The reply said the Commonwealth supports an approach that ensures greater consistency of WWCC between states and territories. The Federal Government, however, currently face a range of significant legal, technical and resourcing issues to make this happen including, “the development of national information sharing infrastructure is a complex task that requires extensive work to secure agreement and establish the infrastructure.” The royal commission report recommendations stated, that “all state and territory governments should amend their WWCC laws to enable WWCCs from other jurisdictions to be recognised and accepted” which is a positive step towards achieving national recognition. ICPA Federal Council will continue to lobby for this certification at a national level. Members are encouraged to send any further developments or information, as this will keep the dialogue happening with State and Federal Governments in relation to this motion.

### **National Quality Framework (NQF)**

The Australian State and Territory Education Ministers have agreed to make changes to the National Quality Framework (NQF) following consultation with the sector as part of the broader review of the NQF. The changes will commence 1 October 2017 in all states and territories (except Western Australia which will commence by 1 October 2018). A revised National Quality Standard (NQS) will be introduced on 1 February 2018 in all states and territories (including Western Australia). Changes can be found at: <http://acecqa.gov.au/decisionris>.

### **Working Holiday Visas**

Foreign travellers gain a second-year holiday working visa by participating in rural work, but working as a governess or as a child carer in rural surroundings is not deemed to be rural work under current Working Visa Criteria. While these workers are highly valued by the rural families they assist, under the conditions of their visas, they can only stay a maximum of 6 months with one employer and they cannot qualify for a second year visa because working with children is not accepted as an agricultural occupation even though it is in a rural location. It would be very beneficial for the education of rural and remote children, if child care was recognised as rural work, so travellers could subsequently qualify for the second year of the holiday working visa. Child carers certainly receive the same ‘cultural exchange’ that is part of the objectives of the holiday working visa the same as others employed on the properties in other roles that do meet the Specified Work Criteria.

The report from the Working Holiday Visa Review which ICPA (Aust) made a submission in September, was mostly centred on fair pay and treatment for the Visa Holder. A need was identified though to extend the categories for Specified Work as well as the time frames, giving hope of a consideration for rural and remote families needing child care and governesses and this could address the severe workforce shortages in this field. We will continue to lobby for this issue, particularly in the upcoming Education Review where Federal Council will make representations across all facets of early childhood education of our rural, regional and remote children.

This report is just a snapshot of the progress made throughout the year and I would like to thank members who assisted with case studies over this time. Federal Council will continue to advocate for change on the many issues members bring to us.