

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION and CARE REPORT

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Early Childhood Education (4 year olds)

The recent Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) results show that nearly four out of five, four year olds are school ready. However, the AEDC results show that developmental vulnerability persists in several domains and children living in very remote communities remain more developmentally vulnerable.

ICPA believes every rural and remote community should be supported in providing an early childhood learning service for children in the year before commencing school. We advocate for all rural and remote children and believe there are three groups who could be helped to decrease their developmental vulnerability.

ICPA recommends the following:

- That targeted funding is made available for communities who struggle to maintain services due to low enrolments.
- That the Assistance for Isolated Children Distance Education allowance (AIC DE) be extended to include the 4 year old cohort of students for whom distance education is the only education available.
- That funding be maintained for playgroups (mainly mobile) for children living in rural and remote locations who have limited or no access to early learning programs prior to school.

At our November and February delegations and also in correspondence, we have again been stressing the importance of extending the AIC DE allowance to 4 year olds taking part in early learning programs. We have also asked that consideration be given to providing targeted funding to allow the rural schools to operate early learning programs when students are present in the community and to apply a 95% target for access of rural and remote children to pre-school programs so as to ensure that state governments focus on creating similar access regardless of geographic area. Similarly, we asked that geographical isolation be included as a category of disadvantage under the National Partnership Agreement for early childhood education, thus providing the impetus to focus on this group. As yet we have had no reply to these requests.

Early Childhood Care

In May 2015, we had two announcements from the then Minister for Social Services, the Hon Scott Morrison regarding child care funding. The *Jobs for Families* child care package detailed replacing the child care benefit and rebate with the new child care subsidy, all with the aim of making the system simpler, more affordable, more flexible and more accessible for families. From July 1, 2017, the *Child Care Subsidy* was to replace the Child Care Benefit, the Child Care Rebate and the Jobs, Education and Training Child Care Fee Assistance (JETCCFA). Eligibility was to be determined by a three-step activity test which aligns hours of subsidised care with the amount of work, study, training or other recognised activity undertaken.

Secondly, *The Child Care Safety Net* was announced, to provide assistance in addition to the Child Care Subsidy. The Safety Net has three key components:

1. Inclusion Support Programme (ISP), commencing July 1, 2016, \$409 million over three years, will assist services to develop their capacity and capability to provide inclusive services to improve access for children with additional needs.

2. Additional Child Care Subsidy, commencing July 1, 2017, \$156 million over two years. Targets children at risk of abuse or neglect, families in temporary financial hardship and those transitioning into work or study.
3. Community Child Care Fund (CCCF) commencing July 1, 2017, \$304 million over two years. This Fund is a competitive grants program for services to reduce barriers to access child care. The support will focus on disadvantaged communities, including remote Indigenous communities and rural areas, low income families in high child care cost areas, services operating in low viability markets and a co-contribution towards new buildings, expansions and/or extensions to services in areas of demonstrated high demand and low child care availability.

On 3 May 2016 the Australian Government announced as part of the 2016-17 Budget that full implementation of the *Jobs for Families* Child Care Package will be delayed. The announcement included;

- The new Inclusion Support Programme will commence from July 2016, as originally planned
- \$20 million will be provided over two years from July 2016 for the integration of child care, maternal and child health and family support services in a number of Indigenous communities experiencing disadvantage; and
- The new Child Care Subsidy, Additional Child Care Subsidy and Community Child Care Fund will now commence from July 2018. **These were due to start July 2017.**
- The Nanny Pilot Programme that commenced in January 2016 will be extended until June 2018.

What the delayed implementation means to us

Mobile playgroups

In the October 2015 “*BBF transition newsletter*” it was stated, ‘*the new child care system will start from 1 July 2017 and all BBF services will become part of the new system. Current BBF services will need to operate as approved services in the new child care system. This means that the BBF Programme will close on 30 June 2017 and ongoing grant funding for BBF services will stop.*’

This announcement means mobile playgroups, while previously funded under the Budget Based Funding Programme (BBF), are suddenly unable to apply for funding after July 2017 as they do not offer care in the usual respect and are not licenced. Families attend and participate in the playgroups, children are not dropped off to be ‘cared for’. The transition arrangements for the alternative funding (CCCF) do not cover mobile playgroups.

With the delay, the BBF Programme has been extended to **30 June 2018**. Groups will still need to prove their compliance for the CCCF and ICPA will continue to support their work and to push for continued funding. Taking away these services does not equal more flexible and more accessible child care for families.

Nanny Pilot Programme (NPP)

Federal Council were pleased to see that families who do not fit within the mainstream service provisions, such as shift workers and those living in isolated areas were being considered with the introduction of the NPP. Throughout the pilot programme, an independent evaluation will be undertaken. This will help determine what worked and what did not, how to improve the programme and determine regulatory requirements, so that longer term policy decisions are based on real evidence.

A recent meeting with the Department of Education and Training revealed that while a number of remote families did sign up for the NPP, many have since resigned, citing it as unaffordable. Very few of our

members have remained in the programme. It is very disappointing that at such an early stage the new NPP is not sustainable for families in remote areas. Unfortunately, many of the service providers are insisting that nannies have a Cert III in early childhood, which is adding to the cost of the service. The Department will be reminding service providers, that this is not in line with policy objectives. Federal Council encourages any participants and anyone who intended to take part in the NPP to contact us, so we can collect information to send to the Department and politicians during the trialling of this programme and hopefully lead to some early modifications.

With the delayed implementation of the *Jobs for Families* Child Care Package, the Nanny Pilot Programme that commenced in January 2016 will be extended until June 2018.

In Home Care (IHC)

Prior to the Budget announcement, Minister Birmingham acknowledged the importance of IHC but stated that no decision has been made to change the way the IHC programme is currently administered - there will be no increase to the number of places nor another allocation round prior to the introduction of the 'new system' in 2017, however IHC will continue to run parallel to the NPP. With the delayed implementation of the *Jobs for Families* Child Care Package, the In Home Care programme will be extended until June 2018. This does however mean that no changes such as increasing the number of places will be considered for a further six months.

With regards to using IHC educators for DE supervision, Minister Birmingham has noted that DE students are regarded as school children for the purposes of the family assistance law so families are only eligible for Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate when a child is in care for periods outside those of the home-school program. Funding for primary and secondary education is a state and territory government responsibility which is why CCB cannot be paid for children in this situation.

In response to our queries regarding service providers claiming that families are ineligible due to remoteness, Minister Birmingham has stated that while the Government cannot compel approved providers to provide care in any particular circumstance, his department would be happy to investigate any situations where it appears services are not delivering care in accordance with the intent of the IHC programme.

Teaching and Caring for our remote children

Visa changes called for

The Minister for Immigration, the Hon Peter Dutton indicated that there are no plans to add au pairs as specified work under the second Working Holiday visa requirements noting that changes to eligible specified work are considered in the context of the potential labour market impacts. He did add that since July 21, 2015 au pairs can work with one family for the length of their 12 month visa but must apply for an employment extension and demonstrate that their primary responsibility has been the care of the family's children.

ICPA lodged a submission to the "Inquiry into the impact of Australia's temporary work visa programs on the Australian labour market and on the temporary work visa holders," in April 2015 and attended the public hearing in June 2015. The subsequent report "A National Disgrace: The Exploitation of Temporary Work Visa Holders" was published in March 2016 and can be found at http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/temporary_work_visa/Report.

The recommendations from the report do not contain any mention of changes to eligible specified work to include nannies or governesses possibly because our organisation was the only one to raise this kind of issue. Perhaps there are other organisations that would support our recommendations and add to our voice?

At the Developing the North Conference in June, it was reiterated that Australian visas need to be benchmarked and comparable to International visas if Australia wishes to encourage workers. One area where Australia is not comparable, is in the proposed changes to the Backpacker tax. Currently backpackers pay 32.5 per cent tax but can earn up to \$18 200 tax free, so the tax is claimed back when they leave Australia. The latest proposal for the Backpacker tax will see the tax free threshold removed. Farmers and tourism operators feared backpackers would shun Australia as a travel destination and 48 000 people signed an online petition in protest.

The Assistant Treasurer, Kelly O'Dwyer announced on May 17, 2016, that the Government would conduct a review of working holiday visas and postpone any changes to the current system until January next year. Hopefully this latest extension will give the government enough time to get to a longer term solution as we know that backpackers are often the only workers willing to travel to remote areas to help with both educating and caring for our children.

Nationalised Working with Children Checks (WWCC)

Working with Children Checks have been considered in public hearings conducted by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and have been a focus of investigation as part of its policy and research program. They decided to examine the WWCC schemes because early in their work it became apparent that the schemes were not as effective as they could be. They stated, "Each state and territory has its own scheme, and each of the eight schemes operates independently of the others. They are inconsistent and complex, with unnecessary duplication across the schemes. There is no integration of the schemes, and there is inadequate information sharing and monitoring of WWCC cardholders."

The Royal Commission released its report on Working with Children Checks on August 17, 2015. It can be found at <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/policy-and-research/our-policy-work/making-institutions-child-safe/working-with-children-checks>. One of the key findings is that WWCCs deliver unquestionable benefits to the safeguarding of children. The recommendations in the report aim to strengthen the protection children receive through Working with Children Checks and the key recommendation is a national model for WWCCs, by introducing consistent standards and establishing a centralised WWCC database to facilitate cross-border information sharing.

The Commission also have recommended time frames and processes to facilitate the changeover, suggesting that within 18 months from the publication of this report, State and Territory governments should amend their WWCC laws to enable clearances from other jurisdictions to be recognised and accepted.

ICPA continues to raise the issue that child care programs need to be flexible to allow for the uniqueness of rural and remote living and accommodate the need for supervision in the distance education classroom. The issues of hiring people to teach and care for remote children continue to be raised and perhaps there is light at the end of the WWCC tunnel. ICPA believes every rural and remote community should be supported in providing an early childhood learning service and child care programs that address the lack of child care options for those living outside of city centres.