

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18

Advice to: Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee

Topic: Senate Inquiry into the provision of childcare

Date due: 10 September 2009

Thank you for inviting the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (the Commission) to respond to the Questions on Notice from the Public Hearings of the Senate Inquiry into the provision of childcare.

Question on Notice from Senate Public Hearings in Brisbane 15 July 2009 (p14).

CHAIR:

Could you take on notice the question of what specific initiatives you believe childcare should be undertaking to help close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?

In the Commission's view children come first in Closing the Gap and the needs of the youngest children should be at the forefront. Childcare that engages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and is responsive to local need can play an important role in Closing the Gap. The Commission recognises that every child is part of a family within a community and that providing quality childcare does not replace or negate the crucial need for better housing, health services, education and employment opportunities. Investment in the conditions that will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, particularly in rural and remote areas, should nonetheless be considered as core work in Closing the Gap and appropriate childcare plays a key role in creating these conditions.

Current research indicates that developmental disparities between children are evident as early as nine months of age and these widen by 24 months of age.¹ It is in this very early stage that the gap is smallest and real differences can be made both in terms of addressing generational disadvantage and maximising outcomes for children through prevention and early intervention. For individual children, high quality services in the early years can contribute to preventing trajectories of disadvantage and poor life outcomes.

Governments have made significant commitments to Closing the Gap through policy, planning and funding. Initiatives to Close the Gap in the early years should now provide long term funding and work on bottom up approaches that are practical, engage local communities and focus on results for children.

In terms of Closing the Gap 'childcare' needs to be reconceptualised within a broader context of culture, integrated service delivery and family intervention. Childcare in this context is part of an holistic approach that integrates care, education and health as well as family intervention services where needed. Engaging parents and carers in early years programs and promoting positive images of what is working well will also be essential if 'childcare' programs are going to effectively contribute to Closing the Gap.

¹ Halle, T., Forry, N., Hair, E., Perper, K., Wandner, L., Wessel, J., & Vick, J. (2009). *Disparities in Early Learning and Development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2009_07_10_FR_DisparitiesEL.pdf

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Summary of Commission's response on 'Closing the Gap' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:

1. Invest in high quality early childhood education and care for very young children
2. Establish and support sustainable local governance structures that develop local skills and focus on results for children
3. Provide intensive family support and intervention programs in conjunction with early childhood education and care services, where needed
4. Employ and reward educational professionals who are committed, effective and willing to support the skill development of the local community through mentoring, training and professional support programs to build local capacity and sustainable early years services
5. Provide ongoing government funding and administrative support to develop high quality, appropriate, adequate and affordable early years services
6. Streamline accountability mechanisms to reduce the administrative burden and enable flexible and tailored program delivery to remain focussed on outcomes for children
7. Identify and promote what works well in ways that are accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, communities and the general public with particular attention to using photojournalism and photo-essays.

1. Invest in high quality early childhood education and care for very young children

Babies are born hard-wired to learn and in the first few years of a child's life the multi-faceted learning process impacts on all areas of development. Learning incorporates children's physical and motor-development, social and emotional abilities, language, cognitive and general wellbeing. If a child grows up in situations of poverty and disadvantage, this can have a detrimental effect on their capacity to learn, long before they start formal school.

Half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up in poverty. There is evidence, however, that quality preventative programs put in place at the earliest stage can make a real difference, particularly if the programs are easy to access and offer services simultaneously for children and their parents.² The economic and social benefits of high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) are now well documented, both in terms of the benefits to children and their families and in the longer term, society as a whole³.

² *The Implications of Poverty on Children's Readiness to Learn*, 2009. Focusing Paper prepared for the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

³ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. 2009. 'Social Inclusion: Social Inclusion and Early Childhood Development'

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Childcare (SNAICC) has highlighted that many children and their families cannot access any early childhood services even though they may benefit most. The low participation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in ECEC services can be due to financial and/or attitudinal barriers or a lack of services. Attitudinal barriers can include previous negative experiences with education, a lack of knowledge about the importance of early years development and the benefits that a culturally appropriate and strengths-based ECEC program can provide.

The Commission supports the principles underpinning the COAG initiative to develop 35 integrated Children and Family Centres, as outlined in the *National Partnership Agreement for Indigenous Early Childhood Development*⁴. COAG has stated it will provide a mix of services, responsive to community needs, that will include childcare, early learning and parent and family support services. The Commission supports this flexible and diverse model rather than childcare provision being limited to the long day care model, which may not be appropriate for the specific needs of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Integrated Children and Family Centres aim to ensure families receive the support they need and will provide an integrated delivery of services, including antenatal services⁵, child and maternal health services, parenting and family support services, and early learning and childcare. The COAG Agreement also noted that community engagement with the Children and Family Centres will be integral to their successful implementation because early childhood programs are most effective when they support parents' active participation in their children's development. Research also indicates that highly effective ECEC programs are closely connected with their local primary schools.⁶

The 35 COAG initiated centres are a positive step. To Close the Gap appropriate early years services should be available to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities.

2. Establish and support sustainable local governance structures that develop local skills and focus on results for children

To ensure that ECEC services are sustainable in the long term, they need to be embedded and managed either by, or in close partnership with, the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Evidence relating to ECEC provision in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities highlights that a sustainable local governance structure is an important variable for success.

⁴ *National Partnership Agreement for Indigenous Early Childhood Development* between the Commonwealth of Australia and the State and Territory Governments regarding Indigenous Early Childhood Development. 2 October 2008.

⁵ The Productivity Commission's, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report indicated that Aboriginal women who participate in antenatal sessions are far less likely to have low birth-weight babies than Aboriginal mothers who do not, 41.6 per cent compared to 8.5 per cent. Measures to improve health and education outcomes are most effective when they are co-ordinated.

⁶ *The Implications of Poverty on Children's Readiness to Learn*, 2009, Focusing Paper prepared for the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18

The *Indigenous families and children: coordination and evaluation of services* research paper that evaluated ECEC provision through the Communities for Children program, and the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report noted the importance of good governance in providing high quality services. In conjunction with good governance, a place-based planning process achieves the best results and these processes require sufficient time and a commitment to build positive relationships and engage in genuine community consultation. Because the situational needs of every community will be different, the nature and type of service delivery should be tailored to these needs.

Evidence from the Queensland *pre-Prep in Indigenous Communities initiative* (pre-Prep) in thirty-five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, highlights the significance of supporting the development of a sustainable local governance structure. The pre-Prep program is an educational early childhood program for three-and-a-half to four-and-a-half year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children administered by the Department of Education, Training and the Arts. Since 2006 the Queensland Government has invested more than \$40 million over 4 years for the pre-Prep program in 35 communities.

Additional learnings from the pre-Prep initiative include the importance of a place-based approach to planning that includes the following aspects:

- value and build on existing community strengths, services and infrastructure
- prior consultation and time for relationship building with the local community
- the program setting is not pre-determined; it can be in a school, childcare centre or community kindergarten – depending on the specific needs of each community
- collaborative planning and on-going community participation in decision-making
- culturally relevant and appropriate programs where local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge about childhood, learning and community are combined with contemporary early childhood understandings
- ongoing support and professional development is provided for staff⁷

3. Provide intensive family support and intervention programs in conjunction with early childhood education and care services, where needed

The Communities for Children research found that in some communities social problems (such as domestic violence, substance misuse and mental illness) need to be addressed alongside service provision of ECEC programs. Prioritising early intervention and prevention services is difficult for families suffering considerable distress from homelessness, poverty, family disputes or substance abuse.

Because many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents are teenagers⁸, programs are also required to assist teenage parents to access and continue education and training. High quality ECEC will enable parents to attend classes, as well as provide parenting information and family assistance programs, such as supported playgroups.

⁷ Moore, Lynne and Creamer, Penny. 2009. 'Optimising Learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: A Queensland case study', *Every Child*, Volume 15, Number 2.

⁸ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rates of teenage pregnancy are 22%, compared to 4% in the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. *Australia's Health 2008: The Health of Indigenous Australians*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18

Research on programs designed to help families with high and complex needs, suggest that family intervention must be intensive and that the approach a service provider takes to family engagement and the development of a trusting working alliance are as important as the program content in influencing outcomes⁹. Policy frameworks developed by the Social Inclusion Board¹⁰ describe this approach as being narrow, deep and intensive investment rather than broad program approaches.

4. Employ and reward educational professionals who are committed, effective and willing to support the skill development of the local community through mentoring, training and professional support programs to build local capacity and sustainable early years services

Recruiting and retaining highly effective early childhood teachers to work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services will be a significant lever to lift educational outcomes.¹¹ Mentoring local people to gain the skills, abilities and eventually formal ECEC qualifications, to work as teachers and in professional support roles, is an important aspect of providing culturally appropriate services, as well as providing more Indigenous employment opportunities.

Evidence from both the Communities for Children report and the Queensland pre-Prep program stress the need for adequate professional development networks for all staff. Flexible work practices, such as offering traineeships, part-time work, job sharing options and creating Indigenous support roles, assist in recruiting local community members. Established high quality ECEC services would also help to attract and retain professionals with young families willing to work in rural and remote areas.

5. Provide ongoing government funding and administrative support to develop high quality, appropriate, adequate and affordable early years services

Current provision of ECEC services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is mostly through government supported, community based and not-for-profit services. The absence of any substantial private childcare provision in these communities is most likely due to the lack of a guaranteed profit base.

The substantial increased costs of service provision in rural and/or remote Aboriginal communities, includes recruiting and retaining suitable and qualified staff and supporting local community members to gain early childhood qualifications. Research evidence from the Communities for Children program also suggests that for many Indigenous ECEC services to be effective, extra supports such as providing transport and meals assist with community engagement. Both SNAICC and the Communities for Children report state that financial constraints hinder the ability of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to participate in ECEC services. Even minimal fees of \$20 per week or

⁹ Sharon Dawe, Paul Harnett and Sally Fry. 2008. 'Improving outcomes for children living in families with parental substance misuse. What do we know and what should we do'. *Child Abuse Prevention Issues, No 29*. Australian Institute of Family Studies

¹⁰ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. 2009. 'Social Inclusion: Indigenous Social Exclusion'.

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia (2008). *Quality Education: The case for an Education Revolution in our Schools*. Canberra: Author.

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18

\$10 per day are prohibitive for some families. Government funding is required for quality ECEC services to assist in Closing the Gap.

Funding arrangements need to be ongoing, rather than short-term. Effective and sustainable community engagement does not happen within short-term time-frames, building trust and maintaining effective relationships takes time. The Communities for Children sites that had the most success in engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities reported that staff spent considerable time consulting the community and building relationships. Adequate consultation slowed the implementation process, however, it was more successful in achieving program outcomes. Sufficient time was also needed to build effective working relationships with and between existing service providers.¹²

6. Streamline accountability mechanisms to reduce the administrative burden and enable flexible and tailored program delivery to remain focussed on outcomes for children

Current funding, accountability and administrative mechanisms can be a burden for staff and volunteer parent management bodies in ECEC services in well-resourced, city-based services. Therefore it is important to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services are not over-burdened with inappropriate accountability mechanisms.

The Communities for Children report found that a number of remote communities had substantial difficulties observing and collecting data to measure outcomes for families and children. In many cases the limited number of staff with the skills to collect data and complete the required paperwork were the same staff required to run and implement the programs. In some cases the traditional methods of data collection were not appropriate or could not be translated meaningfully into local languages.

7. Identify and promote what works well in ways that are accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, communities and the general public with particular attention to using photojournalism and photo-essays

The public images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities are consistently bleak. They serve an important purpose in telling the story of desperate need for government and community action. However the consistent diet of negative images, data and stories can remove hope, pride and motivation and paint an inaccurate and one-dimensional picture. When the media coverage is dominated by negative stories, it contributes to a sense of hopelessness within communities and the wider Australian society.

It will be important to tell genuine stories about what is working in ways that are accessible to everyone. There are high quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services currently in existence in Australia, however the stories about these

¹² Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Flaxman, Saul; Muir, Kristy and Oprea, Ioana. 2009. Occasional paper No. 23, 'Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services, Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004-2009'. *National Evaluation Consortium (Social Policy Research Centre, at the University of New South Wales, and the Australian Institute of Family Studies)*

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18

services are rarely told outside educational conferences or in publications with limited audiences¹³. The *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report also contained numerous examples of programs, services and Indigenous initiatives that are working well, yet media coverage of the report focussed overwhelmingly on negatives issues.

Identifying and highlighting programs that are making a difference at local community levels should be widely promoted, as it can assist in lifting community aspirations. Photojournalism and photo-essays are accessible for communities with low literacy levels and would enable mainstream media to promote stories about what is working.

Question on Notice: Moving away from corporatised childcare provision

At the Senate Hearing the Commission stated its concerns with corporate models, in particular, the provision of childcare by any private provider who owns and operates a large number of centres that are administered by a board of Directors, answerable to share-holders. The Commission's evidence was provided at the first day of public hearings. The Commission is aware that a number of witnesses reiterated similar concerns and some of these witnesses provided more detailed information on ways to engineer change because of their academic expertise or operational knowledge.

For example, Professor Deborah Brennan provided a starting point for future policy development with the recent paper, *A Strategic Assessment of the Children's Services Industry*, prepared for the Children's Services Subcommittee of the Community and Disability Services Ministers' Advisory Council. Expert evidence provided by Professor Brennan and colleagues canvassed more detailed alternative policy proposals. The evidence of Ms Marie Coleman from the National Foundation for Australian Women and Mrs Tracey Bradley from the Minister's Childcare Advisory Council, Tasmania, also provided sound, detailed policy advice on changing current provision.

In the view of the Commission, the main areas for improvement include, ensuring public funds are utilised appropriately, developing a planning mechanism for the number and placement of new services and moving to a mix of both demand and supply-side funding mechanisms. One initiative would be to provide extra direct funding to centres providing consistent high quality services. These 'incentive' grants could be tied to identified quality improvements such as employing more highly qualified staff, smaller adult-child ratios or playground and building improvements. The Commission also supports the proposal for a Productivity Commission inquiry to investigate the relationship between funding models, effective childcare provision and quality outcomes for children.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide further evidence to the Senate Inquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact Vicki Hall, Manager, Policy, Strategic Policy and Research Program (ph: 07 3211 6951; e-mail vicki.hall@ccypcg.qld.gov.au) should any aspects of this advice require clarification.

¹³ The 'Cherbourg Success Stories' on the Commission's website, highlight identified initiatives which are making a difference to the lives of children and young people in this Qld Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. These stories are published so others can use these ideas if they like what they see. <http://www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au/about/cherbourg/main.html>