

Frankston City Council Response–

Commonwealth Senate Inquiry into the Provision of Child Care

In the Frankston City the present breakdown of child care services is:

Frankston City

- 2 Council not for profit centres
- 1 not for profit centre managed by Monash University
- 11 for profit ABC Learning Centres
- 15 for profit privately owned and operated centres.

| | Private LDC | Community Based LDC | Total |
|------------------|-------------|---------------------|-----------|
| Frankston | 26 (90%) | 3 (10%) | 29 (100%) |

Therefore, ABC Learning operates a significant proportion of child care centres in Frankston City.

Terms of Reference

Focus Questions

1. The impact of the ABC Learning collapse on the provision of child care in Australia:

a. Financial

The current Australian Government policy has resulted in the domination of corporate child care sector for delivery of child care. The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), Community Child Care and other community peak bodies have for a long time advocated strongly against the corporatisation of child care in Australia, which has resulted in many small private providers and community based services being forced out of the market place.

The departure from the market place of both community based and small private providers has resulted in a lack of choice for families in the type of child care they wish to use for their children. In many areas such as Frankston there are very few community based services for local families to access.

The failure of ABC Learning has had and will continue to have a significant impact on the provision of child care in Australia. The funding package provided by the Australian Government effectively means the Australian taxpayer is subsidising the failure of corporate business. Frankston City Council is concerned this may result in a significant reduction of funding to support new reforms in child care and address issues relating to ageing children's services infrastructure.

Confidence in the industry has been significantly reduced and early childhood workers may not return to the industry as they may see child care to be an insecure workplace. This will further impact on the chronic shortage of staff currently across the Child care sector and possibly place other child care businesses at risk.

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b. Social

Child care is a very necessary and important service for the whole community. It supports labour market participation and therefore the national economy; there is now evidence that high quality early learning and care in a child's first 5 years of life will impact positively on their ongoing development, and child care also provides children from very vulnerable families a consistent, caring environment that is often very necessary to their ongoing well-being. Child care centres can also provide families with support in their parenting role, and encourage and facilitate community connectedness between families. Therefore, it is important for families in Frankston that quality child care services continue operate across the municipality.

c. Industry

The bankruptcy of ABC Learning is seen to be a failure of the current system of child care provision and planning in Australia. There is widespread opinion that the Australian Government should take the opportunity to now restructure the child care system in to ensure quality in service provision, choice for families and security for the industry.

2. Alternative options and models for the provision of child care

Future service delivery of child care in Australia should;

- Grow the community based, publicly owned children's services sector
- Achieve integration of care and education in the early years
- Invest in local infrastructure
- Recognise the role played by Family Day Care, Occasional Care and kindergarten services and commit to a review of federal funding and subsidy arrangements for each of these services.
- Any future provision should not allow one provider to monopolise local markets ensuring choice for families.
- Provide an incentive for schools to establish and operate their own before, after and vacation care programs that would further develop the child care system;
- Give families the opportunity to access high quality Occasional Care as it is critical in supporting families. This provision is massively under resourced and needs a considerable increase in funding to enable increased access.

The current child care service system does not support the current Australian Government's Child Care Reform Agenda and the Victorian State Government's Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform which aims to achieve integration between a range of early year's services and schools. Consideration needs to be given to whether for profit child care services can be successfully integrated into early year's hubs and services co-located on school sites.

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Any new model for child care must ensure that the most vulnerable families have choice in their access to child care. For example two of Frankston city's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods have not been serviced by for profit child care providers because it has not been deemed financially viable for them to establish services in these areas. Our understanding is that this is an issue for many other local government areas.

Any new model needs to also consider the development and ongoing maintenance for community based Family and Children's Services Infrastructure ie Maternal and Child Health, Kindergarten and Playgroups as well as child care.

It is imperative that the new model places quality service provision for children as the highest priority. The National Agenda for Early Childhood and the National Quality Accreditation System needs to be appropriately resourced so that services can meet the requirements for high quality service provision. For example to improve service delivery a 'local area program advisor' could be made available to all centres to support staff with training, development, program planning, etc.

The increase in family breakdown, family violence, financial crisis and decrease in social support has led to increased pressure on child care services to provide family support and welfare. The new model needs to reflect these changes and address these issues.

Any new model must support and fully fund the inclusion of children with a disability or high support needs. Currently the funding gap between the cost of an additional staff members and the Commonwealth Inclusion Support Funding is being filled by Frankston City Council for Council managed long day care and OSH services. Not all providers have been able to fund this gap, resulting in access issues for children with a disability.

Frankston City Council has also identified a significant gap in the provision of vacation care for young people with a disability or high support needs. This needs to be addressed to enable families to participate in the workforce.

The provision of child care should be flexible to meet the children and families in individual communities, and not be one size fits all. This would include increased funding for disadvantaged areas to support staff in meeting the additional workload that comes with caring for vulnerable families e.g. Child Protection Reports, increased monitoring and work with specialist services.

3. The role of governments at all levels in:

a. Funding for community, not-for-profit and independent service providers

It is the Australian Government's responsibility effectively lead, develop and fund child care provision in Australia in partnership with State and Local Governments to ensure a consistent nationwide approach that can respond to local needs. In Victoria

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Local Government is responsible for the planning and coordination of Children's Services at the local level.

b. Consistent regulatory frameworks for child care across the country

The Australian Government needs to work in partnership with State Governments to ensure a high quality and consistent regulatory frameworks.

Licensing requirements to operate child care centres

State Governments should be responsible for regulating and licensing requirements. Increased resources are required to provide improved monitoring in the future.

It is suggested that the Federal Government use CCB approvals to influence planning for new child care services – promoting the development of child care places in localities where the child care market has failed to meet demand (where waiting lists remain high) or to ensure the viability of existing child care services. Victorian Councils have actively contributed to the Australian Government planning process in the past through annual surveys of child care demand in all municipalities.

c. Nationally consistent training and qualification requirements for child care workers

Child care training/traineeships need to ensure students are adequately skilled to meet the new demands placed on staff in this sector, reflecting societal changes and the importance of the early years. The current fast tracking through courses may lead to a child care workforce that cannot meet the increasingly complex demands of working in child care today. The Australian Government needs to work in partnership with State Governments to ensure high quality and consistent training and qualifications for child care workers.

d. The collection, evaluation and publishing of reliable, up-to-date data on casual and permanent child care vacancies

To assist Local Governments' role in local planning and development, the collection, evaluation and publishing of reliable, up-to-date data is essential and is the role of the Australian Government to coordinate and disseminate in collaboration with State and Local Governments to achieve agreements for regular reporting on a national, state-wide, regional, local and suburb level.

4. The feasibility for establishing a national authority to oversee the child care industry in Australia

5. Other related matters

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- The Australian Government needs to implement a national marketing and information strategy to improve the understanding, profile and community value of child care in Australia.