

# **THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO CHILDCARE**

SUBMISSION FROM KAY THOMAS 30<sup>th</sup> January 2009

AS a long term advocate for and supporter of Out of School Hours Care, I appreciate the opportunity to make comment via this inquiry. My comments are in the main very biased towards care for school age children. A significant proportion of the annual federal childcare budget is channelled into OSHC in various ways but sadly OSHC is seldom at the forefront of policy discussion or change. Too often it is tacked on as an afterthought with little real consideration of what would improve the developmental outcomes for the thousands of Australian children who attend OSHC on a regular basis.

There is an overwhelming focus on the early years and much is being done to determine how as a nation we can improve our world rating in the provision of care and education of pre schoolers. There is almost an unstated comment that by the time children are at school they are past help and so care for them (OSHC) is for the convenience of adults rather than a serious environment where good things can happen for children.

To address the points as per the intent of the inquiry I submit the following points for consideration.

## **a) THE FINANCIAL, SOCIAL & INDUSTRY IMPACT OF THE COLLAPSE OF ABC LEARNING ON THE PROVISION OF CHILDCARE IN AUS.**

For many in the industry the collapse came as no surprise. Following the high profile demise and the subsequent cost to all Australians to “fix” the mess there is renewed vigour in the sentiment that no individual or organisation should make big profits out of caring for our nation’s children. Therefore we hope that the policy makers will seriously consider the future planning and distribution of childcare places.

From an OSHC perspective and particularly from a SA – there has been limited take up of service provision by private operators. Hopefully the ABC model will never be replicated in OSHC and that limits will be placed on the number of services any individual or organisation can operate. There should be a real expectation that if there are profits to be made that these are spent on improved outcomes for children and that families become much more vocal about this expectation.

Interesting in the community there is a real perception that OSHC is too expensive and therefore parents will quickly opt out to use informal care or “home alone” arrangements when they are under any financial

pressure. Care for school age children is dispensed with if a household's discretionary spending funds are decreased. Therefore a long-term economic downturn can be expected to see fewer families using OSHC

## **b) ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS AND MODELS FOR THE PROVISION OF CHILDCARE.**

In any discussion on this theme time should also be made to consider improved options of care for school age children. Families must be encouraged to consider what they really need to support the life/work choices which they have made and what care will support those choices most effectively.

## **c) THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS AT ALL LEVELS – general comments**

Governments at all levels must fully acknowledge the need for OSHC in our society – families do! There is a great need to really consider the actual data that exists; it is quite difficult to interpret data to determine the number of children who use care. Anecdotally a CCB place in an OSHC service is used by around 2 ½ children each week this substantially alters the impact of effective OSHC in the lives of children and families.

### **Federal –**

- Acknowledgement of OSHC
- Understanding of OSHC issues – consultation with industry that takes into consideration that OSHC is national quite fragmented. There are peak groups down the eastern seaboard that receive PSSP funding but in the remainder of the country, peak groups where they exist are wholly organised by volunteers who have very limited free time and are reliant on the membership fees to do whatever work is required. There is an urgent need for the OSHC sector to have the opportunity of a national forum where issues from the various states and territories can be presented to policy makers.
- To fund Australian research into need of school age children – to parallel the Early Years Learning Framework, why not commission the development of a Middle Years Learning Framework that fosters dialogue between educators and those who provide care for the children in the primary school age group – 5- 12 years
- Support for services that improves the current Inclusion and Professional Support model that has dramatically diluted the overall support for OSHC by attempting to use the old “one size fits all” approach

### **State – (SA)**

- Acknowledgement of OSHC and its importance to families and therefore its marketing potential for schools

- That there is recognition for the staff that work with children and a realisation that more should be done to develop a relationship between the educators and the care providers on each site.
- Consider better use of the support money that is currently allocated to OSHC – what is this achieving – is it the best use of tax payer's money.

### **Local - (SA)**

- To have a basic understanding that the services exist and where possible provide support through community grants and maybe transport if possible
- Previously local government sat on a state based planning committee and it is valuable that there is a forum where local government can voice concern about the disproportionately low number of services in any given area, – e.g. Port Adelaide Enfield

### **Funding for community, not for profit & independent service providers.**

Because OSHC services are usually located on school sites or other community buildings the provision of funding is limited to the need for work to be undertaken to open services. A financial incentive to schools to customise an OSHC areas would be a real carrot in some communities and could be used to ensure effort was applied to support a successful venture by asking that any money be repaid if the service closed in the first 5 years of operation.

There is currently some establishment money available but it is insignificant. In a paper I prepared last year I conservatively estimate that it would take around 125 hours to prepare to open an OSHC service that meet the OSHC Standards SA and is prepared for the readiness for quality assurance accreditation.

Currently there is no way a new operator can access support to achieve this work and so most new services begin their life without the essential operational framework. Hence there appears to be an increase in the number of new services that have only a short operational life.

To be really competitive a new service needs to have decent equipment and resources when the doors open and so consideration should be given to how this can be addressed. Clearly the demand for support for establishing long day care facilities is much greater but school age care needs should not be overlooked.

It is essential that there is support to assist operators to understand their legal liabilities and responsibilities to children and their families as well as those they employ.

### **Consistent regulatory frameworks across the country.**

Others will make more comment about this. It is very hard to be consistent when traversing the vastness of our country and trying to match urban middle class expectations and possibilities to those that are achievable in the rural and remote communities.

### **Licensing requirements to operate child care centres**

Currently a state issue and it can remain so but what about some OSHC. In SA there is also the anomaly that one government department is not only the operator of services but also the regulator??? Not a good strategy.

**Workforce issues** – Others will have plenty to say.

**Data collection** – The data should be available but there must be more efficient ways of gathering data than continually harassing service staff to complete endless reports.

### **THE FEASIBILITY FOR ESTABLISHING A NATIONAL AUTHORITY TO OVERSEE THE CHILDCARE INDUSTRY**

I think such bodies already exist there have been various advisory groups and there is the National Children's Service Forum – to negotiate with this group to seek the required information makes better sense than starting something new.

### **OTHER RELATED MATTERS**

OSHC simply wants a better deal and a supportive climate to develop new initiatives that will enhance the care environment of Australia's school age children in care. In its play based recreational setting, quality OSHC services can offer great opportunities for children that with some planning could add value to the school based curricula.