

Response to the Senate Inquiry; re the Jobs for Families Child Care Package

This response comes from the Director of an individual mobile service offering Long Day Care at four different sites, in the southeast of South Australia. This service has been operating with Budget-Based Funding .

CCOWS (Child Care on Wheels Service) began operating in 2002. Staff numbers allow us to offer care for up to 127 children each week. Licensing enables us to have the potential for greater numbers, but we are limited by staff availability (and salary implications). So the number of available places are capped at this time.

About this response

- There are references to other mobile services.
- NAMS (National Association of Mobile Services for Rural and Remote Children and Families) will be mentioned in the responses from other organisations eg SNAICC and eca . The author of this response document is a member of the NAMS Executive.
- It is acknowledged that there is an RFT for “Assistance for the transition of Mobile Services”. We know that a “one-size-fits-all” solution does not satisfy the differences and unique operations existing under the “mobile” banner. We look forward to the individual consultation, which will enable a future path for each service to be determined.

This response will highlight some of the challenges common to many mobiles, but not address specific details as it is anticipated that this will be discussed with the “Mobile Transition Assistance Group”.

About mobile services

As with other mobile services, CCOWS operate at sites which we do not own. The history of the “mobile model of delivery”, shows that the establishment was to assist children and families in areas where there were no other children’s services, and the sparsity of population meant it was not viable to establish a purpose-built venue.

Importantly, there is a need to consider the challenging physicality of mobile operations:

- The distance travelled by staff to get to the site, the road surfaces encountered, the loading and unloading of resources, the setting up of a site, the cleaning of the premises.
- Though the service travels to a venue, the parents may still need to travel considerable distances to reach the site .
- There is a physical need to have more than one staff member to enable the setting up of a site with temporary fencing, portable cots, administration requirements and resources.
- The limitations experienced make adaptations necessary at each site to provide a safe and secure environment.

These are some of the factors which have influenced this response to the proposed Bill.

Not all mobile operations offer the same type of service, but they do respond to the needs of the communities which they serve, in a way which empowers parents and offers education and care to children. Purposes may include health care, toy libraries, play sessions, long day care (and others). When children attend a mobile

it may be the *first experience* parents have had, where their children have been observed by educated professionals, who are able to assess and advise about the developmental needs of their children. It may be the first time parents have been able to observe their children interacting with other children, an important milestone for both children and parents.

It is against this background of mobile provision, that the following observations and comments have been made.

The Bill stated that the **objectives** were to help **parents who want to work**, or who **want to work more**, by providing a **simpler**, more **affordable**, more **flexible** and more **accessible** child care system.

Addressing: HELPING PARENTS WHO WANT TO WORK, OR WHO WANT TO WORK MORE

- The demographics of the communities which CCOWS serves, show that many families work in primary industry. They are already *in work*. The day's care helps them be more efficient. They can arrange a visit to their finance officer/doctor/ or business adviser..or complete dangerous operations on the property (knowing their child is safe at care). Many of these parents are self-employed and already in the work force.
- The majority of names on the *waiting list* have parents who are waiting to return to work (this is mainly at the two Robe sites). There are 40 children waiting for 124 places.
- CCOWS offers a positive support to children and a balance and assistance to families.

Addressing: SIMPLER

- The CCOWS service operates in communities where there are many *families* involved in primary industries which include fishing, beef cattle, mixed farming and aquaculture. These families are often self-employed and their "hours of work" depend on seasonal requirements. The requirements of the new system will be a challenge for these families. Information will need to be offered regularly to Centrelink as part of their Activity test. They have not needed to do this before. Centrelink offices are hours and hundreds of kilometres away, and not all families have great IT reception.
- The CCOWS administration will need to find a way to manage the CCS system and the implications for budget, operation and staffing (in short, the service provision).
- Education of parents and training for administrators will be required.

Addressing: MORE AFFORDABLE

- Cost modelling to determine daily operational cost for CCOWS is being finalised. This is affected by several ongoing considerations:
 - *The educators at CCOWS are paid under the **Municipal Officer's Award**, as they are considered as Council employees. This is because of the historical establishment of this service. The Federal Government agreed to fund CCOWS if there was an Incorporated body to receive the Funds. (This is similar to the establishment conditions for some other mobile services.) Robe Council agreed to "sponsor the CCOWS service.*

The MOA rate is much higher than the Child Care Award rate, making a difference in salary costs (conservatively estimated at about \$35,000/year). At present the Council staff is in consultation for an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement which is negotiating a 3.5% increase in wages.

- *Leases for some sites are being re-negotiated.*
- *A neighbouring Council (where CCOWS operates 2 days of service) is being approached to contribute to operational costs.*
- Historically families using CCOWS have been charged a daily (or half-daily) fee, in a 3-tier system based on the combined income of the parents. These fees have been reasonable, but even so, some families have struggled to meet them. Our parents are unable to access CCR.
- The concern for the CCOWS service is that the proposed rate of child subsidy will mean parents may need to pay a higher fee. It is anticipated that the parent's co-contribution will escalate because of the difference between the subsidy amount and the daily operational cost per child. The operation costs are influenced by *distance* and *the nature of the mobile model* which combine to add extra expenses to service delivery. Hours of travel for staff, freight for resources, vehicles (maintenance and fuel), premises rental are all "add-ons" to be taken into consideration. A higher subsidy rate may alleviate escalation of parent's co-payments. NB. The proposed Safety Net will be mentioned later in this document.
- Activity tests will be a "new" experience for parents. They will need assistance through this process. Employment hours and wage estimation will be a challenge.

Addressing: MORE FLEXIBLE

Mobiles pride themselves on "flexible delivery".

- Some educators have long days, in that they drive from their homes to the CCOWS shed (this is where the vehicle and resources are stored) at the Robe Council Depot, where they load the car and then travel to the site. Flexibility enables us to convert the premises with temporary fencing etc. to a site which is safe and secure, and meets licensing regulations. *The ability to extend hours of provision* is limited by the time required for travelling and setting-up. The length of day for these educators needs to be a consideration.
- The other limiting factor to flexible hours, is the child's day. Many parents travel considerable distances to access these sites, and the day would be too long for children if the hours were extended.
- Flexibility has enabled CCOWS to include children with special needs or considerations in the service. We have children with cystic fibrosis, diabetes 1, autism, speech delays and limb plaster-casts. Educators have been able to assist parents through the assessment process, diagnosis, treatment delivery and CDU meetings.

I realise I have probably interpreted "Flexibility" in a manner not aligned to the Bill's intent.

Addressing: MORE ACCESSIBLE

The basic intent of mobile services is to provide more accessible children's services. (Some mobiles travel out for weeks at a time, others to stations and homesteads.) CCOWS travels to 4 sites, 2 being about 50 kilometres away and located in rooms in schools. We have needed to "manage" the sites, making sure there have been

microwaves, refrigerators, temperature control mechanisms in place. We take drinking water to one site, nappy bins, and anything else that is needed to leave the site in an acceptable state. Parents travel varying distances to the sites. Because of the isolation of some sites, educators need to be able to deal independently with many forms of trauma including bushfire, children's accidents, snakes, power outage and family duress. There are many barriers to access. In rural and remote areas the barriers are often physical, as well as financial.

Addressing: the CHILD CARE SAFETY NET

Understanding all the aspects of this proposal, not having firm definitions of some terms in place, 13 week "turnaround times", reapplications for assistance and competitive processes for grants.... make this a challenging feature for services which do not have an extensive administrative capacity.

The overall income from child care subsidy is reliant on the number of hours in care. In many mobiles there are limited enrolments (because of the areas of "sparse" population). There is also an inability for the utilisation of places which become available due to children's absences, even though we have a "stand-by" list for each day, some families invited to use a spare space cannot travel the distance to care, because they are already involved in their day's work and unable to change their routine to bring their children in. Therefore we have less children for the day, but are required to retain the same number of staff, as they have now travelled in the CCOWS vehicle away from the base, and are unable to be sent home.

Additional Child Care Subsidy

The effectiveness of these assistances to fees for mobile services, may depend on the determined "Child Care Subsidy Rate".

Inclusion Support Programme.

This is an important support system for mobile services, especially in rural and regional areas where infrastructure and supportive services are not plentiful. Ability to access assistance via IT is a meaningful addition to the Inclusive Services, and enhances the ability of mobiles and rural families to obtain support.

Community Child Care Fund

These grants are provided on a *competitive basis* which may therefore mean that some services (and children) will miss out on assistance.

- CCOWS looks forward to *further discussion regarding the sustainability support* for services experiencing viability issues. The continuation of the CCOWS service is critical for families, particularly in Robe, to enable them to continue in employment. There are requests for more than a hundred enrolment places on the Robe waiting list. Many of these are for children who are under 2 years of age. The majority of female Robe parents work in trade and hospitality, with less than 20% in primary industry. A walk down the main street of Robe would show that every facility has, or has had a connection to CCOWS, with many parents declaring they could not be back in the work force without CCOWS.
- There have been petitions from the community (particularly Beachport) asking for *expansion of the service*. One more day has been suggested. In the Bill, the premise for expansion, is that the services will make a financial contribution towards the establishment of an expanded service. This is not

possible. There is a constant demand for enrolment, with requests for extra days at some sites, and a lengthy waiting list, but there is little chance for expansion to occur, given that CCOWS has no capital to contribute to those projects.

SUMMARY

The ability of the CCOWS service to deliver a meaningful, appropriate programme of education and care can be verified. There are 14 educators, 7 of whom have Diplomas, 5 have Certificate 3, and 2 are studying for their Diploma. There has been rapport and collaboration with Mt Gambier TAFE, enabling us to train local people. We have monthly staff meetings, professional staff appraisals (at least every 12 months and sometimes more often), the CCOWS Quality Improvement plan is a living document, improving programming and documentation is an ongoing strategy. Every child, even though we may only see them for half a day a week, is considered in our daily provision of care and education.

Mobiles need the Jobs for Families Child Care Package to deliver assistance which facilitates financial sustainability and continued service, with understanding and consideration of the challenges that have been outlined:

- Inability to utilise “absentee spaces” (because of distance and parent inability to interrupt their day/ or return from work location)
- Educators are under the MOA rate, much greater than the Child Care Award, therefor salaries are a disproportionate part of budget expenditure
- Distance affects operational costs.
- Population is sparse.
- Parental Employment includes seasonal occupation and self-employment.

CCOWS looks forward to consultation which will assist with planning the continuation of this service to meet the community and family needs apparent in this region. It looks forward to an appropriate interpretation and consideration needed for assistance towards financial stability and sustainability, with a package that reflects the unique, responsive nature of mobile service delivery...which will ensure that each child’s right to education and care is met. CCOWS continued service will facilitate parent’s mentoring, and support for continuation in the work force will be achieved.

This response is offered by Robyn Paterson on behalf of the mobile service (CCOWS) which operates from Robe, 5 days a week.

Sites:

Robe Kindergarten/ Monday, Tuesday, Friday from 8.30am until 5.15pm	(capped at 20)
Robe RSL Hall/ Wednesday, Thursday from 8.30am until 5.15pm	(capped at 20)
Beachport Primary School CPC room/ Wednesday from 8.45am until 5.00pm	(licence for 15)
Kangaroo Inn Area School CPC room/ Thursday from 8.45am until 5.00pm	(licence for 12)

Robyn Paterson

Director Children’s Services Robe
NAMS Deputy Chair