

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE REPORT 2021

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Early Childhood Education and Care has continued to be a busy portfolio, and taking this on from the remarkable Jane Morton certainly gave me some big shoes to fill. The endemic inappropriateness of current Early Childhood Education and Care delivery models for geographically isolated families and the difficulties associated with accessing child care and education in rural and remote areas have been a key focus of our advocacy.

ICPA (Aust) maintains equitable and affordable Early Childhood Education and Care services and support for families living in rural and remote areas are critical. We have highlighted that specialised model/s need to be established for rural and remote families; programs designed to address the unique disadvantages and needs associated with caring for and educating children in geographically isolated locations.

In Home Care

While ICPA (Aust) acknowledges that the In Home Care program provides some childhood services to geographically isolated areas of Australia, we continue to highlight the gross inadequacies of the system for rural and remote families. It simply has not been designed to address the unique needs and circumstances of families in these areas. Advocacy has focused on the overarching recommendation that “an In Home Care Program (IHC), or sub-program thereof, be established specifically for rural and remote families”. In correspondence with the Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education, Hon Andrew Gee MP along with other relevant Ministers, MPs and Senators we provided an insight into the unsuitability of the current Scheme, highlighting the inappropriateness and unfairness of a blanket approach to Early Childhood Education and Care in rural and remote areas. This was exemplified and amplified by the issues arising from the implementation of the COVID-19 Relief Childcare Package. We requested amendments to the current scheme, or the inception of a new scheme to cater for the unique circumstances and needs of rural and remote families and to address specific circumstances, including those mentioned during our 2020 Online Federal Conference:

- dispensation for families who must provide board and lodging for their educators, which would result in reducing families’ gap payments; and
- amendments to the Scheme to allow an educator to care for children from more than one family at the same time, and to care for their own child whilst caring for children from another family or families.

We have also continued to emphasise the need for In Home Care, or another program, to be able to provide support for remote families who must educate their children at home due to being geographically isolated and who have no daily access to regular educational services; families also working in businesses or trying to maintain employment. Unfortunately, we are making little headway progressing this issue.

Federal Council have raised these topics during meetings and delegations as well as with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). With recent staff changes within DESE, we have made contact with the new In Home Care team raising our concerns and sharing our updated Briefing Papers for their reference. DESE staff welcome case studies and stories exemplifying the experiences of geographically isolated families using In Home Care. My thanks to families who have passed on information to support

our advocacy. The real-life, on-the-ground experiences really capture the attention of people we meet with. Federal Council encourages members to send any case studies to us to pass on to DESE.

In December 2019, ICPA (Aust) welcomed the decision of then Minister for Education, Hon Dan Tehan MP to extend the Transitional Provisions for IHC for two years until December 2021 for remote families. Given this deadline is looming, Federal Council has again raised this topic with DESE. We have been informed evidence is being gathered on the usage of the Transitional Provisions for IHC educators and hope consideration will be given to further extension of these Provisions. Federal Council will keep members abreast of developments.

Federal Council was disappointed to learn that the long-running Longreach In Home Care provider, which had been servicing both Queensland and Northern Territory families, would be closing at the end of 2020. We have raised concerns with the Department on this closure and have highlighted the need for those providers who service remote families to be supported in order to maintain services for our families. Already we know that South Australian families are negatively impacted by the lack of providers for their locations. Certainly, we know the In Home Care Scheme is not ideal for geographically isolated families, however it does provide some level of access to a service in remote areas for some and this access needs to be maintained. The In Home Care team in the Department of Education, Skills and Employment are keen to garner an understanding of the impacts and experiences of families who were affected by the Longreach closure in order to better equip themselves to deal with these situations in the future.

Assistance for Isolated Children Distance Education (AIC-DE) Allowance for Pre-Compulsory School Students and Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

The longstanding pursuit for the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance to be extended to pre-compulsory geographically isolated distance education students has continued in earnest this year. In 2020 ICPA (Aust) took the opportunity to lodge a submission to the Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments¹. The ICPA (Aust) submission pointed out the challenges and expenses associated with providing a distance education pre-compulsory program and highlighted that ineligibility for AIC for this relatively small cohort of children is at odds with the Federal Government's commitment to "Universal Access to Early Childhood Education". The Final Report, released in November 2020, referred directly to our remarks in Section 3.2.7 and further made the following Recommendation:

"the Committee recommends that the Commonwealth support early learning programs through the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme Distance Education Allowance in the 2021 Budget."

ICPA (Aust) gratefully welcomed this acknowledgement of the need for AIC expansion to early learning students and implored the Government to accept and implement this recommendation, both through our 2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission and in meetings, follow-up correspondence with the Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education and other key Ministers, MPs and Senators and in a Media Release prior to the 2021-2022 Budget. While the 2021-2022 Budget did not address this recommendation, Federal Council were pleased to see the announcement of \$2 billion in support across the next four years to provide 15 hours per week of quality learning for children in the year before school, irrespective of where they live. Federal Council used delegations and another media release following this announcement to appeal for part of this funding to be allocated to fulfil this request. The ICPA (Aust) media releases can be found on our website <https://icpa.com.au/au/resources/media-releases> .

¹ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report

Mobile Early Childhood Services

We have been assured funding for ex-Budget Based Funded Early Childhood Services such as Mobile Playgroups is ongoing and grants are available through future grant opportunities. Information on grants available to services can be found at:

<https://www.dss.gov.au/grants/grant-programmes/families-and-communities-programme>,
<https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programmes-services/parenting/families-and-children-activity>, www.communitygrants.gov.au and
www.grants.gov.au.

Federal Council continues to advocate for funding to expand and maintain Mobile Early Childhood Services in geographically isolated areas and communities where there is no Early Childhood service at all and have highlighted the need for guaranteed funding for organisations providing these services in our submission to the Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments and we were pleased to see this acknowledged by the Committee in their key recommendation:

“the Committee recommends that the Commonwealth modify funding arrangements for mobile early childhood education to provide flexibility and surety of funding for these services in the 2021 Budget.”

In our 2021-22 Pre-Budget submission, ICPA (Aust) appealed to the Government to implement this recommendation to assist in providing much needed early childhood education services to geographically isolated children. Following on from the aforementioned Budget allocation of \$2 billion over 4 years for preschool funding, ICPA (Aust) suggested some of these funds be allocated to mobile playgroup funding.

Given the finite and insecure nature of Federal Government funding for the provision of these services and the resources and activities required across vast distances in challenging geographically isolated contexts, Federal Council has also pursued the suggestion of an alternative solution. Members at the 2020 Federal Conference, suggested geographically isolated children be recognised as ‘in need’ of benevolent assistance for early childhood educational purposes, allowing the Not-For-Profit organisations serving them to be considered for Deductible Gift Recipient status. This would allow these services to access additional funds from other sources and not be completely reliant on Federal funding. We were pleased to have received positive responses to this idea from several Members of Parliament and look forward to further developments.

Remote Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce

One of the most significant obstacles in the delivery of early childhood education and care services in rural and remote areas is the difficulty in attracting and retaining a quality workforce. Finding suitably qualified staff to deliver child care or early childhood education for rural and remote families is an ongoing and urgent concern and we have continued to request that amendments to Visa eligibility incorporate Early Childhood workers in remote areas, as well as for flexibility in attaining qualifications in geographically isolated locations and that the challenges of studying and training in these locations are considered.

ICPA (Aust) has also continued its pursuit for a National Working with Children Check (WWCC) as a matter of priority to ensure early childhood carers, teachers, educators and those assisting with education particularly in rural and remote areas can transition across states easily. We have taken the opportunity to include this call in a submission to the Review of the National Quality Framework <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/2019-ngf-review>. The process of obtaining a Working with Children Check (WWCC) in each state or territory is expensive, slow and impedes early childhood workers, tutors and teachers who wish to help various families across borders. A national WWCC certification would help

resolve this and was recommended in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse Final Report. A National WWCC would ensure effective and efficient assessment for suitability to work with children and address the staffing challenges of recruitment and retention in rural and remote contexts.

Other Early Childhood Education and Care Activity

In 2021 we have welcomed the opportunity to work with Sue Kingwill from Contact Inc as well as to participate in the Thrive by Five campaign (website address), to ensure that rural and remote children and their families are not forgotten when it comes to Early Childhood reform. We have also contributed the perspective of geographically isolated ECEC in a number of submissions this past year, including the National Quality Framework Review, the Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 and the NDIS Community Consultation on Supporting young children and their families 2021. We have also recently made contact with the team undertaking the National Quality Framework specifically requesting information on how the Review and recommendations that may come forward will impact rural and remote families and services, as rural and remote was not mentioned in previous Review documents. Indeed, our submission noted that this seemed to be missing from the Review documents and endeavoured to emphasise the unique circumstances and needs of rural and remote families. We received some assurance that the Decision Regulation Impact Statement (DRIS) recommendations will acknowledge the diversity of programs and the impact on services in rural and remote areas as a result of changes to the NQF.

Federal Council feels as though there has never been a better time to pursue the need for specific support to be made available for geographically isolated Early Childhood Education and Care, with welcome recognition of several key advocacies in this space and we will continue to advance members' needs at every opportunity. As I close, I wish to thank my dynamic ECEC Portfolio team, being Sally Sullivan, Jo Camilleri and Wendy Hick.