



Childcare Inquiry Roundtable Summary

First Nations

Virtual Roundtable - Friday 25 August 2023

This document is not a verbatim record of the roundtable, but a summary of the issues raised by roundtable participants. The views and opinions expressed are those of the participants and do not necessarily reflect the ACCC's views or position on the issues summarised here.

Introduction

On 28 October 2022 the Treasurer, the Hon. Jim Chalmers MP, directed the ACCC to conduct a price inquiry into the market for the supply of childcare services (the Inquiry).

The ACCC carried out a wide range of outreach and information gathering activities for the Inquiry. These activities included roundtables with invited stakeholders representing the following groups: Educators, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities, Childcare providers, Parents and Guardians, First Nations families and communities, and In Home Care users, educators, and providers.

This document provides a summary of the issues discussed during the first of two roundtables for stakeholders representing First Nations families and communities, held virtually on Friday 25 August 2023.

26 Participants confirmed their attendance in advance, with 13 joining on the day. Several apologies were received on the day of the event due to staff shortages in childcare centres requiring managers to cover shifts. Participants included representatives from “mainstream” and Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services (MACS), Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs), Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), advocacy groups, and government agencies, as well as First Nations community elders.

The roundtable was chaired by ACCC Deputy Chair Catriona Lowe. Childcare Inquiry General Manager Nicole Ross and other Inquiry staff also attended.

This summary does not identify individual participants or organisations. The views and opinions expressed are those of the participants and do not necessarily reflect the ACCC’s views or position on the issues summarised here. No attempt has been made to verify any claims made in the discussion.

Summary of Issues

Participants discussed the following topics during the roundtable:

Topic 1 - Closing the Gap, and the intersection of issues impacting First Nations families and communities regarding access to quality, culturally safe childcare.

Participants observed that while the National Quality Framework and National Quality Standards are important, they do not capture the markers of quality in childcare that are recognised by First Nations communities and parents/guardians.

The primary markers of quality identified by participants are an awareness of elements such as Country, culture, connection, affordability, choice, community, culturally responsive curriculum and co-design. Other kinds of support given to families via childcare services are considered equally important as the childcare program (see notes on Topic 4 below).

Service design must be inclusive of First Nations people's holistic beliefs. Spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual well-being are all linked for First Nations people. These elements also look different in different communities – there is no single First Nations culture. These cultural differences must be considered in service provision, or access remains problematic.

The lack of available, suitable workforce was identified by many participants as a major barrier to accessing and availability of quality, culturally safe childcare.

- Many services struggle to keep educators long enough for them to build consistent relationships with children.
- There is a shortage of First Nations educators (who are more easily able to build connection with children in their care). Some services maintain staff levels above minimum educator-to-child ratios in order to have coverage when staff wish to take leave for sorry business, time on Country, etc.
- Providers have responded to what they describe as the “staffing crisis” in different ways; some have become Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), identifying and training their own staff. Some report they have had to cancel sessions of care due to staffing shortages, which has significant impacts on families and on the children's development.
- Participants noted there was formerly government guidance around prioritising care when sessions of care must be cancelled. Staff feel unsupported when needing to cancel care or prioritise some children over others. They frequently have to choose between the children of essential workers, thereby impacting local services, or First Nations families, which they feel means implicitly rejecting Closing the Gap targets.

The current Childcare Subsidy (CCS) framework for funding care does not work. The increased uptake of care by First Nations families during COVID when childcare was “free” demonstrates that the current system makes care inaccessible to many of those who need it most.

Participants described the “hoops” to jump through for parents, grandparents, and kinship carers to be assessed for CCS eligibility are too many, too hard, and too slow to be resolved.

Topic 2 - The impact of funding models and interactions with CCS/Centrelink on First Nations families and providers.

Many participants spoke of frustration at the barriers faced by First Nations families in interacting with CCS/MyGov/Centrelink. The mainstream funding and eligibility frameworks apply a westernised “one size fits all” model onto diverse First Nations communities with differing needs.

- Participants spoke of delays of multiple months in families getting approved for CCS. Something as small as a typographical error in a name on a government record has delayed an application for a highly vulnerable child for months.
- Families may experience several months’ delay in registering for CCS, but Centrelink will only backpay for 28 days, so if the need for care is urgent, either the family or the service has to cover the additional cost.
- Additional Childcare Subsidy (ACCS) is only accessible after CCS eligibility is determined, so those families facing barriers to access childcare (the target for ACCS) face barriers accessing the subsidy that is supposed to reduce the barriers.
- The time it takes for an assessment or CCS approval for a kinship carer might exceed the length of time for which that person is with the carer.
- Limited access to smart devices, internet, etc, hinder some First Nations people’s ability to interact with Centrelink/MyGov. They might not have birth certificates. A mobile phone may be shared among several family members, etc.

Participants have observed an increase in the number of children presenting with complex needs. These children require additional and specialised staffing to support them, but there is a significant amount of work required to apply for and secure inclusion funding or specialised services. Waiting lists for allied health professionals to assess children for special needs and therefore eligibility for further support are so long as to be non-functioning - the child will have moved on by the time they are approved. One provider has hired its own team to help educators with trauma-informed processes while they wait on assessments for children in the service.

The ACCS system is described as being culturally unsafe. The system requires a child to be identified as “vulnerable” in order to be eligible, creating a real fear that children will be removed. Educators describe feeling uncomfortable being required to make notes about children “at risk” as they feel it hampers relationships with families. For these many families and carers, as well as services, will avoid applying for ACCS funding even when circumstances would justify the additional funding for the child in question.

Participants noted that under the former Budget Based Funded regime, services were able to offer care to children at risk, providing a safe place to be during the day, without needing to wait on approvals from Centrelink. Services supported by the Community Child Care Fund restricted grant (CCCF-R) currently have some flexibility to welcome children before CCS is approved without the risk of incurring a debt for the family or the service.

The feedback from former Budget Based Funded services that have transitioned to CCCF-R is generally negative. Providers preferred the Budget Based Funded model. It had some challenges, but with some adjustments could be a functioning model. There were some benefits introduced in the CCCF-R system (as noted above), so a future system with the flexibility of Budget Based Funded and the workable elements of CCCF-R would be good.

Some services depend on the Community Special Circumstances grant to cover day-to-day expenses in order to meet compliance obligations. There is no guarantee that this money will be available in following years, meaning budgets and planning can only go as far into the future as current grant funding allows. Services should not be depending on these grants in order to be sustainable.

Topic 3 - The effects of the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Cheaper Child Care) Act 2022, including relaxation of the 2018 activity test changes.

Many childcare services are operating at maximum licenced capacity, or the maximum capacity for which they have staff, and so have not noticed any increase in attendance since the relaxation of the activity test. Some providers have observed an increase in numbers on their waitlists.

Participants stated that 36 hours of childcare per fortnight is not enough for children from vulnerable families. Services that have abolished fees (even very low fees) for preschool sessions have seen enrolments increase by up to 300% indicating that cost is a major barrier to accessing childcare for First Nations families. Administrative barriers associated with payment also has an influence.

The number of hours of “free” childcare needs to be dramatically increased for First Nations children, who are some of the most vulnerable in the country. Educators believe it should be closer to 100 hours per fortnight. However, even if this were funded, there would still be capacity issues to be addressed due to workforce shortages.

The CCS system and associated eligibility requirements should not apply to remote indigenous communities. Giving priority to working families over non-working families should be considered where places for sessions of care are limited.

Childcare services are not allowed to charge a lower fee to families/carers who cannot afford the standard fee. Thus, childcare fees do not reflect a family's/carer's ability to pay, the priority needs of children, or barriers to access. This could be addressed through legislation in the future.

The Closing the Gap target of increasing enrolment in pre-school care looks good, but many services see a significant variance between enrolment and attendance. Some services are at capacity according to enrolment figures, but with sorry business, time on Country, holidays, family violence, fear of removal/child protection involvement, and family financial pressures, attendance is very low.

Childcare staff are reluctant to cancel enrolments for children who do not turn up for an extended period as they want to provide care if the child does attend, especially as many of these children are vulnerable, at risk of family violence, etc. However, a child will be at risk of going over their allowable absentee quota and will then lose eligibility for CCS. Many staff

hours each week are invested in communicating with families to help them take up the sessions of care available to them.

Topic 4 - The added challenges faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled centres due to the additional nature of services they provide (e.g. parenting support, Centrelink advocacy, transport).

Participants noted that many of the childcare services most effectively supporting First Nations families have a holistic integrated services approach. It was also noted that funding suitable wraparound services is difficult and costly.

The Aboriginal Child and Family Centre (ACFC) model is a successful model that can include provision of diverse services. The Connected Beginnings program also allows for some wrap around services.

First Nations-led decision making, genuine consultation, and building trust with families are key. Providers need to find out from families what additional services will make a difference to them accessing childcare. A “one size fits all” approach does not work, but the types of services generally valued by families and therefore having an impact on childcare accessibility and uptake include:

- Early intervention pathways.
- Building parenting capacity.
- Transport to assist with attendance.
- Workshops on practical life skills, e.g. how to obtain a birth certificate.
- Provision of meals, clothing, etc, to minimise shame.
- Primary health and allied health.
- Mental health.
- Drug and alcohol safety.
- Assistance with navigating Centrelink/MyGov.
- Advocacy in the child protection space.

There is a cost to providing wrap around services and coordinating external providers. Funding for these is generally piecemeal, from various sources, each requiring different reporting and management, so the staff workload is very high. It tends to be senior staff who need to address these various tasks, meaning they have less time to invest in quality matters for their service.

It takes only a small amount of outside grant funding for additional services, or a few additional trainee staff before a childcare service needs to increase staff hours for financial management/reporting and HR functions.

Sometimes there can be too many outside service providers descending on a childcare location all wanting to offer their services, and this can make parents nervous, especially where there is pre-existing suspicion of government. Wrap around services should operate

as a “one stop shop” coordinated by the local community, rather than multiple outside organisations.

Connected Beginnings has allowed services to have additional staff to focus on less traditional roles such as family support, helping families understand why it is so important that their child attends childcare, going to collect a child with their parent and bring them together to the service due to a child’s anxiety at attendance, etc.

The goal of wrap around services should be to engage families before the point where childcare staff have a mandated obligation to report issues. Culturally safe, accessible services help families engage earlier before there is a fear of child removal, etc.

Topic 5 - Workforce and educator pressures reported in regional and remote locations; the withdrawal of training providers, low wages, lack of First Nations staff, unavailability of housing, and lack of training for the kinds of trauma observed by educators in many services, which all contribute to difficulty in attracting and retaining staff.

Interactions with child protection staff are frequently frustrating to educators and unhelpful to children. Child protection staff visit some services up to three times each day to collect children or arrange visitation, causing other children to ask, “Is it my turn now to be taken away?”

Services have identified the need to increase the number of First Nations workers, for reasons including increasing the attendance of First Nations children. Creating trainee positions increases the numbers but is expensive. National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) 1,000 Jobs Package funding has made training positions possible in some cases where it otherwise wouldn’t have been, but mentoring trainee staff, etc, is still costly and time-consuming for services.

Online learning platforms do not meet the needs of many First Nations people. Some remote services pay for a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) to visit four times a year to deliver face to face learning as this format is the most effective, but there are no local RTOs. There is a lack of access to TAFE training that has been well received in the past. Participants generally agreed that changes to how training has been delivered over recent years has led to poorer outcomes and graduates with less childcare experience.

Flexible pathways can be effective in increasing the number of First Nations educators. Some will start as trainees. Others will start in other roles, e.g. cooking, administration, gardening, or transport, then move into care roles. Senior staff have to build a lot of trust with communities in order for community members to join the organisation. If the employment relationship does not work out, relationships between the community and the service can suffer, and the service loses families.

First Nations staff are generally the lower qualified and lower paid workers in a service. It is challenging to upskill them to manage the complex needs of children who have experienced trauma, etc. There is a need to address the pay and recognition of skills and reinforce the

importance of the work they are doing. First Nations people ought to be in significant roles in organisations, not just junior roles. They can do more than face to face contact with families. They can develop policies, shape pathways for staff, etc.

The number of services operating under staffing waivers suggests there are significant issues with workforce availability in remote areas especially.

Participants estimate that 80% of staff are affected by significant and ongoing trauma. This leads to issues in the workplace and requires assistance to stay in the role or transition to other jobs.

Housing in remote areas is costly and hard to secure. Several participants report that some employees are homeless and couch surf with their children. Services struggle to compete against the remuneration levels of teachers in remote schools. The government often provides housing for teachers and police in remote areas, but not for childcare workers.

Participants stated that they struggle to get governments to understand the cost of doing business in remote communities, and the need for any visitors, trainers, and potential employees to factor in hours-long drives, and accommodation that is often inaccessible due to tourism.

There is no access to a casual relief pool in remote areas. Since COVID this has become more common in metropolitan areas, also.