



Childcare Inquiry Roundtable Summary

First Nations

Face to Face Roundtable – Friday 8 September 2023, Darwin

This document is not a verbatim record of the roundtable, but a summary of the issues raised by the 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 second of 2 roundtables for stakeholders representing First Nations families and communities, held face to face in Darwin on Friday 8 September 2023.

Nineteen stakeholders joined the meeting, including representatives from metropolitan and remote childcare services with high proportions of First Nations children (up to 99%), Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs), Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), and peak bodies. Childcare educators who are themselves First Nations people were among the participants.

The roundtable was chaired by ACCC Deputy Chair Catriona Lowe. Also present were Commissioner Peter Crone (Chair of the Childcare Inquiry Project Board), Childcare Inquiry General Manager Nicole Ross, and other Inquiry staff.

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 shared the following observations regarding a lack of cultural safety as a barrier to accessing childcare:

- Many childcare providers do not know how to implement First Nations culture into their services, and fear judgment if they get it wrong. This results in childcare environments that do not feel culturally safe for First Nations people. First Nations cultural expertise is local and place-based so a “one size fits all approach” to implementing cultural safety cannot work.
- One organisation has developed a package for childcare services and schools to build their cultural safety. Some have expressed interest, but none have fully implemented it yet.
- Expectations considered the norm in mainstream services feel culturally unsafe for many First Nations families. For example, the fear of shame keeps families away if they think they will not meet the expectations such as arriving on time, supplying lunch, and bringing certain items.
- Parents fear they will be judged if they bring their children into a childcare service without the right food for lunch, or the required clothes. Services need to prioritise working with local communities to ensure parents feel confident and able to ask for assistance where necessary.
- There is high cost in bringing local First Nations groups into a service to provide cultural awareness training. In addition, the changes in thinking and practice required can be significant, especially for staff from other cultural backgrounds.
- Having First Nations staff who can speak language to children is helpful in making them feel comfortable, safe and included.

Participants agreed that the markers of quality valued by First Nations families and communities are often different to those valued most in mainstream services, and which are recognised by the childcare system:

- Families in First Nations communities often have different hopes and expectations regarding childcare compared to families in mainstream services. In many cases parents are not looking to develop academically high-performing children, but good community members.
- Trying to fit this difference in priorities into early childhood programs is difficult. Several participants described this difference in priorities with the expression, “square peg in a round hole.”

- The markers of quality valued by First Nations parents include a feeling of safety, children being fed, an experience of love, embrace and community (demonstrated by a service's willingness to purchase a bus to collect children from town camps to attend care, for example).
- Participants agreed that many services are doing great cultural work locally, but that it is not valued as quality by the system or people outside. As a result, educators do not understand the value of what they are providing. This work does not fit into the learning outcomes valued by the system, so educators doing the work do not feel valued.
- Because of the differences between mainstream practices and priorities, and First Nations practices and priorities, the system always wants to shape the First Nations approach to make it more like, and fit within, the mainstream model. Instead, First Nations practices and priorities should be seen as a separate, valuable model.
- Where childcare services have been able to increase the number of First Nations people on staff, attendance and outcomes improve. However, there is no local staff training available in regional and remote areas.
- First Nations children need to be culturally strong if they are to be successful in school.
- Services should be encouraged to find creative ways of connecting with their local community, e.g. find an uncle to run the walking bus to bring the kids in each morning. This example values men, demonstrates that there are jobs connected to the service, and promotes language, culture, and community connections.
- Quality in the existing model is linked significantly to infrastructure, but in remote Australia, the infrastructure cannot be established, so quality is seen to be lacking.

Participants made several observations regarding children's and families' interactions with state child protection systems in the childcare space:

- Families coming to community-led services appreciate the no-judgment space around disability and child protection they generally experience in these services.
- Children from remote or regional areas who are in the child protection system may end up in a town/city far from home, where no one speaks their language. This can have significant impact on their behaviour and engagement in childcare services.
- Being deemed eligible for Additional Childcare Subsidy (ACCS) flags vulnerability and attracts attention from the child protection system, but the child may qualify for ACCS simply because they are living with a grandparent for a time. This reduces First Nations families' willingness to engage with services/subsidies to which they are entitled.

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

Participants identified a number of barriers experienced by First Nations families in engaging with CCS/MyGov/Centrelink. These include challenges posed by language, remoteness, past negative experience, and a lack of understanding of the system:

- Families who have had negative experiences with government departments are often reluctant to provide the information required for them to be approved for Childcare Subsidy (CCS), ACCS, etc.

- A community's childcare service may be identified as eligible for Community Child Care Fund – Restricted (CCCF-R) funding because there is such a significant need there. But if the local families are unwilling or unable to apply for CCS, this much-needed service cannot be delivered.
- Prior to current funding models, one community had very high usage of childcare. This has dropped dramatically as out of pocket fees have increased under CCS and families are no longer able to afford care.
- Participants report that “accessing Centrelink is too hard. Communication from Centrelink is bad.” Families need help in navigating complicated systems, and they tell childcare services that removing these barriers is a high priority for them. Parents and carers are engaging with an unfamiliar system in a language that is not their own. This raises questions of whether they are truly able to give informed consent to the arrangements they enter into.
- The lack of understanding complicated funding arrangements extends to child protection staff, who don't understand CCS and ACCS.

A lack of flexibility in the CCS system is frustrating for First Nations families and providers. This is especially noticeable in a failure to recognise First Nations kinship care relationships, and cultural and community priorities.

- The system is not flexible or agile enough to manage kinship care arrangements. A family member may be looking after the child, but if they are not the person the government thinks they should be engaging with, nothing can be done. It might take 6 months to apply for kinship care. Would-be carers often give up on the process and just look after the children unofficially, which creates further challenges down the track (as noted above).
- The system does not make allowance for families in remote areas who tend to be highly mobile. Sorry business and time on Country mean children are absent for longer periods and they use up their allowable absences. CCS eligibility is then cancelled. Some centres carry significant debt from these situations rather than passing it onto families or carers who cannot afford it. Services also reported carrying debt from past childcare sessions rather than passing them on to a new guardian or carer, who has taken up responsibility for a child.
- Unrealistic expectations regarding activities such as transporting children who live on community threaten the funding of the service. Community disengages when they are told their children cannot walk to and from the service which is across the road from their home.
- Differences between the regulatory burden for school vs childcare is frustrating for educators. A child doesn't need to be “signed on” to the school bus, but does need to be “signed on” for Out of School Hours Care (OSHC), in the same location, on the same bus.

Delays faced by First Nations families in being approved for CCS and/or other funding were noted:

- Delays in getting children approved for CCS and into care have very high stakes in family violence situations as the child needs a safe space. There does not appear to be any recognition of priority or significant need in the system.
- Long delays in waiting for eligibility or assessment outcomes, often with no support besides what the childcare service can offer, means families then tell other families in their community not to bother with putting their child in care.

- Delays in getting kinship care approved force some children back into the child protection system.

The cost of accessing care remains high, particularly in remote Australia. For many First Nations people, cost is a barrier to accessing childcare:

- Service delivery costs are very high in remote locations. Local First Nations families can be priced out of services, and the bulk of children at a service ends up being children in the child protection system, paid for by state/territory governments.
- One service in a First Nations community sees children standing outside the fence explaining that they cannot come in today “because mum can’t afford it.” The daily fee is \$1.50. Employees of government departments with little understanding of families’ ability to pay have been observed calling this fee amount “a pittance,” to the frustration of childcare staff.

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

Participants had seen no noticeable change to attendance as a result of the activity test being relaxed in July 2023. Most services represented in the roundtable have a waitlist for places, so the changes to the activity test have no immediate impact on enrolments or attendance.

The activity test is based on market conditions that do not exist in regional and remote areas. The most vulnerable families cannot meet the criteria. It should be abolished. Children who are the most highly vulnerable should receive full financial support for childcare attendance.

Removing the activity test for First Nations children and other vulnerable children would enable them to be in a safe place, and for too many children, home is not a safe place due to family violence, etc. Childcare services are already recognised in their communities as a safe place for lots of children. Many children stay beyond their paid hours and the services absorb the cost.

Removing the activity test will also contribute to the viability of childcare services in the longer term. This, in turn, supports local communities, because when Early Childhood Education and Care services close, access to other services also suffers (because parents and guardians working at other services lose the childcare they need in order to be able to work – e.g. police, health services).

The experience during the COVID pandemic and the increase in uptake of childcare in First Nations communities when childcare was made “free,” demonstrates that price is a barrier keeping First Nations children out of childcare.

Flexible block funding is the model that is needed in the First Nations Early Childhood Education and Care space. This needs to be sustainable, not just repeated short term grants. The government changed the health service funding model as First Nations people could not navigate Medicare. Something similar could happen in the childcare space.

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).

Wrap around services are a major feature of childcare services most effectively meeting the needs of First Nations families and communities in regional and remote areas. An example was given of a childcare worker who, by chance, witnessed a grandmother and 2 young children escaping family violence. The service was able to take the children in, connect the family to counselling, housing pathways, food support, and developmental assistance.

The above experience contrasts with how one family described their experience of trying to avail themselves of assistance pathways; “White room after white room, after white room, with people we didn’t know, talking to us in a language we didn’t understand.”

There cannot be a “one-size fits all” approach to identifying which services should be offered in wrap around services, as the needs and priorities of communities vary. However, there are many specialist and referral pathways that are difficult for lots of families and guardians to access, which childcare services can assist with accessing:

- voluntary employment opportunities
- housing referral pathways
- crisis support
- family violence support
- supporting families in getting children to school, including by walking them to and from school.

During the COVID pandemic, many services were able to provide wrap around services, such as helping families obtain vaccinations. Some services have a similar community-support function during floods and fires.

Services are the primary identifiers of when a child needs more help. Early Childhood Education and Care might be the only relationship outside the family able identify when a child needs further assistance.

Some families and guardians may be distrustful of the local health clinic. In extreme cases they worry that their child will be removed if they go to the clinic. However, the same services provided in wrap around services attached to the Early Childhood Education and Care service feel safe.

The approach to wrap around services must consider that some children in Outside School Hours Care services have been through men’s or women’s business and are considered adults in their communities. The services offered needs to be broader than just those targeted at families with young children.

Wrap around services must be well-coordinated and developed in consultation with the local community. The following experiences were shared:

- When wrap around services are poorly coordinated, families need to tell their story to multiple people over and over, which is time consuming, frustrating, and undermines confidence in the system.
- One First Nations community had a service provider contact them announcing their imminent arrival and the list of services they would be running on various days. The community knew nothing of this in advance. The community-led Outside School Hour Care service was already running similar programs and would have been a more logical recipient of the funding. The service provider did not remain in community long and the services and funding disappeared, with no services being available to the community at the end.
- One First Nations community of 150 people has 36 child-focussed programs delivered by 36 organisations, none of which was requested by the community.

The more remote from the centre of government a community is, the less monitoring of service delivery standards there appears to be. The best way to ensure service standards are met is to transition to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations providing these services with appropriate funding. Shared decision-making and a transfer of service delivery to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations should be a priority reform.

A possible first step towards developing/expanding wrap around services would be to place clinical staff (Occupational Therapy, etc.) in Early Childhood Education and Care services to help with children with special needs. Clinical staff are trained in a very clinical model and would need to use their skills in the less clinical space of Early Childhood Education and Care. Other steps being taken to address these issues include drawing clinical students into the Early Childhood Education and Care system during their studies, so they have some familiarity with the setting, and to help them operate in a less clinical manner. Educators also need to be given the confidence to interact with clinical staff.

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.

Participants shared many experiences of the training and development pathways for childcare educators:

- Online training often does not meet the needs of First Nations educators and others in remote areas. Many First Nations people do not have the literacy levels in English to engage with the learning.

- There is a significant burden placed on services when they take on staff in training roles. The Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) do not offer as much support as they could or should, meaning centre directors and senior staff need to invest hours each week in supporting trainees.
- There needs to be better supports built into the system to encourage educators to undertake study.
- Registered Training Organisations change their requirements repeatedly, with the result that some childcare staff have been studying for 10 years and have not yet completed an award, often having to repeat training modules already undertaken.
- There needs to be a change in thinking in order to attract First Nations staff. The process starts early, not with a 20-something prospective employee, but a 13-year-old who wants to work in Early Childhood Education and Care. They need support and encouragement all the way along to help them stay in school, etc.
- Because of the challenges noted above, some services are becoming Registered Training Organisations and starting to realise the benefits of that. Though this again is costly.
- Educators in remote areas must travel to get training and mentoring. This is difficult when the educator has their own children to look after, and they cannot easily leave town on their own. Participants spoke of trying to patch together funding from different streams in order to provide training more locally, along with provisions for mums to leave their kids at the local Child and Parent Centre while they do the training, etc.
- The latest training package, announced in the last budget has some better options for First Nations people, but there has been little uptake. Participants speculated that perhaps the communication about these changes has not been good.

Availability and sustainability of the childcare workforce is seen to be a major challenge across the First Nations Early Childhood Education and Care sector.

- The cost of staffing is high for small services in remote areas, and many educators feel stretched by the workload. Staff feel uncomfortable taking time off for sick business, or when facing burnout, because of the added burden it places on their colleagues.
- Most staff recognise that they do not have the knowledge to care for kids with complex needs, experience of trauma, etc. Educators have multiple roles - educator, therapist, cleaner, cook, and more. They likely feel confident in only one of these areas, which can lead to further stress and burnout.
- It is difficult to attract skilled staff for low money. This is a particular struggle for Out of School Hours Care services, who seek to employ qualified staff for three hours/day. Many Out of School Hours Care educators work two or three jobs to get by, contributing to burnout. This, combined with the high proportion of university students working in Out of School Hours Care just for the period of their degree, results in a constant cycle of recruitment and training.
- It was acknowledged that the sector is hopeful that wages will increase in the relatively short term, supporting educators and making Early Childhood Education and Care jobs more attractive. However, pay increases will make it hard for some First Nations centres to stay open due to the increased costs, since their viability is already borderline.
- These workforce challenges put pressure on childcare services to find cheaper staff – those with lower qualification and less experience. This results in the children who are most vulnerable being placed into the care of the workers with the least qualifications and experience.

- Small programs that see educators in mainstream services go on secondment to remote services are showing promising results. Consideration needs to be given to how to encourage more educators to do this, and how to get larger provider organisations to reach out to remote services and ask what they need.