
A National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

First wave of public consultations on reform proposals,
August and September 2008 – Summary of outcomes*

January 2009

* Note: The information contained in this document summarises the views and recommendations of third parties. This material was assembled in good faith, and does not necessarily reflect the considered views of the Commonwealth, or State or Territory Governments or indicate a commitment to a particular course of action.

Introduction

In December 2007, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a partnership between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments to pursue substantial reform in the areas of education, skills and early childhood development.

- COAG asked its Productivity Agenda Working Group (PAWG) to deliver these reforms in the area of early childhood education and care.

The reforms envisage a new national quality framework, comprising:

- strong national quality standards for early childhood education and care;
- a quality rating system to drive continuous improvement and provide parents with robust and relevant information about the quality of learning and care;
- streamlining or integrating licensing and accreditation arrangements; and
- a national Early Years Learning Framework.

In bringing this about, PAWG recognises that there will be implications for the existing and future early childhood education and care workforce, as well as to the cost to parents and the broader community.

PAWG sought input from a wide range of people and organisations to assist in developing these broad options, through:

- the release of a discussion paper on 2 August 2008;
- a public consultation process during August and September 2008, comprising:
 - 48 open public forums around Australia, involving around 2,500 people from across the early childhood education and care sector;
 - 35 focus group discussions, principally involving families and service providers; and
 - 34 in depth interviews with key stakeholders and people who were unable to attend a forum or focus group (e.g. isolated parents).

In addition, a public invitation was issued to provide written submissions on the issues raised in the discussion paper. Around 400 submissions were received.

Key findings from the consultations

The consultations found a diverse range of views, which was expected given the wide variety of parents and families who use early childhood education and care services, the diversity of services and settings across the early childhood education and care sector, and the variations in current practice across the nine jurisdictions involved in delivering, licensing, accrediting and funding early childhood education and care.

While acknowledging this diversity, some common themes did appear:

- there is considerable impetus for reforms across the sector, with widespread support for the general thrust of the reforms as agreed at COAG and outlined in the discussion paper;

National Quality Standards

- there is cross-sector support for the notion of stronger quality standards, especially nationally consistent standards focussed on 'key drivers' of quality such as relationships between staff and children, family and community partnerships, a differentiated play-based curriculum, staff leadership and management;
- parents were particularly keen to ensure that national quality standards included reference to the health and safety/security of their children;
- there was broad agreement that there needs to be a focus on the three structural indicators of quality – staff qualifications, child-to-staff ratios and group size;
- while the sector broadly recognises the importance of having properly qualified staff delivering early childhood education and care, there was recognition of the impact this might have for the existing and future early childhood education and care workforce, and for the costs of delivering services;
- parents, especially of children 0-2 years of age, tended to place a higher emphasis on a carer's capacity for nurturing and caring rather than on formal qualifications;

Quality Ratings System

- the concept of a ratings system received a mixed response. There was some general support for a three-tiered system that drove continuous improvement in quality delivery, and little support for an A – E rating system as set out in the discussion paper;
- an example of a three-tiered system that was expressed across each of the consultation formats was a 'provisional', 'operating effectively' and 'centre of excellence' model. In this model, a 'provisional' service would receive active assistance and support to address aspects of its operations that required improvement;
- it was broadly agreed by parents and providers that an A – E system would not necessarily provide useful information on the services actually being provided, and cause anxiety for parents faced with needing to place their children in a 'D' or 'E' rated service. Conversely, services receiving an 'A' rating may take the opportunity to raise fees;

Regulatory Approach

- there was strong support for a nationally consistent approach to regulation of the early childhood education and care sector;
- service providers sought a reduction in the 'cost of compliance', especially the administrative burden of meeting compliance and a reduction in the overlap between Commonwealth and state/territory licensing and accreditation requirements;
- parents supported licensing and accreditation arrangements that gave them consistency and certainty around the quality of services being provided;

Early Years Learning Framework

- the first wave of consultations indicated that there was not a strong understanding of the concept of an Early Years Learning Framework, suggesting that further information on this is required. A draft Early Years Learning Framework is now available (see website link below). Further EYLF consultations were held nationally during November and December 2008;

Workforce Issues

- workforce issues were consistently raised in all consultation formats, and are widely seen as a key constraint to the successful implementation of the reform proposals;
- the interrelated issues of low wages, high turnover and difficulty attracting and retaining staff were seen as being of paramount importance;
- service providers generally expressed willingness to support the ongoing development of their existing staff, though were concerned at the cost, especially in terms of time 'off line', and the impact this could have on the continuing operation of their service;
- there was general acknowledgement of the need to raise the perceived status of early childhood education and care, including to recognise it as a profession;
- participants noted that there were likely to be cost implications to upgrading the status, and therefore salaries, of people working in early childhood education and care;

Indigenous Families and Services [^]

The consultations found that:

- Indigenous parents valued the routine and structure child care provided and saw it as supporting the children's transition to school;
- Indigenous parents' idea of quality emphasised health, nutrition and culturally and linguistically sensitive care;
- Training local people in the local community was seen as the best way forward;
- The following cultural and structural issues were raised:
 - concern that aspects of a service valued by Indigenous parents may not be recognised in a ratings system;
 - the regulatory system needs to be responsive to local culture, circumstances and problems, especially in remote areas;
 - difficulty attracting and retaining Indigenous staff, especially young staff;
 - problems in obtaining and 'upgrading' qualifications, especially in rural and remote areas;
 - lack of service access and affordability, often exacerbated in remote areas by a lack of local infrastructure such as staff housing;

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families and Services

- families in culturally and linguistically diverse communities place a high emphasis on the appropriate balance between reflecting cultural values and readiness for 'mainstream' society and schooling;
- availability (including choice) and cost of services were also key issues for these families;

Families of Children with Disability

- families of children with disability reported finding it very difficult to access services that are able to address the particular needs of their children, and often find themselves having to 'buy in' additional support services;
- reliance on finding staff with the expertise and understanding to care for their child further highlights the need to consider strategies for the retention of staff;

[^] This section of the document as originally published has now been amended. Following further consideration, it is felt that this summary better represents the views expressed across all elements of the consultation process, including the written submissions and in-depth interviews.

Transitional arrangements

- the sector generally was concerned at the timing of implementation and transitional arrangements, believing that successful achievement of worthwhile outcomes should not be unduly rushed.

Next steps

The outcomes from this first wave of consultations, including copies of all written submissions, have been made available to PAWG through the Early Childhood Development Sub-group for consideration in the development of more detailed draft documents, including:

- a set of draft national quality standards;
- draft models of service quality rating systems;
- a draft Early Years Learning Framework (now available at www.dest.gov.au/sectors/early_childhood/policy_initiatives_reviews/coag/The_Early_Years_Learning_Framework.htm); and
- proposed regulatory arrangements.

Further consultations on these draft documents and on a Regulatory Impact Statement for the reform proposals (including a cost benefit analysis) will occur in the first half of 2009. Details of upcoming consultations will be made available on the www.mychild.gov.au website.

As part of this development process, there will be some focussed engagement with selected early childhood education and care providers early in 2009. The aim of this phase of the development process will be to test initial drafts of the documents, testing assumptions, identifying issues and refining details. This should ensure that the draft documents taken to the next wave of public consultations are practical proposals for genuine, achievable reform.

Further updates on progress towards a national quality framework will also be available on the www.office.mychild.gov.au website.

Acknowledgements

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PAWG and DEEWR also acknowledge the work of the Open Mind Research Group and Essence Communications in facilitating the public forums, conducting the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, and reviewing the submissions received prior to the due date.