



Out of School Hours Care

Essential but Undervalued

Submission from Network of Community Activities to Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal
May 2023

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Findings

About Network

Network of Community Activities (Network) is the peak representative body for Out of School Hours Care providers in NSW. Network is a recognised leader in the field of school age care and is the largest membership organisation in Australia dedicated to the advocacy, promotion, resourcing and development of play, recreation and leisure activities for 5-14year olds.

Established in 1974, Network is one of the oldest not-for-profit peak bodies in the Australian Children's Education and Care sector. Network strives to resource and facilitate Out of School Hour Services in NSW to enrich, inspire and support children to engage in creative arts, play and learning.

Network is the proud representative of New South Wales on the National Outside School Hours Services Alliance (NOSHSA), which represents the collective interests of OOSH Services across all States and Territories.

We believe High Quality After school programmes have become an important part of childhood and are rich environments providing essential play opportunities to help children thrive!

Network is a Charity, A Company limited by Guarantee and Not for Profit entity.

Acknowledgement to Country

Network acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we work, and of the lands on which the Services we supported throughout this project reside. We pay our respects and thanks to elders past, present and future.

Acknowledgements

Network of Community Activities would like to extend our sincerest gratitude to the Out of School Hours Services sector who provide Network with regular feedback about the issues affecting the sector. We draw on our members collective voices to inform this response and our intention is to cover each area within the scope of the inquiry.



Out of School Hours Care

Essential but Undervalued

The importance of middle childhood is often overlooked and given less attention than other stages of childhood. Time out of school is an important time for children and is often a missed opportunity for supporting children's overall wellbeing. Out of School Hour services are undercapitalized for supporting children's overall wellbeing.

We need to be more holistic in our approach to supporting children now and into the future. We know Australian children are missing out and now is the time to be bold and ambitious in our thinking.

Our submission will focus purely on the Out of School Hours Sector.

Overlooked and Undervalued

The Out of School Hour Care is continuously overlooked and under-valued. The workforce is in crisis and Covid has had a significant impact on the sector with reduced enrolments making some services unviable for some smaller stand-alone operators.

The economic stability of Out of School Hour Care services providers has been shaken for a number of reasons:

- High rents in schools
- Not seen as a valued partner within the Education sector
- Workforce crisis, pay and conditions and losing our great leaders to other industries
- Covid impact
- Inclusion of children with additional needs – policies not fit for purpose
- Vulnerable and First Nations children underrepresented

We are very extremely concerned about the lack of access for vulnerable children, First Nations children and our regional and remote communities who are all missing out. We need to be putting children at the heart of any system and providing access for all children who need it. Out of School Hour services can be the wrap-around service children need to support them grow and thrive.

Investment needs to be well planned

Investment in our sector is ad hoc!

A clear example of this is NSW 120 million investment which was not consulted on and funds not directed in the right or the most “value for money” way.

- **\$40 million over four years** to provide rental subsidies to service providers located at public primary schools if they can demonstrate savings have been passed on to families – why not make rents more affordable in the first place for the community based, parent managed and NFP sector
- **\$20 million over four years** for an implementation fund focused on schools where a standalone service may not be viable, including smaller schools and rural and remote communities; We need a different model and some community development and exploratory projects supported by organisations like Network working with communities to explore the local context and community need.
- **\$8.5 million over four years** for a team of specialists – we need an OOSH specialist team who has sector expertise – and reports to an advisory group. The BASC reform team employs contract managers who do not have the expertise of the NQF or quality provision or understanding about OOSH. We need a team dedicated to OOSH within the NSW Government.
- **\$2 million for a new website** and mobile app to allow parents and carers to search for and book student places online. This is a complete waste of public funds there are a number of sites available for parents to access care information.

We need a bold and ambitious plan

The NSW Voucher Scheme

We then had the NSW voucher scheme. This was policy on the run and not well thought out at all. There was no consultation and whilst funding did help family fees it took a toll on Educators who had to administer the scheme which was administratively burdensome.

Unqualified Sector – NQF requires experience and knowledge base within services

It remains unbelievable that the NSW government has not focused on supporting Educators with qualifications. We are currently the only state in Australia that does not have mandated qualifications for people working in Out of School Hours Care.

There is National inconsistency across the states in particular the laws and regulations as well as other components of the NQF. This combined with the lack of professional recognition and professional status of Educators drives our workforce into other professions. Educators are often isolated and unsupported which then impacts the recruitment and retention of the workforce.

Our sector remains undervalued and under-resourced!

We need a bold and ambitious plan

The facilities services often operate out of are often not purpose built or fit for purpose – some do not even have access to running hot water in public schools in 2023. This impacts quality and it makes providing care for the individual needs of children who can be challenging to manage. Our sector remains undervalued and under-resourced! With long-standing issues continuously not addressed which impacts the quality, access and outcomes for children.

We believe the Out of School Hours sector requires a bold and ambitious plan with significant investment to address the long-standing inequities that children, families and providers continually face. Now is the time to strengthen the Out of School Hour sector to ensure that parents (particularly women) who wish to work can remain or return to the workforce, The sector needs to be valued and requires the appropriate public investment and proper recognition given to the workforce. It should not be underestimated how these services can support academic achievement and the overall well-being of children.



Workforce

Essential but Undervalued

Recruitment and retention crisis

The pandemic has highlighted and intensified the pre-existing challenges of the Out of School Hours Care workforce, including high levels of turnover. Services don't have enough Educators and this is impacting all who work in the sector including the agencies that support services.

There is wide spread low morale, mental health and well being issues. Our sector feels devalued, invisible and ignored.

There is a lack of recognition for OOSH in the NSW Government and this filters down into schools. There is a wide spread feeling of Being undervalued, under paid both in government policy, but also by parents and community.

There is a clear and urgent need to address the recruitment, retention crisis and improve pay conditions and career paths of all OOSH and EC Educators. This cannot wait! We need a workforce strategy tailored specific to the Out of School Hours sector who has different workforce issues and needs.

Access to and choice of services

Parents need care at the school or in a nearby location to the school the child attends. It can be a challenge to access a place due to the facilities the service has access to. The school hall is often not the best facility as it is noisy, lacks cosy spots and can be cold! All school sites should provide a "home base" or a OOSH hub. Out of school hour services need at least one dedicated space for quality care. These facilities should include a:

- Kitchen
- Toilets
- Office space
- Play space which meets the 3.35 sq metres regulations - not 2 sq metres
- A place where team meetings & programme planning can take place.

The shortages of places is due to:

- Workforce crisis
- Insufficient value placed on OOSH within the school & wider community
- Lack of adequate facilities made available to OOSH and teaching staff unwilling to share space

Supply of services

Regional and remote areas are not provided for adequately. The pandemic has pushed already fragile regional and remote services into crisis. There is not enough supply and a different model of funding is required. Every child in a public school or otherwise should have access to care at their school or in a nearby community service.

We need to rethink the model and what is suitable for these communities. There needs to be a fund where communities can apply to build and work with experts such as Network to grow and create more viable models of care.



Affordability

of Services

The community based and NFP sectors are more affordable and offer more flexibility for parent users. Our sector is increasingly unable to offer casual or irregular bookings as permanent booking gives a reliable source of income. This impacts shift workers and other families who have irregular patterns of work and require casual or flexible bookings. The cost of living and increased public school rents have added to the operational costs of running a service and this impacts affordability especially in Vacation Care. We believe strongly that Out of School Hour services should be for all children and currently vulnerable and low socio- economic families miss out.

Long-standing Parent Managed Services

Network is extremely concerned about these entities which are fast eroding and being tendered out. This is being driven by governments who do not value a parent model of operation or community choice. We believe this also impacts affordability for families as there is no doubt these services are more affordable and also understand the local community context and needs.

There is a significant growth in large off-shore corporations taking over the Out of School Hours market and this is not in the best interest of children or community or the workforce.

For Community

A community-based model of management made up of parents is a cost neutral management model as the Board of Directors are all volunteers and all funds are reinvested back into the service, community and the quality of care.

There are huge benefits to these models of operation building community capacity, understanding community context and needs. It is also good for children to see their parents involved in their service and create a community of giving back! Why are these services being put to tender. It makes no sense as they are high quality and understand the local context!

Vacation Care

Vacation care is the most unaffordable component of care within the Out of School Hours sector and often restricts parent access. Excursions which are beneficial can be costly as can be the staffing costs this combined with unaffordable rents in public schools can make Vacation Care unaffordable for parents. This can lead to children being left home alone! The activity test also restricts vulnerable children's access – this was proven in COVID when Vacation Care was highly subsidised and more accessible for children.

We need to grow provision in rural and remote areas of NSW and there needs to be financial support for organisations such as Network to support these communities to establish and meet the community need.

Privatisation of the Sector

Our sector has seen a significant growth in for profit making entities.

These entities put profits before children and Educators receive the minimum pay and conditions. Many Educators working in the NFP and Parent managed services do not wish to work for these large corporations. If they lose their jobs they leave the sector and do not return. In a workforce crisis this is not ideal. Many of the NFP and community-based sectors retain staff. These entities are the preferred employers.

Many large corporations strategically purchase high quality services for their quality rating. This adds to their quality portfolio. We do not believe that service approvals should transfer their rating.

Partnerships with Schools

The increased costs of rents charged by public schools is also impacting the overall fees of the Out of School Hour Care sector. Services are often seen as the cash cow for the school which is deeply concerning. Rents in NSW are often inconsistent and rent increases are given without adequate notice.

Accessibility

We know from our membership engagement that the current policy for supporting children with additional needs is woefully inadequate and is not fit for purpose. Many services choose not to access the funding for the following reasons:

Application and ongoing administration

- it's too complex and time consuming for services to navigate and complete. It is often outside Educators skill sets and the ongoing reporting is burdensome and irrelevant. The Service Inclusion Plan is unhelpful.

One-on-one support

- some children require one-on-one support. It can be for the short, medium or long term to be fully included. They may need support with toileting, feeding and the current policy does not allow for this. Which hinders inclusion.

Demand exceeds supply

- There are not enough places for children who require high support needs and some schools who educate children in a special school need provision on site with higher Educator to child ratio.

Educators Wage subsidy

- does not cover actual costs and services are often out of pocket. Sometimes specialist expertise is required and Educators need to have the relevant specialist training however, the subsidy is woefully inadequate to meet these cost

Inadequate facilities and lack of dedicated space

- the majority of OOSH services are located on school sites and there is a perception that facilities are fit for purpose. This is often not the case and many of the facilities offered can be located in school halls which do not allow for quality programming, they can be long distances from toilets, without adequate space to do complete administration, manage children's behaviour or speak privately with parents. Some do not have kitchens or hot water which makes offering nutritiously appropriate food difficult. Lack of security of tenure or short team licences can hinder quality care and access.

Relationship with schools

- this varies considerably. The Out of School Hour Care sector needs to be recognised as an equal partner and valued within the school community. These relationships impact every aspect of operations including accessibility for children with additional needs.

All of the above issues impact accessibility.

*Some children
require one-on-
one support*



Outcomes

For Children

Outside school hours care (OSHC) is a significant site of care, play and learning for children aged five to twelve years.

The Out of School Hour Care sector has many educational and development benefits for children. They provide play rich environments and can support children struggling at school to engage more with school like. We need a to shift mindsets in relation to the Out of School Hour Care sector and it should be valued for the benefits it offers children:

- Supporting children's wellbeing
- Fostering relationships
- Learning through play
- Connecting to community

Middle childhood is often overlooked. There needs to be stronger links between the school and the Out of School supporting the holistic development of children. We need a more integrated approach and more linkages for all the different agencies contributing to the health and wellbeing of children.

There are numerous recent reports highlighting the mental health and wellbeing concerns of pre-pandemic children. One in seven children was found to have a mental health disorder.

Our sector can-not continue to meet the needs of these children without the adequate resources and support. We need a more holistic approach to children to enable them to thrive.

Children can arrive at OOSH hungry and lack nutritional food. There is an escalation in concerning conditions including eating disorders, obesity. Our sector, often with limited kitchen facilities (and often no kitchen facilities or hot water) are trying their best to meet some of these basic needs.

Workforce participation and economic growth

After school care is still limited in supply restricting workforce participation. Many do not offer flexibility or cater to the needs of seasonal workers. Educators struggle to find care for their own children and can leave the sector when having their own children. Low-income families are often working unpredictable schedules and this can lead to leaving children home alone or using unregulated arrangements.

Children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, vulnerable children –

The workforce participation model does not always support children who are vulnerable. This is concerning as Out of School Hours services can provide a safe and supportive environment. They provide positive social, emotional and learning through play for children as long as they have nutritional food. Over all they can broaden educational opportunities, provide social and emotional learning and create a safe place for children adding enormous value to the lives of children especially children who are vulnerable.

These children can often struggle at school and attending Out of School Hour services can add value to children's overall health and wellbeing. Out of School Hours is a learning environment offering a supervised play space for this generation of children. We know children benefit hugely from spending time with other children. We believe all children deserve access to Out of School Hours and the concept of a "whole child and whole of school approach" which should include the Out of School Hour Care sector.

First Nations Children

Data indicates that first nations children are under-represented in Out of School Hours Care. This is for the following reasons

- Workforce participation model
- Out of pocket cost
- Lack of Educators who identify as indigenous as part of the workforce.
- Lack of knowledge and limited awareness of services
- Administrative complexity

Government

Investment

The efficiency and effectiveness of government investment in the sector

COVID has certainly highlighted some of the limitations and flaws of the current systems. The CCS is too complex for families to navigate and administratively burdensome to services to administer. This takes Educators away from important work with children. It requires Business Management skills and many Educators do not have specific training in this.

In Covid the CCS system had to be put on hold due to being inflexible! Services should have the ability to waive fees for children in crisis, vulnerable children or at risk children. Policy is often poorly thought-out and not reflective of the needs of the sector. We can do better!

There is little collaboration between the commonwealth and states for example In NSW voucher scheme was made available to families with fee relief. A good idea in theory however the administration was a manual process and added hours and hours of administration to services. Providers were costly to administer. There was no consultation and this is a clear example of a poorly thought-out government policy. Out of School Hour services are further disadvantaged as the subsidy does not reflect the real hourly rate to operate a service and there needs to be a special subsidy given to services to support children who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or require additional support. The current system does not address the needs of these children or families.

Breakdown the silos between government agencies

In the Education and Care sector there is a fragmented tapestry of inconsistent services, to support the sector and families. These are difficult to navigate and Educators parents and community members shouldn't have to understand the complexities of government just to find the right services. Creating a connected government is a core responsibility of our public sector and at the very heart of government. and often there is little to no expertise and all too often consultants are used

who make recommendations that are not shared or followed through on.

This is very frustrating for the NFP and community sector who often give their time willingly for little reward. We need a system that is child centred with integrated approaches that focus on the wellbeing of children and improved outcomes for children. We should be striving to change to a wellbeing system that focuses on early intervention.

Conclusion

Every-day Out of School Educators play a significant role in nurturing children and helping children to succeed. Children's time out of school is often overlooked and not valued as a significant part of childhood. Out of School Hour services support children's development in many ways

Time out of school is a significant part of a child's time and Out of School Hours care investments are essential to creating an aligned and accessible Education and Care system. Stable, affordable, quality Out of School Hours care provides economic stability for families by allowing parents to have fewer work interruptions due to a lack of before-school, afterschool, vacation care. It also provides safe, healthy environments for children as they grow older and their needs change. These investments can also support higher wages, increased benefits, and greater professional development opportunities for providers.



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