Council of Single Mothers and their Children

TO: Education and Employment References Committee

DATE: 18 September

Re: Inquiry into the quality and safety of Australia's early childhood education and care system

Dear Committee members,

Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc. (CSMC) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1969 by single mothers to secure a better life for women parenting alone and their children. We achieve change by championing the agency, rights and needs of single mothers and their children and by providing specialist support services to over 3000 women per year. In addition, we have 6200 members, over 10,000 active followers on social media and 52,000 website users.

Childcare is, and has been for many years, a profound consideration for single mothers. As early as 1972, single mothers were acutely frustrated by the expectation that they should be in paid employment (as indeed, many already were) but could neither access subsidised childcare nor claim childcare expenses as a tax concession. When the Howard government withdrew capital funding and operational subsidies for community-based long daycare centres in 1998, Council of Single Mothers and their Children objected strenuously: *"(This Government) wants to see a free-market approach, where they seem to think that centres should vie for children, like supermarkets vie for customers."*[i] Concerns escalated in 2006 when the Welfare to Work changes came into effect, forcing single mothers into work whether or not suitable and safe childcare and out of school hours care was available.

We address only the terms of reference where we have the experience to comment.

We wish the Committee all the best with your deliberations and will be happy to provide more information should it be useful.

Yours sincerely,

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The health and safety of children in childcare services across the country

Our recommendations to improve the health and safety of children in childcare services across the country are:

1. Put the wellbeing of children at the heart of all decision-making about this matter. The National Children's Commissioner has been calling for this across the whole of government, and it is vital. We will know we have achieved this when it is no longer possible for a single child to be subject to any form of abuse in childcare in Australia.
2. Be very wary of ideas such as CCTV cameras in all centres. Visual images of children in vulnerable positions are at the heart of much cyber pornography and may attract cyber criminals.
3. The single best way to increase safety is to increase staff ratios and training (particularly wherever possible, training at higher levels). Both must be made priorities.
4. If we are to continue with a privatised system, both executive and non-executive directors must be held personally accountable for instances where child safety is breached. They must not be able to hide behind legal facades.

Discussion

In general

Parents across Australia rely on childcare services and regulators to ensure the health and safety of their children in long daycare, occasional and family daycare. Yet rarely would any parent (particularly a busy solo parent) read the annual performance report of the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) and discover how considerable are the gaps between ideal and reality. If they did, they would see that the various forms of childcare meeting **minimum standards** hit 90% in 2024, up from 79% five years ago.[ii] Further, only 12 centres in the whole of Australia were awarded the top rating of 'excellent' in 2024 (ibid).

What does that gap of 10% mean in a child's day and how is a gap of 10% acceptable?

Alongside this, a reading parent would find the galloping rates of incidents:
"The rate of reported serious incidents in 2023/24 was 148 per 100 approved services, higher than the rate of 139 in 2022/23 and 124 in 2021/22. The rate of confirmed breaches in 2023/24 was 201 per 100 approved services, higher than the rate of 193 in 2022/23 and 162 in 2021/22."[iii]
Alarmingly the most frequently breached requirements to injury, trauma, or illness.

- Protection of children from harm and hazards
- Supervision of children
- Emergency and evacuation procedures
- Upkeep of premises, furniture and equipment

Single mothers across Australia, in fact any parents reading all this would by now be likely to feel extreme anxiety at leaving their child in organised care, and to find their wellbeing and productivity highly compromised – a consequence that can have devasting impacts on sole

income families. These outcomes would be greatly heightened for parents aware of the many critical incidents occurring around the country, including and not limited to:

- An Australian Federal Police (AFP) investigation with Queensland and New South Wales police, leading to a former childcare worker being charged with 1623 child abuse offences against 91 children, alleged to have been committed in Brisbane, Sydney and overseas between 2007 and 2022.
- A Melbourne childcare worker charged over alleged sexual abuse of many young children in his care, sparking a need for 1200 children to be tested for sexually transmitted infection (The Conversation, 2025).
- A baby girl being 'slapped four times by an educator for entertainment' (ABC, 2025).
- A small boy not receiving medical attention for burns so deep that when the parents later took the child to hospital there were fears he may lose a finger (ABC, 2025).

It is clear to CSMC that the health and safety of children in various forms of regulated childcare, is far from ideal, and in fact, is in a mess. Our observations and those of our members show that:

- The safety of children in childcare is not the leading priority. As our representatives feared, the growth of childcare businesses in a free-market approach has left ideas of safety and quality behind. These businesses do indeed vie for children as supermarkets do for customers, and parents, who should be able to trust those caring for their children, are merely stakeholders to be managed.
- Evident are the extreme workforce shortages that are at the heart of a lack of safety. Arriving to drop-off children to find trusted workers have left, or are on sick leave, replaced by temporary workers is a frequent experience in many centres.
- Single mothers in regional, rural and remote communities, tell us there are often no long daycare options and even occasional and family day care are in short supply. For those without extended family support or strong community networks, this increases their difficulties in accessing the care they need, and engaging in paid work, and their children are missing out.

Single mothers in particular

There are other, less well documented risks to children's health and safety in informal childcare, particularly when the parent's circumstances collide with 'childcare deserts' in rural and remote areas, and the frequency of 'closed waiting lists'.

Two more relevant points from the ACECQA 2024 are:

- There remains a *persistent and widening gap* in services meeting NQF standards in 'disadvantaged areas' compared to 'most advantaged areas'. (ACECQA, 2024, p. 13).
- 'Australian researchers from the Australian Education Research Organisation and the Queensland Brain Institute recently found that **children who attended a service rated exceeding NQS had consistently lower rates of developmental vulnerability'**(ACECQA, 2024, p. 13).

These points relating to disadvantaged areas are particularly important in considering the position of low-income single mothers who may be relying on childcare of various kinds to help them further foster their children's health and safety.

Nationally, we see that:

- 37% of single mother families are living below the poverty line and this is the family type now most likely to live in poverty in Australia. Given that current income support payments for single mother families remain below poverty level, and rising cost of living pressures are impacting those earning even over median income, many single mothers are faced with little choice other than to utilise potentially unsafe childcare services so that they may work in order to have enough income to pay rent and buy groceries and other necessary expenses.
- The combination of poverty and the housing crisis, narrows the options of many single mothers with affordable accommodation limited to lower socioeconomic areas.
- These circumstances coincide with the higher risk of childcare services in disadvantaged areas not meeting AQF standards, and higher rates of developmental vulnerability as outlined by ACECQA (2024).

In addition:

- Data accessed in 2022 indicates that 60% of single mothers have experienced family violence, and 67% of their children witnessed or experienced the violence. Along with this evidence has come further confirmation of the poverty these families experience.[iv]

Where to now?

Early childhood education and care have now been established across many countries as an essential service that delivers enormous benefits. Many economists say it is one of the smartest investments a country can make.

Evidence points to high quality early learning in the context of safe childcare as a boost to children's sociability and habits of learning. These in turn set children up for school, improve their long-term education outcomes, and improve their life and health chances.

Some single mothers, along with other parents, would prefer to stay at home until their youngest child is established in school. The reality though, means that most parents regardless of their partnered status, find that working is essential to meet the costs of living. For single mothers in particular knowing their child is happy, safe and learning, is the key to returning to work, building a career, and creating greater financial security for their family.

As an integral part of a high-quality education system, affordable, safe and high-quality early learning and childcare supercharges the economy. We have not had this and are currently facing faltering productivity. Now is the time to act.

The choice of care options available to parents and families

Our recommendation to improve the care options available to parents and families is to put in place strategies to increase social acceptance of choosing to stay home to care for very young children and those with a disability, and the use of the social security income to enable this without any pressure from government to put a child into paid care.

Discussion

Respect for stay-at-home parents

Single mothers choosing to stay at home to care for young children experience stigma disproportionate to couple families who make the same choice. This stigma influences single mothers' decision making surrounding the choice to participate in formal paid work versus staying at home to care for children.

We contend that the lack of recognition and validation of all forms of 'care' work (childcare, care for elders and country) being real work, particularly by government authorities overseeing social security income payments, results in single mothers and others too often feeling coerced into participating in paid work.

Single mothers, once feeling coerced into paid work, then have to utilise childcare services – often in disadvantaged areas or informal situations - at a risk to the child's health and safety, rather than caring for their child themselves which may be their preference.

"Why is it preferred that I outsource the care of my child rather than caring for her/him myself?"[v]
This statement which we often hear from single mothers, is essentially the same as the opening line in a PWC report on understanding the unpaid economy:
"Why is it that a mother caring for her children produces no 'measured' economic value, but the same mother hiring others to look after her children does? The answer stems from our narrow measurements of 'economic activity', which currently only captures activities for which people are paid. Unpaid work is excluded but we intuitively know that this work generates great value to society: from the raising of children, caring for the sick or elderly through to volunteering."[vi]

This report, released in 2017, shows that: "Quantifying and valuing the time spent on unpaid childcare implies that it is a $345 billion sector (in 2011 terms), almost three times the financial and insurance services industry, the largest industry in the formal economy." Similar data collection is currently being worked on by the ABS.

The key missing option for parents is in our view, is the social acceptance of choosing to stay home to care for very young children and those with a disability, and the use of the social security income to enable this without any pressure from government to put a child into paid care.

Paid childcare

Overall, we consider there is a good range of childcare theoretically available in Australia. The difficulties however are affordability and accessibility. Both are far from equitable and ideal as the data quoted from ACECQA above demonstrates.

Council of Single Mothers and their Children: Early Childhood Education and Care

Good quality childcare services are highly in demand. The Victorian government advice is that: 'parents and carers are recommended to join their preferred wait lists 12 months or more before the date they hope to start their child with a service' (Vic Gov, 2024).
This places many single mother families at a disadvantage where they are unlikely to be able to predict their need to utilise childcare services 12 months ahead:

- Our 2022 national survey found that 67% of respondents had experienced family violence abuse, with this number even higher where mother or child had a disability, increasing to 75%.
- Some of these women, in leaving abuse have had to relocate to another state, immediately losing any place on a waiting list that they might have had.
- Many families plan on the mother staying at home for a few years with a small child but if there is a separation, discovery of a disability or chronic health condition, high quality and safe childcare is often unavailable without an extended wait.

In 2022, Council of Single Mothers and their Children identified the following points in relation to childcare, asking the incoming government to make childcare affordable, accessible and high quality. These points included:

- Australia's childcare crisis: there are not enough places for children in rural and remote regions and there are waiting lists in many metropolitan areas.
- Childcare costs are far too high with many parents, particularly single mothers, unable to work the roles and hours they prefer because childcare is unaffordable. This problem contributes to a 'poverty trap', where single mothers cannot afford to survive on income support alone, and are no better off financially when they return to work and incur additional childcare expenses combined with a loss of social security payments.
- There is not enough in-home and flexible childcare available for single mothers doing shift work, weekend work and other work outside business hours.
- The government's most recent change to subsidies was framed to benefit families with two or more children attending childcare at the same time. This does not help the very many single mothers and other parents with only one child at childcare at the one time.
- Subsidies are tied to "parent activities" which favours working parents and ignores the important issues around the development of children in the first five years of life.

References

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Endnotes

[i] Deanne Carson & Fiona Hendry: CSMC History – *single but not alone.* The first 40 years of the Council of Single Mothers and their Children 2012. Available from: Council of Single Mothers and their Children

[ii] ACECQA. (2024). NQF Annual Performance Report. December 2024. Pg 12

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Summers, A. (2022). The Choice: Violence or Poverty. University of Technology Sydney. https://doi.org/10.26195/3s1r-4977

[v] Single mother comment on our Facebook group (closed)

[vi] PWC Economics and Policy: Understanding the Unpaid Economy, March 2017 Accessed at: www.pwc.com.au/australia-in-transition/publications/understanding-the-unpaid-economy-mar17.pdf and Fiona Smith, Guardian Australia: Unpaid childcare is Australia's largest industry and it should be acknowledged. March 2017 Accessed at: https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/mar/10/unpaid-childcare-is-australias-largest-industry-it-needs-to-be-acknowledged#:~:text=The%20report%20values%20Australia's%20unpaid%20economy%20at,cost%20to%20pay%20someone%20to%20do%20it).