

AUSTRALIAN GREENS ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

1.1 The Australian Greens believe early childhood education and care should be valued and invested in as part of lifelong learning process that starts at birth. Childcare is an essential service and should be funded as such by the government. For the first time Australia has a national focus on the importance of quality education and care for children, in the form of the National Quality Framework.

1.2 The Greens strongly support the National Quality Framework (NQF) and its continued rollout across the country. The early education and care sector has made substantial progress in improving the quality of education and care provided since the rollout of the NQF. Any attempt by the current government to roll back the NQF would have a detrimental effect on children's educational outcomes.

1.3 It is clear from this inquiry that there has been a failure to match the achievements of the quality standards with major investment in the sector. The unaffordability of care has significant implications on family budgets, women's employment, ECEC providers' ability to expand their services and fair access to quality local care for children. Evidence provided to the committee also notes that the current fee levels are discouraging some women from returning to the workforce or forcing them to rely on less suitable and lower quality forms of care.

1.4 The Greens agree with the majority of submitters and witnesses that we need to address quality, affordability and accessibility if we are to lift quality standards across the board. Further to this, it is clear that there is a crucial need to support professional development and address the labour shortage in the sector.

1.5 The Australian Greens note and endorse the following recommendations made by a number of submitters and witnesses:

- streamlining the existing Child Care Rebate and Child Care Benefit into one central payment, which is paid directly to centres, so parents only have to pay the fee gap. Administering one assistance payment would simplify the system and reduce out-of-pocket costs for parents;
- targeted assistance for rural and regional areas that have difficulty maintaining affordable childcare;
- targeted funding for children and families who need it most, including vulnerable and at risk children and children from low-income families;
- capital grants for new and expanding centres for community and not for profit child care centres to build new or expand their centres. This will help directly with the availability and fees crisis;

- the introduction of professional wages so that the sector can attract and retain qualified and professional educators;
- an additional 10% loading for babies aged (0-2) to address current and continuing pressures; and
- universal access (UA) to preschool and kindergarten.

1.6 The Australian Greens strongly support wage increases in the early childhood education and care workforce. While we recognise the Early Years Quality Fund was an initial attempt of the previous government to begin the process of improving wages, we remain significantly concerned that the Fund was too limited in its scope, time frame and depth of funding to address the pressing and immediate needs of the early childhood education and care sector.

1.7 The Australian Greens strongly support the majority report's recommendations to rescind the government's proposed cuts to ECEC funding and reinstate the JET scheme. At a time when parents are already struggling to meet the rising cost of childcare, the last thing this government should be doing is cutting their support.

1.8 Significant concern was raised by a number of submitters and witnesses regarding the uncertainty surrounding Universal Access funding commitments. The government must reaffirm its commitment to providing universal access at a minimum of 15 hours for four year olds and recognise the long term social and economic benefits of early childhood education.

1.9 It is clear from this inquiry that the majority of submitters and witnesses support the continued implementation of the NQF. However, there must be a substantial investment in the sector should we wish increase quality, accessibility and affordability.

Recommendation 1

1.10 The Australian Greens recommend that the National Quality Framework be supported and its implementation continue as planned.

Recommendation 2

1.11 The Australian Greens recommend that the existing Child Care Rebate and Child Care Benefit be streamlined into one central payment, which is paid directly to centres to reduce the out-of-pocket costs to families.

Recommendation 3

1.12 The Australian Greens recommend that the government urgently address the current wages crisis in the sector by providing appropriate funding through mechanisms other than Enterprise Agreements in order not to disadvantage smaller providers.

Recommendation 4

1.13 The Australian Greens recommend that the government reaffirm its funding commitment to guarantee universal access for all four year olds.

Senator Sarah Hanson-Young