

Dissenting Report by the Australian Greens

Jobs for Families Bill

1.1 The Senate Inquiry into the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Child Care Package) Bill 2016 (the Jobs for Families Bill) and the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Family Payments Structural Reform and Participation Measures) Bill 2016 (the Social Services Bill) received 46 submissions from peak bodies and experts in childcare and social security as well as members of the public. A substantial number of submissions raised concerns regarding these Bills.

1.2 Despite the evidence provided and concerns raised by these experts, the Chair's report has recommended that these Bills be passed.

Jobs for Families Bill

1.3 The Australian Greens support the Jobs for Families Bill's purported aim to 'improve access to the affordability of early childhood education and care' and welcome the committee's recognition that access to high-quality early childhood education and care is of substantial developmental benefit to children.

1.4 The Australian Greens remain concerned, however, that the measures included in this Bill as currently drafted will not achieve these aims, and will in fact result in a number of families being unable to access childcare or receive reduced access to subsidised care.

1.5 The Australian Greens are concerned by the imposition of a minimum requirement of 8 hours of activity per fortnight in order to receive subsidised child care and note that a number of vulnerable families may not be able to meet this minimum requirement. The Greens are therefore concerned that a number of lower socio-economic and middle-income families will be ineligible for adequate levels subsidised childcare under this scheme.

1.6 The Australian Greens also recognise concerns that the proposed activity test inadvertently creates barriers to work for families where at least one parent does not have secure, regular employment and believe amendments are required to ensure the system is fair for parents engaged in irregular work and does not leave them with inadequate child care subsidy to meet their work commitments, or higher childcare costs. Without amendment, this activity test will present a barrier for new mothers trying to re-enter the workforce through casual and irregular employment. Without a minimum amount of childcare guaranteed, many parents will find it near impossible to take on extra hours of work.

1.7 The Australian Greens also remain concerned that the Bill may have a detrimental impact on children from remote and rural parts of Australia, and in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The Australian Greens refer to concerns raised by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) in their submission and in their evidence provided at the public hearing, in particular:

- The proposed closure of the Budget Based Funding Program;

- The risk posed to the loss or reduction to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector; and
- The increased cost of service delivery to remote areas, in particular for Indigenous communities.

1.8 The Australian Greens are further concerned that the introduction of the activity test will reduce access to subsidised childcare for vulnerable children and is counter to the acknowledged need to increase participation in early childhood services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Conclusion

1.9 The Australian Greens are concerned that the Chair does not appear to have appropriately responded to and addressed the concerns raised by the vast majority of experts regarding this Bill. There is a real risk that the impacts of a tougher activity test will further disadvantage families with irregular work hours and new mothers re-entering the workforce. Some of the most vulnerable children in our nation, particularly those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, will lose out if these measures are introduced un-amended.

Recommendations – Jobs for Families Bill

1.10 Recommendation 1: The Australian Greens recommend that the activity test be amended to include an additional amount of base level subsidised childcare for all families that fall within the 0-8 hours of activity to a minimum of two full days care.

1.11 Recommendation 2: The Australian Greens recommend that an adequately flexible reporting grace period be adopted that allows all casual workers, part-time workers with irregular hours or people who lose their jobs to estimate their expected activity and childcare needs, so as not to be disadvantaged by the activity test.

1.12 Recommendation 3: The Australian Greens recommend that unless additional funding for services which meets the needs of vulnerable children in remote and regional Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is provided, that the current Budget Based Funding levels remain in place.

1.13 Recommendation 4: The Australian Greens recommend an amendment to include mechanisms for increasing childcare places where vacancy rates are critically low, creating barriers to parents being able to find affordable care.

1.14 Recommendation 5: The Australian Greens recommend that providers of In Home Care be explicitly referenced in the Bill as being eligible for Child Care Subsidy payments.