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National Association of Community Based Children's Services

CHILDREN – TOO PRECIOUS FOR PROFIT

NACBCS - A NATIONAL POLICY FOR AUSTRALIA – 2004 and beyond

We call on the Australian Government to make a commitment to retaining and developing community owned, not-for-profit children's services as a key support for children, parents, families and communities.

Inside we detail:

- **OUR DEMANDS**
- **RATIONALE AND COSTINGS FOR OUR DEMANDS**
- **CURRENT POLICIES – HOW DO THEY STACK UP?**
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OUR DEMANDS

“Children – too precious for profit”

We call on the Australian Government to make a commitment to retaining and developing community owned, not-for-profit children’s services as a key support for children, parents, families and communities.

The National Association of Community Based Children’s Services (NACBCS) believes that the best way to meet the needs of children from birth to age 8 years is through strong, well connected communities which have the infrastructure to provide care, education and support to all children.

Community owned not-for-profit children’s services are an essential part of that infrastructure. They must be retained along side commercial services in the mixed economy of child care in order to build communities that respond to all children and families.

The Australian Government is allowing unchecked growth of publicly listed corporate child care chains – they can never take the place of locally owned, parent run services.

We call on the Australian Government to make a commitment to retaining and developing community owned, not-for-profit children’s services as a key support for children, parents, families and communities.

OUR DEMANDS ARE:

• **Fund community child care**

- Provide capital funding to make sure there is at least one community owned and managed early childhood service for every 800 children up to the age of 5 years

• **Increase Wages for Child Carers**

- By increasing Child Care Benefit (CCB) so that services can pay decent wages to attract and retain skilled and qualified staff, while charging fees that parents can afford

• **Stop Destructive Competition**

- Bring back planning controls by setting a cap on the number of CCB places for long day care in each community to stop uncontrolled growth in areas that already have enough services
- Retain and strengthen the planning controls for Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) to ensure that the number of not-for-profit community owned OSHC services does not drop as commercial operators move in

RATIONALE AND COSTINGS FOR OUR DEMANDS

“Quality child care now – community child care - the only effective way”

Why fund community child care?

So that:

- parents have a genuine choice between not-for-profit community owned child care and other providers
- every community has a service to act as the focus of family support and community building activities such as:
 - Actively engaging parents in decisions about the care of their children
 - Mutual support for parents reading to children
 - Outreach programs for adult literacy
 - Building confidence in the service system

What funding would make the difference?

Provision of capital funding to make sure there is at least one community owned and managed early childhood service for every 800 children up to the age of 5 years
NB: A different ratio of services to children is needed in areas of low population density

This will not happen in struggling communities without government resourcing.

What will it cost taxpayers?

\$1.05 billion investment from government for capital funding for 700 new community owned long day care centres¹

Why Increase Wages for Child Carers?

Child care is one of the most important roles in society yet the awards for child care workers set wages at ridiculously low levels – less than supermarket checkout staff. Children’s services are facing a crisis in attracting and retaining skilled and qualified staff to provide quality care to children.

How can the Australian Government support increased wages for child carers?

By increasing Child Care Benefit so that services can pay decent wages to attract and retain skilled and qualified staff, while charging fees that parents can afford

What will it cost taxpayers?

Nothing – this can be achieved at no cost by eliminating CCB for very high income families and increasing it for low and middle income families.

¹ *Australia needs about 1,900 services to provide one service per 800 children aged 0-5 years, with approx 1,500,000 children in this age group in total; there are currently approximately 1200 community owned long day care centres in Australia so we need an additional 700 services at an approximate cost of \$1.5m per service = \$1.05 billion]*

Why Stop Destructive Competition?

Some not-for-profit sponsors of child care around the country are questioning why they should stay in the business now that corporate chains can deliver a service and generate a profit. But many parents are passionate and articulate in their demand for choice of publicly owned, not-for-profit child care.

Government must act to ensure that parents have a genuine choice of community owned, not-for-profit child care.

How can government stop destructive competition?

- Bring back planning controls by setting a cap on the number of CCB places for long day care in each community to stop the uncontrolled growth in areas that already have sufficient services
- Retain and strengthen the planning controls for Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) to ensure that the number of not-for-profit community owned OSHC services does not drop as commercial operators move in

What will it cost taxpayers?

Nothing.

CURRENT POLICIES – HOW DO THEY STACK UP?

How do the Coalition Government and ALP Opposition policies support communities and children?

Coalition Government Policies

NACBCS welcomes:

- the increased level of interest in early childhood currently shown by the Australian Government
- the recent grant of \$250,000 capital funding for a new community owned child care service in rural Victoria
- the attempts to develop a National Agenda for Early Childhood

NACBCS is critical of:

- inadequacy of CCB to enable services to cover costs of adequate wages and conditions
- unchecked growth of publicly listed corporate child care chains
- the free market approach to development of new child care services
- government failure to fund the building of new child care facilities
- no regular funding for maintenance and upgrade of community owned child care facilities
- the piecemeal nature of the current government initiatives for children, such as lack of co-ordination with state and local government initiatives, separate advisory committees for child care and parenting, pilot programs scattered throughout the country

ALP Opposition Policies

NACBCS welcomes:

- the commitment to government sharing with parents the cost of increased wages for child care workers
- the commitment to fund new community child care services
- universal approach to children's policy, such as reading to all babies

NACBCS is critical of:

- the failure to recognise community owned child care services as the logical focus point for reading programs and other initiatives

OUR VISION - A NATIONAL POLICY FOR AUSTRALIA – 2004 and beyond

“Caring for children - not for profit”

Australia is a sophisticated nation built on a strong democratic base. Parents in local communities across Australia have been one of the key groups involved in developing Australia’s early childhood services.

If Government provides leadership and support these volunteers who have managed Australia’s children’s services for the past decades will continue to actively participate to deliver quality services and to help build strong and cohesive communities.

The community managed sector will continue to work alongside the commercial operators who provide quality services to young children. With the community sector strengthened to foster community building while providing quality care, the early childhood sector can deliver an excellent range of services that will enhance our children’s development in the critical early years and enable parents to work, have respite and be supported with their child rearing responsibilities.

The following is a blue print for the national policy NACBCS will support for Australia in the year 2004 and beyond.

NACBCS VISION

The Australian Government will have the goal of:

- Delivering a universally available and affordable high quality range of children’s services which foster children’s development, support families and build community

The Australian Government will:

- Invest in a range of services for the first five years of childhood in recognition of their importance for optimal development of all children
- Develop a system of early childhood services that not only supports child development but breaks down the isolation of families
- Develop a system of early childhood services that helps build and strengthen communities and contributes to the building of a healthy democracy
- Provide additional funding to ensure access to services by disadvantaged children
- Fund local communities to develop a better integrated and co-ordinated system of child and family support services

The Australian Government will develop an early childhood system based on the recognition that:

- Community owned child care plays a the critical role in building community and strengthening democracy
- government investment in community owned child care is an investment in the social and economic life of Australia
- children and their families need a full range of children’s services
- barriers between different types of early childhood services must be broken down to better utilise community resources

- the full cost of delivering high quality early childhood services that meet children's diverse needs including cultural and developmental differences needs
- well remunerated staff capable of providing the high quality care and educational opportunities critical in the early years are essential to the wellbeing of our children
- many Australians have a limited capacity to pay significant fees for early childhood services
- geographic communities have varying capacity to develop and sustain quality early childhood services
- Government funding is needed to ensure that Australia has a high quality children's services system

HOW COMMUNITY OWNED CHILDREN'S SERVICES BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL

Community owned children's services are owned by community groups or organisations, rather than by individuals. They are run on a not for profit, break-even basis by voluntary parent and community committees of management, local government, church groups or tertiary institutions.

Any operating surplus is directed back to the service. There are no owners, directors or shareholders requiring a financial return on an investment.

Community owned children's services, be they parent run, or run by a non-profit organisation, have unique features which enable them to contribute to community building and social capital in a way which commercial services can never do.

Community owned services empower families through genuine partnership, to advocate on behalf of their children and their children's services. Rather than passive consumers, parents are able to actively participate in the care and education of their children. It is a model in which professionals are "on tap, not on top". (Brennan 1994)

Fundamental to community owned services is the active involvement of parents in the care and education of their child, not just as consumers but as high level decision makers thus developing a true partnership in the care and education of their children. This high level collaboration can lead to new and innovative ways of providing programs, thus ensuring programs remain truly reflective of the needs of the children and the community. Because they are owned by the community, there are no structural impediments to the formation of partnerships with other not-for-profit community service providers.

So the distinguishing features of community owned children's services are:

- **empowerment** i.e. genuine sharing of power between service users, manager and service providers
- **inclusion** i.e. work to respond to needs of everyone, including hard-to-service groups such as refugees, people on low incomes and geographically isolated families
- **integration** with other community services i.e. operating as part of community infrastructure
- **not for personal profit**

STRATEGIES FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

In order to achieve the responsive system of early childhood services that is needed by Australian families, their children and the Australian economy the Federal Government must put in place strategies which deliver:

- an investment of at least 1% GDP in services for children up to 5 years of age
- a fee assistance scheme that limits parent contributions to a maximum of 15% of nett household income²
- in every community sufficient high quality early childhood services, offering care and developmental opportunities over a long day for either part-time, full time or occasional usage, to provide at least 2 days per week access to every child under school entry age.
- participation by all early childhood services that are in receipt of Government funds (either directly or through income support) in local networks of child and family support services so that families can be connected with the supports they need for child health, early intervention and family support
- one community owned and managed early childhood service, offering a full range of care and developmental opportunities, for every 800 children under the age of 5 years
- all community owned services funded to enable the volunteer committees of management to undertake their obligations related to community building, family strengthening and community participation
- capital funding made available for the development of community managed services in areas of particular economic and social disadvantage with ongoing recurrent funding tied to achievement of defined Government outcomes related to community building achievements
- Federal Government commitment to early childhood service funding to be enshrined in Legislation
- partnerships with the community to develop and deliver a quality children's services system through expansion of the current Child Care Advisory Group to establish a National Advisory Council
- a nationally consistent system of high quality, affordable and accessible early childhood services including Community Building Officers funded in each region to facilitate regional planning committees and capital funding to disadvantaged areas
- review the structure of Child Care Benefit in recognition of the need for an appropriate remuneration package for early childhood workers
- improved staff:child ratios
- at least one-tenth of the working week of children's services staff recognised as non contact time for preparation and on-going training and professional development
- an improved quality improvement and assurance system with alternative review methods including spot checks and imposing penalties for non-compliance
- targets for all funded services, including those whose families receive Child Care Benefit, to ensure that disadvantaged children and those with special need are accessing services
- increased indigenous child care services
- funding to enable participation by children with special needs in early childhood services, including refugee children and children from culturally diverse backgrounds
- an appropriately remunerated and funded package for specially trained and experienced early childhood workers to work with children with special needs

In conclusion NACBCS calls on the Federal Government in 2004 to act to provide Australia's children with the best possible start by seriously investing in a system of quality children's services which can make Australia a clever and civilised nation into the future.

² European Commission Network on Childcare and other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children. Proposals for a Ten Year Action Plan* London, January 1996