

Engaging Communities- developing new community based Early Childhood services: A central Queensland snapshot

This paper aims to highlight the need for leaders and advocates in developing new community based early childhood services. Recent times have seen the proliferation of the private – for profit sector.

What about the growth in the community based sector?

Who is overseeing the needs of children, families and communities for current and future services?

What should new early childhood education & care services represent?

Who are the key stakeholders?

As the OECD (2001/ 2006) research highlights early childhood education & care service delivery in Australia has been hindered by state and federal legislation and jurisdiction complexities and minimal input from a multitude of stakeholders. As an early childhood education & care advocate I want to make a difference in communities...for children, families and the community as a whole. I am concerned that communities within Central Queensland are not being able to access the education and care programs they require and need and the additional support services that have also been highlighted as a need within these communities.

OECD policy issues

Some of the issues for policy attention for Australia identified in 2001 by the OECD review team included :

- *Understandings of childhood and early education*

It was felt that a clearer vision (including a strategy framework) of Australian ECEC policy should be elaborated, drawing from the views and interests of children, families, communities, professionals and researchers across the States and Territories.

- *System coherence and co-ordination:* Currently, real limitations on system coherence are imposed in Australia by the complexities of government in a federation of states, and the multi-layering of administration and regulation. Other difficulties arise from the vastness of the territory and the dispersion of populations.

OECD (2001). *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care 1*

Part of my role as early childhood education & care consultant with C&K Pre-schooling Professionals, based in Central Queensland has been engaging communities and working with key stakeholders to reflect on current service provision, and to work together to develop new community based early childhood services. This work includes reflecting on how to meet the needs of children, families, community and business/ employers.

Through this work it has become apparent that local council and other key community stakeholders have clearly recognized the importance of quality care

and education services as critical community infrastructure. This is possibly more so in rural and regional areas where the proliferation of private services have not travelled as far inland as the expansion on the coastline. Hence smaller towns have been left with fewer services and less choices. In places like Barcaldine, there is no long day care service at all.

Whilst there are many new services or services requiring expansion within Central Queensland, partly driven by the resources boom, the two projects to be highlighted in this paper include C&K Emerald South Community Pre-schooling Centre and the C&K Barcaldine Child Care and Community Centre.

These two projects have had support and input from C&K Pre- schooling Professionals, local service providers, parents, local council, government departments, business representatives, school principals and health professionals.

An overview of these two projects will be highlighted to provide information to assist and support others in the development of new early childhood services. These two services also reflect possible service provision as highlighted in *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care* (2006). This includes Kindergarten and child care services being co-located and more integrated, and the extension and expansion of services to reflect a multitude of services including health and well being. In working on these two projects (amongst others) within Central Queensland I have also reflected on the needs of families and their well being. Many families relocate to Central Queensland for employment reasons and when they move from extended family and support networks to a town with limited care options, limited capacity of services and reduced possibilities for their own employment due to limited care.....family well being and family support also need to be carefully considered. Co locating toy libraries, playgroups, parenting services and family support services within an early childhood care & education service may provide more integrated facilities to meet both children's and families needs. This is critical as Gammage (2008) highlights..

“What does such a ‘Utopian’ social agenda demand? Inter-agency collaboration that is broader than simply childcare and early education and that, wherever feasible, involves health, paramedical social work and welfare agency, counselling and training in ‘one package’

It would seem we still have a long way to go to have interagencies, government departments and communities working together to have such collaborative programs and service delivery. Although some “hub type” programs do exist in Queensland this is not widespread nor accessible to many communities in rural and regional areas. Who has the responsibility for developing such new facilities and adapting existing facilities to provide such services?

As an early childhood education & care advocate and within my role of consultant with C&K, I have worked with many stakeholders across both Emerald and Barcaldine in developing and establishing new services. Emerald is located 270km west of Rockhampton and Barcaldine is located 580km west of Rockhampton in Central western Queensland.

The C&K Emerald South Community Pre-schooling Centre

In 2004 it became apparent that the existing Kindergarten facilities were not meeting the needs of the Emerald community. At this point in time there were 4 units of kindergarten, 2 private child care centres and a community based Family Day Care Scheme for a population of around 12,000 people.

The Emerald Shire Council had previously been very pro active in supporting C&K early childhood services and they were approached to assist in the development of a new service. In consideration of research and meeting family needs, the council and C&K chose to build a service that provided kindergarten and child care in one service. Council gifted a parcel of land to C&K for the project. As the demand for Kindergarten was high at the time, a temporary empty state school pre school building was utilized as a Kindergarten, providing places for 40 children, whilst the new project could be progressed. This was on the proviso that the Kindergarten relocated prior to the roll out of prep in Queensland in 2007.

The C&K Emerald South Community Pre-schooling Centre was supported by C&K, the Emerald Shire Council, the Department of Education, Training & the Arts, the Gambling Community Benefit Fund, the C&K Emerald South Community Kindergarten Parent Advisory Group, BMA – Gregory Crinum Mine, Rio Tinto & the Kestrel Community Development Fund, Ensham Resources, Goldings, Fairbairn Motors and Cardav Constructions.

The service provides for 75 children on a daily basis. All rooms were built larger than minimum standards and a large kitchen is centrally located to provide cooked meals for children. The centre meets Breastfeeding Australia Accreditation and is currently trialling the C&K Community Pre birth program. This program enables expectant parents to spend time in the nursery prior to their child's birth. This is the first community based long day care centre for Emerald, providing parents with more options and choices. The service allows parents to access a sessional kindergarten program with the option of long day care for working families as well. The centre employs a four year trained early childhood teacher in the 3 ½ -4 ½ years Kindergarten room and the 3-5's child care room and aims to have highly qualified staff across the service where possible.

The model provides more continuity for children in that although there are staff changes they are attending the same service for the day and not having to be transported to different venues. This model also allows for siblings to be attending one centre.

In the 18 months of opening this new service, the centre currently has 130 families on the waiting list. The local regional council have again been approached to assist with land for another community based integrated early childhood service.

The C&K Barcaldine Child Care & Community Centre

A steering committee was set up in Barcaldine to look at existing services and needs of the community in 2006. The council amongst many stakeholders within the community recognized that the limited care and education services within the town were largely impacting on the community. The steering committee consists of C&K, school principals, local council, the local Aboriginal Corporation, existing staff of the early childhood facility, local business representatives, parents (including school P&C President) and representatives from local government departments including the Department of Main Roads.

In 2007 C&K on behalf of the steering committee were granted funds through the Blueprint for the Bush state funding to engage a company to complete community consultation and prepare a business case for the project. This business case is now being used to seek funding for the project. The local council have also committed funds to this project along with in kind support from C&K and a local engineering firm amongst others.

The community currently has one unit of early childhood services that operates 4 days of Kindergarten with a limited hours child care service that operates before / after the Kindergarten session and caters for children aged 3 – school age. One day per week the centre operates a mixed age group of children aged 2 ½ years to school age. Licensed capacity is for 24 children.

The Department of Communities in Queensland that oversees the Limited Hours Child Care model requires services to keep care to a maximum of 20 hours per week. The priority is for non working families. Many services operate the 20 hours of child care around a sessional kindergarten program. Often these services are the only early childhood facility within the community and therefore need to be able to provide sessional kindergarten and child care for both working and non working families. Barcaldine does not presently have the facilities to provide care for children under 2 ½ years. The Limited Hours Care model and sessional Kindergarten program does not allow parents to access full child care benefit. There is currently no holiday care within the town.

The new project will incorporate the following in a purpose built service on the state school site.

- sessional kindergarten within a long day care centre
- care and education programs for all ages from babies through to school aged children
- a multipurpose room that will be utilized for school aged care after school but used for parenting programs, playgroup, family support and health

- clinics during school hours. School age care program will have access to the primary school's new undercover multisports complex.
- A toy library
 - High school Students co located on the school site will have access to the centre and support with their training in child care studies. This will give local youth and others the opportunities to have career options in care and education and choose to stay and work within their local community.
 - Engaging the seniors within the community to spend time with children at the centre. The Home and Community Care Centre and 60's and Better programs have been engaged to discuss possibilities for this partnership. This is intended to be an ongoing partnership with volunteers visiting the service regularly rather than often what exists now where programs often only have contact with seniors for once off type visits.
 - Inclusion support through access to school professionals on site with supporting children with additional needs within the early childhood centre. This will provide more continuity of care & education services for children as they move from the early childhood facility to the school program on the one site.
 - Care and education services will be more affordable for families as this model will allow families to access the full child care rebate.

This project is awaiting an outcome from the Federal Government's 260 centres funding. In August the steering committee were successful in seeking funds of \$56,000 through the Department of Communities Blueprint for the Bush Our Place, Our Future Funding which will be utilized to employ a local person to continue to coordinate the project including writing grants, liaising with community and progressing this project.

There are many towns within Central Queensland where expansion or new services are required. The resources boom across many towns requires urgent attention to ensure current services can meet the needs of the community. To ensure community capacity building and longevity of rural towns, community based early childhood services must be considered as critical infrastructure along with schools, health and other services. The multitude of research demonstrates to government and society the importance of investing in the early years. This needs urgent attention now...not only of government but communities, early childhood staff, parents, children...we can all be advocates and leaders and stand up for what every community deserves and requires for their children and families.

Gammage P. (2008). The social agenda and early childhood care and education: Can we really help create a better world? Online Outreach Paper 4. The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation .

OECD (2001). Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care 1

OECD (2006). Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care 2.