

ACCS Trends in Community Children's Services Survey

2012 1st Wave

National Report

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCS	Australian Community Children's Services
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
ASC	After School Care
BSC	Before School Care
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace and Relations
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECT	Early Childhood Teachers
FDC	Family Day Care
LDC	Long Day Care
MACS	Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services
NFP	Not for Profit
NQF	National Quality Framework
OSHC	Outside School Hours Care
TICCSS	Trends in Community Children's Services
VAC	Vacation Care

Executive Summary

The introduction of national minimum standards and the associated reforms for the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector have seen much political and media attention. For the first time education and care services for children under school age and school age care services are now subject to common regulated standards across Australia. All services, including pre-schools/kindergartens, are now part of a nationally consistent quality assurance system.

As the first phase of the National Quality Framework (NQF) commenced on 1 January 2012, public debate raged about the likely impact on fees for child care, the capacity of services to meet the workforce requirements of the NQF and the accessibility and flexibility of children's services for Australian families.

Australian Community Children's Services (ACCS) offers this first wave of the *Trends in Community Children's Services Survey* (TICCSS) as reliable data on the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector during this time of great change.

With over 640 respondents in this first wave, representing a range of service types from throughout Australia, including 89% of responses from not-for-profit (NFP) services, TICCSS shows a very different story to that being reported in the media. It shows a sector that is:

- Embracing the reforms;
- Acutely aware and prepared for the challenges it faces in delivering a critical service for Australian society;
- Well aware of the skill shortage it faces;
- Well aware of the issues with graduates not being work ready;
- Well aware of issues with lack of professional wages; but
- Most exciting, the sector is ready with ideas and advice for policy makers.

The headline findings of the first round of TICCSS research are:

- Increases in childcare fees are largely modest with minimal impact from rising minimum standards
- Waiting lists persist for NFP Long Day Care (LDC) services
- Vast majority of services are already meeting new minimum standards
- Increased workload from new national consistent quality system is manageable and expected to decrease in near future
- The ECEC sector is making good progress towards meeting workforce requirements of the NQF

Accessibility and availability for Australian families

The large majority of LDC services reported waiting lists. Children aged under two years old have the longest waiting periods, with services having an average 48 children for this age group on their waiting lists.

One third of LDC services expect children aged under two years old to wait for 6-12 months, while another third have waits of 1-2 years and 10% have waits of more than two years.

Fees and Fee increases

Fees are increasing in childcare but not at the alarmist rates predicted by some. The average LDC daily fee across Australia is \$75. Queensland is slightly lower than the national average at \$68 while Victoria is more expensive at \$80.

In the first half of 2012, a critical stage of the NQF implementation, close to half of services increased their fees, but only to a moderate level – with the national average increase being just under \$5 a day. Rising minimum standards were not the major factor, with the normal rising cost of living and CPI being the number one reason for the increase.

Out of those services that increased their fees, most stated their families did not express frustration, reduce hours, leave their service or say they were experiencing financial stress.

Meeting and Embracing the NQF

The vast majority of services of all types were already meeting the requirements of the NQF in 2012. Only one in ten respondents needed one or more waivers from regulated standards.

The majority of respondents commented that the first six months of the NQF had resulted in increased work, but 16% stated it meant normal business or reduced workload. Many services acknowledged while there had been an increased in workload, it was a temporary adjustment to the new system and was already reducing.

Staff to Child Ratios

All LDC services are already operating at the new national minimum standard for staff to child ratio, for children aged 0-3 years, of 1:4. Twenty-five per cent of LDC respondents operate at 1:3 or better.

A national minimum standard of 1:11 ratio of educators to 3-5 year olds will apply from 2016; yet the majority of LDC respondents are already meeting this standard with two-thirds actually exceeding it.

Workforce and Recruitment

Drawing a workforce portfolio, from over 7000 educators representing nearly 600 services, TICCSS shows the sector is making good progress on the requirements for all educators to have, or be working towards, a qualification in 2014.

Only 12% of the workforce is currently without any early childhood qualification, while just over a quarter of all educators are currently engaged in studying for their first qualification or up-skilling their ECEC qualifications.

The majority of services have a full complement of staff however nearly one third of services had a vacancy for an educator position at the time of the survey.

The two top issues in recruiting for staff are the low wages and applicants not being suitably skilled or qualified. Services also raised issues with the quality of qualifications and issues with Registered Training Organisations (RTO).

Vulnerability

The vast majority of services have children they identify as vulnerable, that is, children with any of a range of risk factors that are challenging or affecting their development and learning. Nearly a third of services have seen an increase in the number of children who are vulnerable in the first half of 2012. The most common contributing factor is family financial stress.

Future TICCSS waves will identify early warning signs of emerging vulnerabilities in the children and families accessing ECEC.

Next Wave of Data

TICCSS will release its second report in early 2013 showing experiences with the first round of assessments of the NQF and other impacts.

Introduction

Children’s services in Australia are currently undergoing major reform with an eight year national plan that commenced on 1 January 2012 to significantly improve the education and care provided to children and families. These positive changes support learning and development in the critical early years with skilled and qualified educators, consistent minimum standards across the nation and a robust uniform quality assurance system underpinned by wise frameworks to ensure child centred reflective practice.

I think the reforms are fantastic, about time we all came under the one body.

VIC Respondent

ACCS advocates for the right of Australia's children to access quality not for profit, community children's services so, of course, we welcome and actively support these reforms. We recognise that research is vital to track the implementation of the reforms, to counter alarmist claims of those who oppose them and to identify gains and real challenges requiring policy attention.

2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:4 staff to child ratios for children aged under three years
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every child to have access to 15 hours/week of preschool delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher in the year before school
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All long day care and preschool services to employ a qualified early childhood teacher • Fifty per cent of educators to have, or to be working towards, a Diploma level or higher qualification • All remaining educators to have, or to be working towards, a Certificate III qualification (or equivalent)
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:11 staff to child ratios for children aged 3-5 years
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All long day care and preschool services with 60 children or more to employ a second early childhood teacher, or another suitably qualified leader

While the Australian Government Census of Child Care Services provides comprehensive data on the ECEC sector it has not been conducted since May 2006 and does not distinguish between the NFP children's services and commercial services. ACCS knows that the experiences of the NFP sector are often very different to their commercial counterparts and believes these NFP voices should be heard. Given the formative change happening in our sector, this data gap is resulting in a lack of understanding of how the NFP sector is responding to the reforms. Research driven by the NFP sector, on the NFP sector could bring about different data on successes and challenges and shine a light on the experiences of these services around Australia.

As the peak body for not for profit children's services, ACCS recognised the gaps in knowledge and commenced an ambitious research agenda in 2012 with TICCSS to track the experiences of community children's services in Australia. With biannual surveys to the sector in the first year and annual surveys thereafter, TICCSS will monitor the experiences of children's service across Australia including, focusing on staff child ratios, utilisation, waiting lists, fees (including increases), experience in implementing the NQF, existing and emerging vulnerabilities in their communities and experiences recruiting and retaining staff. Most importantly, with its main audience being community, NFP children's services, TICCSS sheds a light on the specific experiences of NFP services.

Conducted in May/June 2012, the first wave of TICCSS attracted responses from 640 services around Australia. Responses were as varied as the ECEC sector, representing all states and territories, a range of service sizes (from 25 places or less to 80 places plus) and a range of metropolitan, regional and remote areas in Australia. The respondents deliver a range of services to meet the needs of Australian families including long day care, before and after school care, kindergarten/preschool, family day care, vacation care, in home care, multi-functional Aboriginal children's services, occasional care and mobile service for rural and remote families.

Responses were from the three main operation models: stand-alone community based (not for profit), large NFP organisations (such as YMCA, Goodstart, and church organisations) and commercial providers. However, reflecting the membership of ACCS, the NFP services, small and large, were the main respondents and the main subjects of this report.

The Trends in Community Children's Services Survey is designed to be explorative. The findings and this report are intended to be indicative of what is happening in the sector and not representative. ACCS believes it provides vital information to track changes in the sector as government policy brings about the transformation to ensure consistently high quality education and care.

We also hope that TICCSS can assist in identifying areas where more extensive research could be conducted.

Demographics

State and Territory Responses

- Over 640 services participated in the first wave of TICCSS responding to the survey in May and June 2012. Taking into consideration Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' (DEEWR) data on the number of ECEC services in Australia (2010-11), the respondents represent 4.2% of the total sector (including NFP and commercial services).
- If broken down to community managed LDC centres the community managed LDC TICCSS respondents represented 17% of their sector.¹
- All states and territories were represented with the largest response from the higher population states – Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

Australian Capital Territory	0.2%
New South Wales	28.3%
Northern Territory	0.5%
Queensland	21.2%
South Australia	6.1%
Tasmania	1.5%
Victoria	39.8%
Western Australia	2.5%

¹ Please note this does not include larger NFP organisations such as Good Start or YMCA, which as a category represented 49% of the TICCSS responses. There is no available data to- determine what percentage of the sector as a whole these large NFP organisations represent.

Management Types

- Forty per cent of respondents were from stand-alone parent managed services including school councils; 49% from a large NFP organisation (i.e. YMCA, church organisation or GoodStart Early Learning), resulting in 89% of respondents being from NFP services. The remaining 11% identified as being a commercial company or private owner.
- Unless specified otherwise, data in this report includes all management types and service types.

The importance and value of community based children's education and care services cannot be overstated.

VIC Respondent

Size of Service

- Nine per cent of services were very small (less than 25 places), 47% small (26-59 places), 25% medium sized (60-79 places) and 19% were larger services with more than 80 places.
- While we had responses from the major services types in most states and territories, the majority of Outside School Hours Care (OSHC)² responses were from Victorian services (52% of the national response), and Queensland (35%).

Geographical Locations

- Sixty-three per cent of respondents were from major cities, 30% from regional Australia and two per cent from remote or very remote Australia.³

The people of the bush are struggling. They need advocacy.

NSW Respondent

² Outside School Hours Care includes services that deliver any of the following – Before School Care (BSC), After School Care (ASC) and Vacation Care (VAC).

³ Ninety-five% of services provided addresses that allowed for coding using the Australian Bureau of Statistics Australian Standard Geographical Classification. Regional Australia includes inner regional and outer regional.

Service Types

- Many respondents delivered more than one service. Of the 53% of services that provided LDC, 31% also provided preschool/kindergarten. See *Table 3* for further breakdown.

Long Day Care (LDC)	53%
Before School Care (BSC)	29%
After School Care (ASC)	35%
Vacation Care (VAC)	25%
Occasional Care (OCC)	6%
Kindergarten/Preschool	29%
Family Day Care (FDC)	5%
In Home Care	1%
Multi-functional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS)	0.3%
Mobile Service	1%

⁴ NB: adds to more than 100% as many respondents deliver multiple service types.

Waiting Lists, Utilisation and Ratios

Utilisation

- Forty-nine per cent of services had high average weekly utilisation (91-100%). Nearly one third had utilisation at less than 80%. See further breakdown in *Table 4*.

Utilisation	All Services	LDC	OSHC
91-100%	49%	60%	25%
81-90%	22%	23%	23%
71-80%	13%	9%	24%
61-70%	8%	4%	13%
Less than 60%	8%	4%	15%

Waiting Lists

- Sixty-five per cent of all services had waiting lists. However for services delivering LDC this rose to 85%, with an average of 48 children on their waiting lists for 0-2 years old.
- The longest waiting periods to enter a service were for the 0-2 age group where 32% of services had waiting periods of 6-12 months, 29% had waiting lists of 1-2 years and nine per cent more than two years.

Staff:Child Ratios

- The NQF introduces national consistent minimum standards for staff to child ratios; however some states and territories have already been operating at better ratios than those being introduced. In these cases there has been a grandfather clause included to ensure that there is no regression of ratios.
- All LDC respondents were at least meeting the new national minimum standard for babies of 1:4 staff to child ratio for children aged 0-3 years; one quarter (25%) were operating their babies' room at staff:child ratios of 1:3 or better.
- Ten per cent of LDC services plan to increase the staffing levels in their babies' room before 2013.
- A national minimum standard of 1:11 ratio of educators to 3-5 year olds will apply from 2016; yet the majority of LDC respondents (72%) are already meeting the standard with 67% exceeding it.
- For children in the 3-5 age group, 47% of LDCs were operating at better than 1:10. See *Table 5* for further breakdown.
- Of the LDCs not already operating at 1:11 ratio 12% plan to move to the new ratio in 2013, 35% in 2014, three per cent in 2015 and 48% in 2016.

Better than 1:10	47%
1:10	20%
1:11	5%
1:12	12%
1:13	1%
1:14	0%
1:15	14%

- Fifty-nine per cent of services delivering OSHC are operating at the ratio of 1:15, with 13% operating at better than 1:10, nine per cent at 1:10, one per cent at 1:11 and 10% at 1:12.

⁵ Please note that due to rounding off, some percentages will not add to 100.

Workforce

Educators' Qualifications

The NQF introduces new requirements for staff qualifications, ensuring the sector has qualified educators equipped to deliver high quality care and education.

On 1 January 2014, all LDC and preschools with more than 25 children will be required to have a full time Early Childhood Teacher (ECT). Smaller services will only require an ECT part of the time. Half of all educators will need to have, or be actively working towards, an ECEC diploma, and the remaining staff will need to have, or be actively working towards, a Cert III or equivalent. All FDC Coordinators will need to have a diploma qualification or above, while all FDC Educators will need a Cert III.

By January 2020, a second ECT will be required for services with more than 80 children all the time, while for services with more than 60 children an additional ECT is required at least half of the time.

- Nearly six hundred services gave a profile of their educators' current qualifications, representing more than 7,000 educators.
- Thirty-five per cent of educators have a Cert III, 35% have a Diploma (including advanced diploma), and 15% have a degree or higher. See *Table 6* for further breakdown.
- While 12% of educators have no qualification, a quarter of the whole sector is currently working towards ECEC qualifications at some level, whether it is up-skilling or obtaining their first qualification. See *Table 6* for further breakdown.

We are a very proud community based OSH program and have successfully run since 1988 but I fear when I eventually retire (I have been with this program since 1989) that it will become a private operated service because of staffing issues

VIC Respondent

Table 6: Educators' Qualifications

Have no qualifications	12%
Have completed a Cert III	35%
Have completed a Cert IV (OSHC)	3%
Have completed a Diploma (including advanced)	35%
Have completed a three year degree	6%
Have completed a four year degree	7%
Have a post graduate qualification	2%

Table 6 (cont): Educators working towards qualifications	
Total % engaged in studying	27%
Working towards a Cert III	7%
Working towards a Cert IV (OSHC)	0.4%
Working towards a Diploma (including advanced)	12%
Working towards a three year degree	2%
Working towards a four year degree	5%
Working towards post graduate qualification	1%

Recruitment Experiences

- The majority of services have a full complement of staff however turnover is common with 28% of services having a vacancy for an educator position.
- Services are recruiting from a limited field of educators but are largely satisfied with their appointees.
- Seventy-three per cent of services recruited for an educator in the first half of 2012. The majority of those recruits had been at Cert III level (36%) and Diploma (32%), with 13% at degree level and 3% at Director/Coordinator.⁶
- Forty-one per cent of services that had recently recruited reported that the field of applicants were of a low or very low standard. Nearly half reported satisfactory fields but only six per cent reported the field being of a high or very high standard.
- Most respondents rated as satisfactory the successful educator's suitability for the role and the successful educator's qualifications for the role. See breakdown in *Table 7*.

We would like to get paid a better wage for the huge job we do. We make a difference too many lives.

QLD Respondent

⁶ Please note that 15% of recent recruitments were for positions classified as “other”.

	Not Satisfactory	Satisfactory
The field of applicants that applied for the position	44%	56%
The successful educator's suitability for the role	10%	90%
The successful educator's qualifications for the role	11%	89%

- The more qualified the position the more difficult it is to recruit. Seventy-three per cent of applicable services found it very difficult to recruit for a Director or Coordinator while 63% found it very difficult to recruit for a degree qualified position, 48% for a diploma position and 24% for a Cert III position. See *Table 8* for further breakdown.
- The top three factors that make recruitment difficult were the low wages in the sector, applicants for positions not being suitably skilled or qualified and the undesirable working hours. One respondent pointed out that supermarkets pay a better hourly rate than a diploma qualified staff member in OSHC.

We pay our staff the highest EBA nationally in Australia and yet we can still not retain our staff due to the stigma of child care and lack of professional recognition from our very own government.

WA Respondent

Positions	Very difficult	Moderately difficult	Sometimes difficult	Occasionally difficult	Never difficult
Certificate III	24%	23%	23%	13%	18%
Diploma	48%	26%	12%	9%	5%
Degree	62%	18%	7%	8%	5%
Director/ Coordinator	73%	11%	8%	4%	4%

Entire Sector	OSHC Only	LDC Only
1. Low wages 2. Applicants are not suitably skilled or qualified 3. Working hours	1. Working hours 2. Low wages 3. Applicants are not suitably skilled or qualified	1. Applicants are not suitably skilled or qualified 2. Low wages 3. Wage differentials between qualifications and/or different service types ⁷

- Services raised issues with the quality of qualifications and issues with RTOs. One respondent said that “training organisations need to consider the well-being of the children first and foremost... incompetent staff means lack of quality”.

There is a drastic drop in the calibre and quality of Cert. III and Diploma graduates... the Government is FINALLY acknowledging the importance of education and high quality care... we as a profession, owe it to these future citizens to up the ante on the quality of our courses and, therefore, quality of educators.

VIC Respondent

Professional Development and Support

- The majority of services that commented on professional development and support for their educators paid fees for short courses and gave time off in lieu to their educators to complete short courses⁸. See *Table 10* for further breakdown.

Time off or in lieu to complete short courses	74%
Pay fees for short courses	91%
Time off or in lieu to complete long courses at TAFE colleges, private RTOs or University	41%
Pay fees for long courses at Tafe colleges, private RTOs or University	33%
Pay staff for their time to complete placements at other services	25%

⁷ A close fourth issue for LDC was working hours.

⁸ Please note that between 14 and 34 per cent of services could not comment on certain PD.

Fees

Current Fees

Average daily fees are significantly lower than those quoted recently in the media and by advocacy groups who are lobbying against the NQF⁹.

The average fee for LDC services, across Australia, is \$75 a day. The average for services that identified as standalone community based or large NFP is \$76. See *Table 11* for larger states breakdown.

Nationally the average for FDC was \$65; however in many FDC services educators set their own prices, meaning fees vary within schemes.

I also become frustrated when the media reports that services are putting up their fees by huge amounts as a result of the NQF. Whilst it may cause a small increase in fees, the benefits to children far outweigh this and I believe many private centres use this as an excuse to add more profits to their pockets!

NSW Respondent

State	LDC Sector	Community and NFP Sector
Queensland	\$67.84	\$67.81
South Australia ¹⁰	\$72.79	\$72.79
New South Wales	\$76.22	\$74.77
Victoria	\$80.44	\$80.28

Area	BSC	ASC	VAC
National	\$11.90	\$16.43	\$45
Queensland	\$12.58	\$17.69	\$43.92
Victoria	\$10.77	\$14.71	\$44.81

⁹ Please see the following for media reporting higher childcare prices:

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/childcare-crisis-as-fees-set-to-soar/story-fn7x8me2-1226211751820>

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/ipad/parents-swoop-on-childcare-vacancies/story-fn6bfmqc-1226326256939>

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/families-face-679-increase-in-childcare-costs/story-fn59niix-1226121202117>

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/ipad/parents-pay-anything-from-62-to-130-a-day/story-fn6bfkm6-1226241157172>

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/new-staff-ratios-mean-fewer-childcare-places/story-e6frq6n6-1225856607368>

¹⁰ All respondents identified as either community standalone services or large NFP.

Fee Increases

- Forty-three per cent of services increased their fees in the first half of 2012.
- The average increases were \$4.87 for LDC, representing 6.5% increase on the average fee;¹¹ \$1.29 for BSC, \$1.49 for ASC, \$2.85 for vacation care and \$1.71 for FDC.

National	\$4.87
Queensland	\$3.18
South Australia ¹³	\$3.87
New South Wales	\$4.06
Victoria	\$6.71

- By far, the major reason for fee increases was the normal cost of living rises (CPI) with 70% of services identifying this as the main reason/s. This was followed by increases to staff wages (46%) and changes to meet increased minimum regulatory requirements (34%).
- Of those services who increased their fees, over 50% stated their families did not express frustration, reduce hours, leave their service or say there were experiencing financial stress.
- However over 30% of services stated families did reduce their hours, 27% stated families expressed frustration at increases, 24% stated families said they were under financial stress and 15% said they had families leave their service because of the increase.
- Overall the data showed that NFP services were less likely to receive negative reactions to their fee increases from their families than their commercial counterparts.

We like to operate above ratio. When the regulations changed we increased staffing again. However this has had a dramatic result in our utilisation: as fees went up, families dropped days to cope with fee increase, putting us in a financially difficult position.

VIC Respondent

¹¹ Note this data will become richer over the next few waves, when tracking of trends is made possible. Additionally state and territory and metropolitan and regional breakdowns of the fees will offer more insight to the experiences of services and Australian families.

¹² Note Tasmania, WA, Northern Territory and ACT had low response rate for this question and cannot produce an accurate average.

¹³ All respondents identified as either community standalone services or large NFP.

Table 14: Families Reactions to Fee Increases		
	Commercial sector ¹⁴	NFP sector
Families expressed frustration due to the increase	41%	26%
Families said they are under increased financial stress due to the increase	41%	22%
Families leaving your service due to the increase	22%	14%
Families reducing hours/days with your service due to increase	56%	28%
None of the above	34%	54%

- Forty per cent of services, at the time of responding (May and June 2012) anticipated increases to fees mid-2012 and 44 % anticipated fee increases at the start of 2013.
- When comparing commercial services (11% of respondents) to NFP services (89% of respondents), fee increases in the first half of 2012 were consistent (44% for commercial and 43% for NFP). However there was a difference in the percentage of commercial services anticipating further fee increases mid 2012 (commercial services 63% and NFP services 47%) and the start of 2013 (47% and 44% respectively).

¹⁴ Note the commercial sector represents 11% of TICCSS respondents.

National Quality Reforms:

The early childhood education and care sector is going through a period of great change and reform.

TICCSS asked services about their experiences with the first six months of the NQF which commenced on 1 January 2012. Some respondents were from areas of the ECEC sector that are not yet included in the NQF, such as Occasional Child Care and Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services. These services shared their experiences as out of scope services where possible.

Understanding exactly what is required has added to work load but as we gradually become familiar we are starting to work smarter. Assessment will be the defining moment of how successful we have been.

NSW Respondent

This data while already valuable will become richer in the next few waves as we compare and measure areas that are working well, the management of challenges by services, the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) and state and territory regulatory authorities and the first roll out of assessments.

Experiences with the NQF: The First Six Months

- Sixteen per cent of services stated that the NQF meant normal business or reduced workload for them.
- Sixty per cent of services said that the NQF has greatly increased their workload and a quarter said there had been a slight increase.
- The top four issues the ECEC sector experienced in the first half of 2012 were:
 1. Meeting the increased paper work to meet legal obligations and government regulations (84%)
 2. Staff’s reluctance to embrace change (38%)
 3. Inability to recruit suitable staff (33%)
 4. Inconsistent messages from state or territory regulatory authority (31%)

We have expressed our concern to the Government regarding the lack of inclusion of Occasional Child Care in the National quality framework. This is causing great confusion within the industry. Our service would love to opt in as we want to be providing best practice.

Vic Respondent

However, many services acknowledged the increase in work to meet the NQF as a temporary increase as a new system rolls out.

Admin tasks have increased, however I am expecting this to flatten out once everything is in place. I think it is a positive opportunity for our industry and families.

NSW respondent

A new system always requires an increased workload through the transition period, then the workload eases off as new policies and procedures are implemented.

NSW Respondent

Waivers

- The vast majority of the sector is meeting the NQF without the need for waivers of any of the new minimum standards.
- Twelve per cent of the services stated they had a waiver from meeting one or more of the standards in the Education and Care Services Regulations.
- The most common waiver was for staff qualifications at 56%, followed by staff:child ratios at 29%.

Communities and vulnerabilities

Vulnerable Children

ACCS recognises the key role that ECEC services play in Australian children’s safety, health and welfare and the support network services their families need.

Having strong connections and relationships with children and families often means that ECEC services are aware of challenges and vulnerabilities in their communities earlier than targeted child protection services.

ACCS defines vulnerability as children with a range of risk factors that are challenging or affecting their development and learning.

As families have become more comfortable in our service we are noticing more parents are talking to staff about their lack of financial stability, loss of jobs, domestic violence, children with additional needs, and parenting concerns.

VIC Respondent

TICCSS asked if services had seen an increase or change to vulnerability in their community. Over future TICCSS this data will make a clearer picture of emerging vulnerabilities across Australia and how children’s services support their children and families.

Key Facts

- Eighty per cent of services have vulnerable children in their service.
- Nearly half of services (46%) have only a few vulnerable children, nearly a third (29%) have some. Four per cent reported that the majority or vast majority of their children are vulnerable.
- Thirty per cent of services have seen an increase in the number of vulnerable children in their communities, while 68% reported no change and 3% a decrease.
- Twenty-three per cent of services noticed a change in the types of vulnerability in their communities. This is further explored in the following section.

We run a targeted program for vulnerable and disadvantaged children... We see a growing number of children with vulnerabilities due to family circumstances - poverty, mental and physical illness, substance abuse, domestic violence and sometimes homelessness. The effects of these environments are extreme on children. Almost all children have some degree of speech and language delay, most have some degree of cognitive delay, and many exhibit severe challenging behaviour... Children in these circumstances cannot learn effectively, and this type of vulnerability puts them at a disadvantage for most of their lives.

NSW Respondent

Financial Stress

The most common vulnerability was families experiencing a higher level of financial stress, with 10% of services stating this as an issue. This varied from issues of existing and long lasting poverty to that of mortgage strain, where previously comfortable and financially stable families are now experiencing harder times.

This was in addition to how the financial pressure impacted the family; at times resulting in relationship stress or breakdown, or parents increasing their working hours and becoming time poor, potentially leading to behavioural issues with children.

Some services said the financial stress had further adverse effects on the service with fewer families paying their fees on time.

We are situated in a mortgage belt where families are displaying signs of financial strain resulting in fees not being paid and families separating. As a lunch box service there has been a marked decrease in the quality of foods provided in children's lunch boxes. Parents are resistant to collecting ill children as they are under pressure to remain at work due to employer's inflexibility around juggling parenting duties. These pressures are not supported by government policy but are being reflected by employer behaviour particularly toward women.

SA Respondent

Additional Needs and Behavioural and Developmental Issues

Additional needs and behavioural and developmental issues also featured as a main concern to services in areas of vulnerability. Witnessing increasing levels of children with additional needs requires services to step up with their support to parents in pre and post diagnosis. The shortfalls of funding and government support in this area was extremely evident with many services reporting the strain that is put upon them by having to pay the "gap" between the Inclusion Support Funding and the real cost of the assistance.

Another issue raised by services, was undiagnosed children and how a service can support the child prior to diagnosis when they still need additional support but are not eligible for the funding. Supporting the parents and potentially managing the parent's reluctance to diagnose were also identified as challenges by some services.

The Centre is under pressure... to utilise Inclusion Support more often. However as a not for profit centre, the level of financial support is not enough to meet all of these needs. \$16.45 per hour does not meet the wages or on costs required for a staff member for this position.

QLD respondent

Reaching out to Vulnerable Families

Many services offered targeted services and support to families that might be at risk to assist in ensuring their children received early education and care.

Services are also engaged in social issues such as closing the gap, reconciliation or providing extra support to families with children with a disability.

[We have] lowered fees, and transport for ATSI children and other factors we have introduced to close the gap we have more children from vulnerable families.

NSW respondent

Overwhelmingly the responses by services on vulnerability in their community demonstrates the critical role children's services have in connecting families and children to the support they need, proving their worth beyond education and care.

We have been working with a number of families under the Brighter Futures program. It is great to be working at an early intervention level in child protection.

NSW respondent

We are still seeing vulnerable families [with] issues such as mental illness and illicit drugs and are continually working with [them] and outside agencies to support them. We are seeing more children coming to us with additional needs and while funding is available for some to employ additional workers, funding should also be available to release educators to gather information and attend training. I think inclusiveness only works if it is fully supported and best practice can be implemented each day.

NSW respondent

Methodology and Research Design

Research Aims

The Trends in Community Children's Services Survey aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What changes are occurring in community children's services in fees charged to families, utilisation and waiting lists, staff qualifications, staff:child ratios and recruitment?
2. What are the positive impacts and challenges faced by not for profit community children's services in Australia and their families in regard to implementation of the NQA?
3. What changes are occurring in the profile of children and families presenting or not presenting, in particular vulnerable children?

Research Design

This research draws on a survey that is open to all services but targeted at community and not for profit (NFP) children's services. In 2012 the first wave was conducted from May to June, with the survey live for four weeks. The second wave is due in October. From 2013 the survey will be conducted annually.

The survey is a simple electronic questionnaire, open to directors/coordinators from children's services of all types – LDC, OSHC, FDC, IHC, OCC, MACS, preschools etc.

The Trends in Community Children's Services Survey in its current form with the limited resources attached is designed to be explorative and a continual reflective learning process. The findings are designed to be indicative and not representative. The research findings will be able to assist in identifying areas where more extensive research could be conducted.

The research is designed to gather data on the following:

Demographics

- Services types
- Number of licensed places
- Locations
- Management type (NFP organisation, parent/community owned or commercial)
- Utilisation and waiting lists

Workforce

- Percentage of educator vacancies
- Ease/difficulty in recruiting
- Quality of qualifications and applicants
- Support offered for staff professional development

Fees:

- Average fees
- Fee increases (past and predicted)
- Communities reactions to changes in fees

National Quality Reforms:

- Experience with implementation
- Frequency and type of waivers

Communities and vulnerabilities

- Number of vulnerable families supported through the service
- Changes in vulnerabilities in the community

All data will be cross referenced against service types, location (depending on disclosure this may break down to metro, regional and to the *Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas* decile ranking) etc.

Survey Distribution

The Trends in Community Children’s Services Survey Communication Strategy utilises a snowball technique to gather the sample through the ACCS membership base and informal networks and contacts. Email invitations to participate in the survey are circulated through members and contacts requesting them to forward the survey to their contacts.

This is providing a diverse sample for the survey. ACCS strongly believes that given the limitations of the research this technique is the most ideal.

Evaluation

ACCS has built in an evaluation process after each wave of the Trends in Community Children’s Services Survey. The evaluation focuses on the following points:

1. The uptake of survey participation across states and territories, metro and regional and service types
2. The completion rate of the survey (are services comfortable with answering all questions, does it appear they struggle with some questions in particular)
3. The process of analysis of the survey (can it be more robust and/or streamlined)
4. The dissemination of the report and uptake of the data externally

Current Limitations

Trends in Community Children’s Services Survey findings will be framed around an acknowledgement of the limitations of the research methodology.

First and foremost the findings will be indicative of what is happening in the sector but will not necessarily be representative of all NFP community services.

Given the lack of comparative research ACCS is confident that this indicative data will address the considerable data gap that presently exists.

Some service types and regional areas are better connected to the ACCS network. Relying on a snowballing approach to gathering a sample means that some areas of the ECEC sector may not be reached in the initial waves. ACCS is working to ensure that each wave further extends the reach of the awareness and participation in the Trends in Community Children's Services Survey.