



Review of early childhood education  
and care

# Public Hearing 3 Transcript

Tuesday, 16 May 2023

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## **Acknowledgment of Country**

IPART acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live. We pay respect to Elders both past and present.

We recognise the unique cultural and spiritual relationship and celebrate the contributions of First Nations peoples.

## **Tribunal Members**

The Tribunal members for this review are:

Carmel Donnelly PSM, Chair  
Deborah Cope  
Sandra Gamble

Enquiries regarding this document should be directed to a staff member:  
Jennifer Vincent (02) 9290 8418  
Jessica Clough (02) 9113 7744

## **The Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal**

IPART's independence is underpinned by an Act of Parliament. Further information on IPART can be obtained from [IPART's website](#).

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# 1 Introduction

**Mr Andrew Nicholls:** Now, to help with accessibility, we have turned on Zoom captions, and there's a message in the chat box on how to use things.

We'll also be recording today's hearing so it can be transcribed. We don't plan on making the video publicly available, but we will put a copy of the transcript on our website along with the presentation slides in the next few days.

This is a public hearing, so it means that if there's any media attending or others that are present today, and you'd like to publish, or if you refer to things that I said during this event you are free to do so.

I also want to remind all of us online that we have a responsibility to ensure a respectful environment today, so that everyone feels safe to share their views and be open with their thoughts.

Well, I might pass in a moment to the Chair of IPART Carmel Donnelly.

The review team will also give a short presentation on key issues and questions for the review we are conducting, and that we're keen to get your feedback on. And then we'll open to a Q&A session, so that we'll have plenty of time in today's session to hear from you, so you can ask questions or give us your feedback or your thoughts, and to raise things that are important to you.

We really want to hear from everyone, whether you ask us questions, put messages in in the chat, or follow up with submissions. And we'll also be asking you some questions, using a thing called Mentimeter, if you haven't encountered it before I'll explain it a little bit later, which you can answer via your phone or computer, and you'll be able to answer some questions throughout the day as another way of giving us feedback. So there's plenty of different ways to give us feedback today.

But first I'll hand over to Camel for a welcome and Acknowledgment of Country.

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## 2 Welcome and Acknowledgement of Country

**Ms Carmel Donnelly:** Thank you, Andrew, and good morning, everyone. As Andrew said, my name is Carmel Donnelly, and I'm the Chair of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal, known as IPART for short.

Joining me today are our fellow Tribunal members, Deborah Cope and Sandra Gamble, and we're assisted by the IPART Secretariat staff, including Fiona Towers, Jennifer Vincent, and a number of members of the review team.

Let me start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands that we now call New South Wales and pay our respect to the traditional owners of the lands and waters from wherever we're joining the meeting today. We pay our respect to elders past and present and acknowledge the ongoing connection that Aboriginal people have to this land, and recognise that Aboriginal people are its original Custodians.

We'd also like to acknowledge and extend our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People who are joining us today.

I'd also like to just say how very much we value your input and thank you for making the time to participate in this important hearing today.

We are looking forward to a productive hearing. This is the third of 4 sessions that we've been having with stakeholders, and I will note some of them have been very large groups, and this one is a little bit smaller, so you might notice we've got quite a few IPART people here, but our role is to listen and make sure that we capture and consider everything that's said. So that's why we've got quite a few of the team who are working on the review here.

A little bit of background. Our role at IPART is to help the people of New South Wales get safe and reliable services at a fair price.

That involves us investigating and giving independent advice on services, on prices and other issues across a range of sectors, and most of our work is related to services that people can't do without.

So the Department of Education is funding some new programs to support more children to access quality early childhood education and care across New South Wales, and to ensure increased investment results in improved outcomes for children and families, IPART has been asked to review the sector.

Our review aims to improve the understanding of the sector today, including barriers to accessibility, to choice for families, affordability and supply of quality early childhood services, and to recommend ways to improve these elements across the sector.

In a moment I will hand over to Claudio Campi from IPART, who, as I just said, is going to give a short presentation from IPART, and then the rest of the time will be spent in discussion, hearing from you and the key issues that you want us to be aware of and considering in our review. So thank you again for joining us, and I'll hand over to Claudio.

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## 3 IPART presentation

**Mr Claudio Campi:** Thank you, Carmel.

So IPART has been asked to review early childhood services in New South Wales, and report on factors that influence, affordability, accessibility, consumer choice, and the supply of services.

We've also been asked to collect information about current fees out of pocket costs and provider costs and revenue. We've been asked to estimate benchmark prices that reflect the cost of providing quality services to compare fees.

And finally, we've been asked to recommend ways for the New South Wales Government to improve the affordability, accessibility, and choice of early childhood services.

In completing these tasks, our terms of reference require to consider the diverse needs of families and children, and the variety of services in the sector, including across different children and family groups, geographies, types of services and providers.

We've not been asked to develop, investigate, or recommend price regulation or price setting mechanisms.

The Issues Paper we published in April is the first major milestone of our review, and it's outlining the key issues and questions we're seeking feedback on. You can provide us with your feedback, today, during our public hearing, or through a submission to our issues paper.

And you can also answer questions on the Have your say survey where there are options to map your experiences and submit a story about your experience in the sector.

We are directly engaging with the sector, so while this feedback is due by May 22 you're welcome to get in contact and get in touch with us if you'd like to meet with us, or if you think your region would benefit from a more targeted workshop or visit.

The New South Wales Department of Education monitors, supports and regulates more than 5,800 early childhood services across the State.

Our review focuses on services for children aged 0 to 12, and these include long day care, family day care, and occasional care for children aged 0 to 5, New South Wales Department of Education preschool, community and mobile preschool for children aged 3 to 5, and finally, it includes out of school hours care and vacation care for children up to 12 years old.

The services are provided by a variety of providers, from not-for-profit organisations to for profit companies, local councils, and the State government, and they're funded by a mix of fees, commonwealth government subsidies, and state and local government subsidies through a variety of programs.

I'll now hand it back to Andrew for a quick Mentimeter ice breaker.

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**Mr Nicholls:** Right, thanks, Claudio. Well, we'll just pause here for a little Mentimeter ice-breaker exercise. Now, not sure if you've used Menti before. If you haven't, it's pretty easy to use. You can access it in a couple of different ways, either through your computer or on a mobile device, and it works a bit like a live poll when you open it up. To access it, you can either go to the link that we pasted in the chat and enter the code shown on the screen, or you can simply scan the QR code with your mobile device, and it'll take straight to the questions.

So I'll just give everybody a moment to open it up so you can go to [www.menti.com](http://www.menti.com) enter the code that you can see there on the screen or hold up your phone and scan the QR code. I can see some thumbs up. That means people are joining Menti.

I just want to point out that the answers are completely anonymous. We can't see how you've responded, or any specific individual response, and we'll be using Menti throughout the session in the background, so that you can answer some questions that will really help us with our review.

And once you have a go at answering the questions, and for this icebreaker we just want to get an understanding of where you're located in the State.

In the first question you just type in your suburb or your local government area. And then our second question, when we get to it, will be to understand the type of services that your child or your children, all those that you represent attend, and you can select more than one type if you use multiple services as well. This gives us a sense of the people we have here with us.

I'll give everybody a moment to fill that in. How are people going using Menti? Looks like we've got a small number of people in attendance. We look like we've got a good cross section of the of the sector.

Okay. Everybody last few seconds to use Menti. Hopefully, you found it pretty easy to use as a site, we'll be using it in the background throughout.

On this note I might now hand back to Claudio to just run through the areas that we're seeking feedback on, and then we'll open it up for everybody to have a discussion.

**Mr Campi:** Thank you, Andrew. So the first key area we're seeking feedback on is accessibility and choice of services.

Accessibility is about several complex and overlapping factors, and consumer choice is also closely related. Consumer choices about making sure that families have a meaningful choice about early childhood education and care, including that there are a variety of high-quality service providers and types to choose from.

So we want to hear experiences of families in accessing services, but also in accessing information about services and about the inclusivity of these services. And finally, we'd like to hear if there's been any experience of discrimination in the sector.

We're also seeking feedback on the affordability of services. And now, when it comes to affordability there's no unique definition of what is and isn't considered affordable. This might vary between families and families might be paying very different amounts of money for a similar service; and this is for a variety of reasons, such as location, or the number of children attending, or the number of hours accessed.

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For the purposes of our review, we're looking at affordability in terms of the cost of using early childhood services as a percentage of household income, but also the cost of using services compared to the additional income that can be earned or gained. For example, if a parent is able to return to work after enrolling their kids into childcare.

We also want to know more about parents' perception of affordability, because we know that families make a lot of considerations, both financial and non-financial, when deciding whether or not they'll return to work, and whether or not they'll use early childhood care services

As part of our review, we will collect and analyse data on services and subsidies, but we also want to know what families are paying for services, including other out of pocket costs.

I mentioned earlier that one of the tasks of our review is to estimate benchmarks or standard prices that reflect the cost of providing quality services, and that we can then use to compare fees across the State.

This is not an easy task, because this sector is so diverse. There are no 2 providers that are exactly the same, and there are a lot of different factors that can influence the cost of service provision. For example, the type and quality and the location of the services, or the age groups and the needs of the children who attend the services

We want to know what factors are important to families when they compare service prices, and when they think about whether they get value from money for the fees and cost they have to pay.

We're also seeking feedback on the supply of services. The majority of early childhood services in New South Wales are located in major metropolitan areas. But the situation in rural, remote and very remote Australia is vastly different. As part of the review, we're looking into areas where there is now an under supply of services, or it is likely for the areas to be undersupplied in the future. We want to understand the causes of this and make recommendations to improve the situation.

When it comes to supply, there are usually 3 main drivers that are cost, demand, and workforce availability. But this can vary between service types. For example, a centre-based service and a family day-care service might have very different costs profiles, different workforce requirements, and so on and so forth. So we want to know more about how these drivers, which in some cases can become barriers, to the supply of services can impact a provider's decision to establish or expand a service.

And finally, we're looking at provider cost and revenue. Providers incur cost to deliver early childhood services, and they generally set fees to recover these costs. But, as I said, because no 2 providers are the same, providers might spend very different amount of money to deliver the same services for reasons such as again the location, the size of a service, and so on. Although the major cost categories tend to be the same across the sector, and they include labour costs, rental cost, property, maintenance, and capital investment costs, administration and compliance and purchases and consumables, such as toys, nappies and educational material. We're keen to better understand what cost provider face in delivering their services, and how they vary, or how they're impacted by other factors.

And this brings us to the end of our presentation. Thanks so much for listening, and I'll hand it back to Andrew for our Q&A discussion



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## 4 Q & A discussion

**Mr Nicholls:** Right. Thanks.

In a moment I'll open the discussion to the floor, and I'd like to encourage everyone to just feel free to raise any concerns that you have. Obviously, you've heard a number of the things that we're looking at in the presentation that you've just seen, and we'll ask some prompts to get that conversation going. But we really want to hear from you on any other concerns that you've got. Now you can use the chat box to drop in any messages that you'd like to raise, or any questions that you might have, and we'll be keeping a record of those. So we'll be using all of that feedback in the meeting chat, even if we don't get time to go through every issue that you might be raising through that mechanism. But you can also put up your hand using the appropriate button on Zoom, and then I'll endeavour to get to everybody in the order that you that you raise it

In the background, if you keep your Menti open on your computer or your device, and you'll see some questions that are going up there that we'd also encourage you to fill in, just so that we can get a sense of the issues that you're interested in.

And, Angela, I think you've got your hand up, so I want to throw to you for comment or a question.

**Ms Angela Bodini:** Hi! I work for THRYVE New South Wales. It's a division of SNAICC, the national voice for children within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services.

Okay, so my first thing is not going to be alarming to anybody. But when we're talking about services, increasing services or spaces, we don't have the educators to actually fill the positions with the services that I work with. There are a number of educators that are wanting to increase their qualifications to a bachelor's degree course but have found it difficult to actually pay for those courses, so there's a funding gap that is also there. We have a lot of trainees, but with services that have waiting lists we're unable to actually service the children and families that are on those waiting list because we can't access educators.

I cover the State so it's from Brewarrina and Lightning Ridge through to the Shoalhaven, Mount Druitt, and Ballina area right down to Wagga. So it is the whole State, and it's very similar that many of the services have that waiting list period. The affordability for the communities is that the services often commit to low fees to meet the needs of those communities and the services, then make up that gap difference which is very challenging for the funding that they receive. But they stay committed to assisting their communities and the children within the communities. That's the way they tend to do it.

CCS, and that can be a really difficult portion as well. There's IT literacy, or IT access to be considered. And there's also Centrelink access to be considered, because many areas don't have Centrelink within the area. And Centrelink don't tend to come out to do work in hubs or location, which would be very helpful.

Then yes, workforce availability.

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Provider cost and revenue, it's not so much that, it's very much focusing on that availability of appropriate education.

Fee-free bachelor's degrees and deployments would be ideal. And I suppose, my question is, what can be done to cover all of those things. Thank you.

**Mr Nicholls:** Thank you very much, Angela, for that statement. I think Deb, one of our Tribunal members, has a hand up.

**Ms Deborah Cope:** Yes, thank you. I just wanted to follow up Angela, and that was really useful. Thank you very much for all of that information, and I just wanted to ask you a question specifically around the education and being able to get people trained up when they want to be.

And I very much take the point about the cost of training. So we've heard a few things around that, one is the cost of the courses. Another one is the lack of availability of people to back fill people's positions if they need to go and do training.

And also, somebody else was talking to us about the issue of, if you've got to do a placement, it can affect how much money you can earn during that time, and that can mean that you're, having trouble making your own ends meet, because you can't take time off to meet the educational requirements. From your experience, is it all those things and more? What sort of things?

**Ms Bodini:** It is all of those things, and I think some of the services have been able to release people for practicums, and I know, with the offering that the University of Wollongong currently has in place, which is an accelerated Bachelor of Teaching degree for 2 years. They've built some of those things into that offerings to make it less of a burden.

Even so it is, and I think I've got around 5 people interested in doing that particular course, but they just aren't able to say yes, because they can't come out of that with the debt, because they've got other family, community commitments that they all have.

I think it's a particular point when we're talking about our Aboriginal and our most vulnerable services and communities that is even exacerbated more. So yeah, it is considering all those things. Sometimes they are in remote communities where the nearest centre to actually do a practicum is quite a distance away. So that that would add on to that as well.

**Mr Nicholls:** Thanks very much, Angela. Now, hopefully I'm getting this in the right order, so I think, Dorothee, you were next with hand up.

**Ms Dorothee Seeto:** Yes, hello, Thank you. So I'm a parent. I've got a child. Well, I have 2 children in childcare, long day care, and I have got one, and what I've really noticed, I guess what is concerning me the most as a parent is this staff burnout, and this staff continuous change. It's much worse I feel in the childcare I'm in in Central Sydney than it was 4 years ago in terms of staff turnover and number of casuals. And so I'm really concerned. I'm like well, every day I'm leaving my children with people who are burnt out. Is that the right thing to do as a parent? And I pay a lot of money for that, so that's a key concern. in terms of wellbeing.

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There's things I don't get, like the infrastructure of the centre is designed quite well for the children. but it's not designed well for the staff. There's one small staff room, which doesn't support their well-being, they're not allowed to get off premises, and of course there's reasons for that, but again, I don't think that helps the staff cope with all the things that they need to cope with during the day, it means it's pretty much always noisy, always busy. Their breaks get interrupted all the time because it's still on premise. All of these things, I think don't help and I think it's self-reinforcing because it's more burnout. And I know people leaving the profession.

Then, the centre I've been at, I think I don't know out of maybe 15 staff, there's like 3 permanent staff left, everyone else is casual. The Centre directors just changed again. They took 38 months to recruit the centre director, and then, 3 years later she's gone, and now it's probably going to take another 8 months, I mean there seems to be from what I can tell, just talking to the educators, they spend an enormous amount of time finding the casuals for the next day, for the week, because they're constantly trying, even though they are part of a bigger group, and they've got a pool of permanent relief staff and casual. It's still like this constant admin burden on top of everything else to find staff for the next day the next week. So yeah, I think that's what I'm most concerned about on top of quality, of course, and affordability. And yeah, it's value for money.

**Mr Nicholls:** Fantastic, thanks for that. We really appreciate those perspectives. I think Joanne might be next.

**Ms Joanne Goulding:** Hi there! I'd like to add to what my colleague Angela has spoken to in terms of our Aboriginal cohort in New South Wales. And one of the things I think that we need to consider is the impact of expansion of ECEC mainstream services on revenue for Aboriginal community controlled organisations. That's one thing we need to have a think about, because these places are a cultural site for the families to attend, and quite often what happens is, our families use these places as a hub, they're places that they go to for so much more than just childcare. They are culturally safe spaces that where they can access parenting programs, they're often used by other agencies as hubs to do COVID vaccinations, for example, hampers and supplies to our families in need. They are often located in areas that are very close to Aboriginal communities that utilise them for a number of other things.

I think one of the other points that's worth exploring, particularly from an Aboriginal perspective, is that Aboriginal community controlled organisations don't necessarily have the infrastructure to support the business side of their activities like a mainstream service that is a for-profit organisation, for example, that has access to an entire business unit to support assessment and writing activities, to support HR activities, to support the governance activities to support on mass, parenting activities.

Our small Aboriginal community controlled organisations are juggling all of these with the existing business acumen that they have, and they're quite often not funded for it. And I think, just to add to that, the activity test has had a significant impact on these services, because they are using their own revenue to top up and to support families for their children to access the centres, which is ridiculous when you think of the vulnerability of Aboriginal families, because it's focused on the parents and the parents' activity is having a significant bearing on the child's access to early childhood care and learning.

And I think one of the other considerations that we need to think about for our vulnerable families is, as my colleague Angela had mentioned, digital poverty, being able to access CCS, to be able to get online and register for CCS.

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It's a very clunky system. Our directors in our services even find it clunky. I mean. I can give you a story of one service provider that took a family into Centrelink herself. It took 3 hours of her own time, only to come back and return that the registration hadn't been completed correctly, resulting in a father getting frustrated, and had to pull this child out of care because of incompetence through operators to get these registrations right.

So I think holistically from a perspective for Aboriginal community control services., there's lots of different things that we need to consider: the accessibility, the affordability, the impact on expansion that the Commonwealth and State governments have committed to, and the impact on our services to continue to exist and be sustainable in those environment and with mainstream services.

What does cultural safety look like when you've got a mainstream provider operating in a population where there are large Aboriginal populations and in local government areas?

**Mr Nicholls:** Right, fantastic. Thank you. Joanne, a lot of food for thought, and a lot of interesting comments. Mary-Louise I think was next with a hand up.

**Ms Mary-Louise Clifford:** Hi! How are you? I would like to just give a bit of input from a couple of different points of view, particularly when we see that the sector is a female dominated industry, that when we're looking across any of the sectors, whether it's nursing, disability or early childhood education and care that we are in that lower pay cohort.

And even when we see some of our beautiful team members try to upgrade their qualification to the diploma and to be degree qualified teachers, there isn't that motivation to stay committed, because we just see that you can go and do other work, and they are paid more, or people go, and they do their degree, and then they look at the conditions that they would get going into primary school settings that there is no reason, no benefit for them to then stay with us in the 0 to 5 sector, because there just isn't that remuneration equal to the skills that we have, and there's all these programs that we've got being funded at the moment, which I absolutely love, because we're always upskilling and training., but why would you want to upskill and train and have nothing to benefit at the end?

There's another pot of money, last week we've had Start Strong, but it's not addressing wages. And when I see my colleague seeing in the media that the disability sector and the nursing sectors are having substantial increases, they can't put food on the table with that.

We also see that there's challenges, if we put our family hats on, because services are so heavily booked at the moment, and we can't increase our capacity as services because we're at absolute point. There's no flexibility in the provision of service for families. So if people are engaged in casualised work, then they can't just do a casual booking at a centre, because we don't have any vacancies here, I'm based on the Central Coast, with the 2 services I manage, we have no flexibility at all to support people who may be able to pick up an extra shift, who may be offered to fill in for someone for a short term arrangement, or have a short term contract. They've got to commit to an ongoing enrolment, and they don't get the work then that family's going backwards. So there's a whole lot of challenges there in service provision.

The way we used to, when I started in industry over 30 years ago, it used to be occasional care centres, and we don't have that built into the model of what's being provided now.

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The other thing from a service provision perspective, we're having more and more complex children from trauma backgrounds or who have really, really complex behaviours. It's a beautiful goal for us to have those children included in our program, and we have a very strong focus on supporting children that might have a diagnosed disability, or may have behavioural concerns, but that weighs down on the staff as well, because the processes to get any support are so difficult within services, and the ISS funding is an onerous task, and it on it gives us a small portion into what we actually do as a service.

So I don't think there's one thing that you can fit in the accessing, in the retaining, in the making services great for families. But I really appreciate the opportunity for us to be able to raise a number of these issues. So thank you.

**Mr Nicholls:** Thanks, Mary-Louise. I think Carmel might have a question as Chair of IPART.

**Ms Donnelly:** Yes, thank you, Andrew. I thought I might just jump in, and particularly thank, people who have just been speaking. There were a few things that I think we'd like to find out a bit more about, and that would be very useful as case studies. And so I know we are meeting with THRYVE, Angela and Joanne, separately, and we may well, if you're happy, follow up with some of the other speakers, Mary-Louise and others, because it would be really useful to have real case studies, perhaps de-identified, that we can refer to. I'm interested in the one about when you have services expand, and then there's unintended consequences for the Aboriginal community controlled centres.

I think it'd be really good to be able to tell the story about that in our draft report, and have people really understand how that happens, and also the example that you gave Joanne about digital poverty, obviously de-identifying the family concerned, but perhaps being able to hear that story in a bit of detail, so that we could explain the difficulties. And I think, Mary-Louise, you also talked about the onerous burden for applying, for funding, so getting a sort of sense of how long that takes as an example, so we can make it real in our report.

So I'm going to ask if you, you may already be dealing with a member of our team, and we're going to put the contact details up later, or we might reach out to you that if there are examples, really practical examples of your experience that we can explain to others in the sector or others in New South Wales Government, when we give our report, what the experiences are. I think that will be very helpful, so I'll stop there, but just really want to put that invitation out there

**Mr Nicholls:** Right thanks Carmel. Nemat I think you're next with your hand.

**Ms Nemat Kharboutli:** Hi! Good morning, everyone, and thanks for the opportunity to be here today. I work for Muslim Women Australia, and we've been supporting multicultural women and their families for over 40 years.

We also deliver services with settlement support, domestic violence and homelessness support. And so what I really want to touch on is a few of the points that we just raised previously. But a few things around cultural, linguistic, and faith-based inclusion in programming and support, especially for early childhood education. We've seen it done really well in certain sectors, but I think that needs to continue moving forward and just to echo some of the notions around cultural safety.

For example, things around halal food, around intake processes which really draw out some of those nuances, so families don't feel like they have to advocate for that for their children.

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I wanted to really also touch on flexibility, and how we can design a system that works for different nuances and different communities. So previously Mary-Louise mentioned around occasional care, that doesn't exist any more, and that looks so different for different communities and trying to keep women connected to the workforce.

Our CEO was one of the expert panellists on the Women's Economic Opportunities Review that took place last year, and that was a huge factor for some of the multicultural families in South West Sydney, who have educated families, educated women who are trying to re-enter the workforce with multiple children, and that the cost, the affordability, and also the other attributes around, caring for their children, around their children's health and illness, and the things that we don't pick up for families, re-entering into early childhood education. How many days they have to take off that they still have to pay for to care for the children when they're getting sick, managing the household and daily logistics. We saw during COVID-19 that that mental load and gender burden, women actually withdrawing and not taking up those extra shifts or the extra opportunity. So we really need to look at, how can we do that even differently. How can we get early childhood education in workplaces? How can we get nannies for women who work from home, 2 or 3 days a week. The landscape looks different, and we need to support women to stay connected to the workforce, and we need to be quite innovative around how we do that.

I also wanted to touch on single parent households and the accessibility factor as in not just being about expansion of services, but doing that in a really nuanced way to say, what does that casualised workforce look like? How are they accessing childcare? What about families invested in small businesses, and the waiting lists are very much more extensive in Southwest Sydney. You're looking for long day care anywhere between at least \$100 to \$150 per day.

We provide domestic and family violence support to women in refuges and transitional homes. Advocacy is crucial to even be able to support their health and their well-being, and moving forward in their empowerment. So I just wanted to make a point around the nature of flexibility so it actually works for families in the long term. And then also how essential early education and childcare is around safety, around employment and educational prospects for women.

Family day care works for some, but for those who are trying to re-engage in the workforce, trying to get access and making it affordable with the Centrelink percentage just can be an absolute nightmare, especially when it looks at before and after school care and vacation care, and how it works practically, because what we're hearing is, women still want to be with their children, but they want to be able to provide for their families as well. And so we need to get that balance right.

And I really wanted to echo that childcare and the quality of education and childcare is crucial to the emotional and academic well-being of children, so it's not just about a babysitting service. It's about that quality of care, and for that we need to adequately resource and pay professionals in the space, because it often is a really early pathway for disability support, for a whole range of other health and wellbeing interventions that families may not pick up on their own. So thank you for having me today.

**Mr Nicholls:** Thank you Nemat, and I think Sandra's actually got a question for you, so I'll just go to Sandra, one of our Tribunal members.

**Ms Gamble:** Hi, Nemat and thank you for those really excellent points and insights. When you mentioned occasional care, do you mean by that, care within the home? Is it something more than that?



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I think you mentioned nannies as well? So is what you're saying, if a woman wants to re-join the workforce who has a number of children at home, that some of those women, or even parents, would like the option of being able to have at least some of the childcare conducted within their own home. Is that what you're saying?

**Ms Kharboutli:** Yes, so I was talking about it from 2 lenses. So one is the traditional occasional care setting where, if you've, for example myself, I'll speak from a personal perspective now, and it's echoed for a lot of the women that we support, I'm a mother of 4 children, three who are school age, and one who's a baby. I work, I try to manage to stay engaged within the workforce, and I've had a lot of support to do that, but for days where I can work from home, and for the days where I need all day meetings, you really have to navigate the shared parental load. You really have to navigate calling on extended family and friends, which I'm privileged to do. But a lot of people don't have that option. I don't have the option of saying 'in 2 weeks' time, I've got an all-day conference that I need childcare support to access.' Otherwise, to do that you need to go through the long day care team. But, for example, I have a child who has health needs and health issues. And so I've had to negotiate putting them in, taking them out because it meant paying for a service when for 2 days of long day care, you're spending 5 days trying to get that child well again.

So that's what I mean about we need to find a not all-or-nothing approach to support families, because Covid changed the workforce and that came with a lot of flexibility. But the system hasn't caught up to what that could look like for families. So from a couple of different perspectives. I hope that answered your question.

**Ms Gamble:** Yeah, yeah, it does. Just a quick follow up to that, I got the impression, and I just wanted to clarify with you, that this type of occasional care might have been more available in the past than it is now. Is that your view?

**Ms Kharboutli:** Yes, my understanding was that a lot of the women that we support were able to find, a one day, a 2 day a week, centre that they could access for some of that that interaction, for some of that engagement. If they exist, the waiting lists are so long that they've rendered themselves not fit for that purpose any more.

**Ms Gamble:** Okay, thanks, Nemat. Thanks.

**Mr Nicholls:** All right. Thank you. I might go now to Margaret.

**Ms Margaret Meaker:** Hi, everyone. Look I'm from Special Teaching and Research, STAR, and I've been in the industry for 21 years since we were established, and we support children with significant disability to be included in mainstream childcare centres.

My daughter was one of the first children to attend a STAR affiliated childcare centre. She had been rejected from 5 childcare centres, and STAR was prepared to take her.

Our area is special education. A barrier to inclusion is obviously a whole lot of issues. But the main points I want to make is that most parents that we talk to have been rejected from other centres, very subtly, and so we say to them, we will take your child, and we can teach your child.

The reason that we do that is that our role is to teach the teachers to teach. That's a bit of our mantra, and we work with the teachers on the floor to develop a learning plan and how to implement that.

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But what we know having worked with all these people is that unless those teachers in those centres are valued and feel valued, and are invested in by their employers, they have no opportunity to upskill, therefore they see children with disabilities as a burden, as an additional cost.

And when people may have them enrolled, they are not necessarily being included, and too many kids are just circling the fence with a box of crayons.

So our passion for inclusion is done by professional development, and we are alarmed by the lack of skilled staff who can teach children with disabilities, and include them in a meaningful way in the child care centres.

One other point I want to raise it that hasn't been touched on is that the roll out of NDIS has also meant that there are therapists chasing each other past the fence to get in and work with the children that they have been engaged to work with. So the centres are overwhelmed and overrun by therapists coming in and wanting to do just one on one with the child for an hour or so, and then pull the educator off the floor and give them a barrage of instructions, and then they go away. And the expectation, therefore, is placed on this educator, not necessarily that skilled, to include this child, so it's a waste of NDIS money for starters, it's not planned. What we do is work with those therapists and include their recommendations and strategies into the plan, and we support it on the floor.

The other thing we do, which someone mentioned, is we bring release staff in as well, so that the person on the floor can be released. We work with the teacher. Therefore, we're not imposing on the staff, and we're not stressing them out around ratios. Our package of training is amazing. It's evidence based. It's led by the best special educators in the country, and we are finding that staff can't access it because they they're not able to pay for it. They're not given the time to do the training so fundamental to quality. Early childhood inclusive education is training of teachers. I think that's it, yeah, which is hard on the back of everything. We've already spoken about that, it's a whole sector that's under duress.

Another thing I agree with, a few other speakers talking about the difficulty of applying for that ISS funding there. It's tiny, it's effortful. I'm very closely related to a small Aboriginal community service, and they don't even bother, and 2 of my Aboriginal services have about 13 children with a diagnosed disability attending across the week.

It's a big deal, but as you said Angela, everyone is already under duress, we're going 'you can do this training', and it feels like we're [unclear]. But yeah, look, it's really tricky. We're lucky enough to be funded by a Department in New South Wales to offer those Webinar training packages online so educators can access them for free. But then they've got to find the time to do that.

But we will look at putting together our thoughts into a submission, and I will work with one of those Aboriginal centres, I think also to put forward their unique perspective.

**Ms Cope:** Thank you. That would be fantastic. Thank you very much.



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**Ms Donnelly:** Thanks. Look, I just had a question which people might be able to give me some sort of answer now, or really I can invite you as you're putting submissions together to cover this as well. And it comes out of my own experience, I will admit, as a single mother with some children who had disabilities, but mild disability, developmental delay, I suppose. And it strikes me that all of the examples that you've been given, how does that work for children for whom the parents have not yet been able to get a diagnosis. or, in fact, they're new to parenting, and the educators at the early childhood centre would have more experience of picking up that a child maybe is at risk of having a delay or a disability or a health issue, but the parents haven't identified that yet.

So it would say to me that there would be a lag even before you can get to the process of applying for the funding, and there's an important role for the educators in helping the families understand that there there's potentially some challenge that child is facing. So any thoughts on that?

**Ms Clifford:** I would love to just make a comment. I also have another hat other than being an early childhood teacher, I'm actually an auditor in the NDIS as well, and between being in my service and being in that role and talking with participants and families, there has been a real gap, particularly in the last couple of years for families to actually be aware that something isn't actually moving along in terms of typical development with the children, because families have been so disconnected from what would have been everyday experiences to attend things like birthday parties or family social events, or go to the park or accessing services. So it hasn't been entirely evident, and then all of a sudden, we're getting back to normal life, as we want to call it, and people are raising that there may be a developmental concern, or a referral required.

And there isn't enough providers anywhere you go, New South Wales, Australia-wide, anywhere at the moment. There is such a huge waiting list for families to be able to access paediatricians. The wait list for our allied health professionals at the moment is astronomical. They can access some through an enhanced care plan with their GP, but they don't really know what they need to do in terms of, should I be seeing a speech therapist, should I be seeing a paediatrician? So there's almost a perfect storm that has happened, because people haven't accessed services over the last 3 years, just having the staff shortages of our allied health, to not being able to access as much in their early childhood care experiences, and families just being completely overwhelmed. So I don't think that answers your question, but I think it gives some context of what we're seeing in field at the moment.

**Mr Nicholls:** Right. Thank you. It gives a great sense of it. I've got Joanne, and then Nemat and then Angela, in this order

**Ms Goulding:** I heard the words of my colleagues online today and in particular around the ISP inclusion support funding. Just to give it a bit of context, the Commonwealth Government are doing a review on that at the moment, so I encourage you to please go to the Commonwealth Department of Education website and look for the review on the ISP funding and have your say there.

It is very onerous. Services don't apply for it, because it's very difficult to apply for, and the limited amount of support they get is to cover hours on the floor with children. For example, you might have a child with a physical disability, another child with a cognitive disability. You might have a child experiencing trauma. It's very difficult for educators to be able to manage with those 3 things happening on the floor at once.

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And the other thing that the inclusion support programs fail to recognise is the trauma experience by families and children, multi generationally, I think that needs to have a lens across it as well, and the difficulty for educators to actually have conversations with parents. There needs to be some training around being able to manage those difficult conversations. Because if you're coming from a cultural lens, then that can be viewed as a judgment on parenting, or that parents don't feel like they're good enough to look after their children. There are really quite sensitive conversations that need to be had. But the burden is put on directors, our directors and our educators on the floor, and that's adding to their experience in the workforce, and that vicarious trauma that they share with their communities.

But from our perspective, SNAICC is a national voice for our children, we can certainly have one on one conversations with you and the invitation to the THRYVE New South Wales Advisory Group Committee should shed an extra cultural lens across a lot of those nuances that are being discussed here today, and I would certainly welcome the opportunity to provide some case studies, and perhaps even try and line up some one on one conversations with IPART before this opportunity closes to highlight some of those particular case studies for our community controlled sector.

**Mr Nicholls:** That'd be fantastic. Alright, Nemat

**Ms Kharboutli:** Hi, I'll keep it brief, but yes definitely, I agree. I've seen it, everything that's been said in terms of the perfect storm. I guess that was created with Covid. That's very real, that the backlog of trying to get any therapist, and what that actually means for a child that's 3 and it's taking 18 months, so then that child is about to be 5, and what that is like, it has real impacts on that child and that family.

I wanted to also plug for families that are at risk of homelessness, or have been experiencing, COVID forms of homelessness. You need an address for an NDIS package, and if you move out of area it can be an absolute nightmare. So there's a whole structural component, for, some really vulnerable families and communities there.

But I also wanted to go back to where I've seen it done excellently and it all comes back to experienced staff, being able to have that conversation to lean in, and that rapport with the parent, and not make it feel judgmental and be really conscious of the familial and cultural dynamics at play. It really comes back to having professionalised experienced staff that have built a rapport over time. So you're not getting what our parents had previously said about whoever's in on the day, and that mismatched casualised workforce.

I think that's where the real strength comes from when you have an older workforce with experience, as opposed to new, fresh staff, who may not be as aware of how delicate some of those challenges are and how it can feel, so it can be really culturally responsive.

On the other hand, I've seen it done poorly, I think it was meant to be good, when we're advocating for a family, and on the intake form (or the application form, I'm sorry my language is different – I'm from a community services background), but in terms of 'Is your child sitting up? Are they rolling back and forth?' That way of doing it was so cold and dry, and it just creates, especially for a first-time parent or a new parent, a lot of stress and insecurity. So it really needs to be done in a really culturally responsive and therapeutic way, and it really needs to be human-centered, not just process-driven.

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**Mr Nicholls:** Fantastic, thanks for those comments, I've seen a few nods as you speak so that's a good sign. And Angela.

**Ms Bodini:** Echoing a lot of what is already being said, I think I'm coming to people with that cultural lens so I'm going to relate some of this to the research that is already available. Relationships and relational pedagogy is a key factor. So how can we have more training on how to do that. So I think that's what that cultural piece is all about, remembering how people come, and their worldviews, into a service, no matter what culture. Okay, so they're going to be, with the systems that are in place, they're quite threatening to some people who have had really poor experiences with government systems anyway.

I agree with, I think it's Carmel from STAR, that the training of the educators is and has always been a big piece when you're dealing with children. My background with different abilities is mainly autism or ADHD, or that sort of area with high emotional needs and trauma backgrounds, and I think it's just having educators - this goes into the expansion of what a degree or a deployment may be being - more versed in those sort of things, so people are able to work with the child that stands in front of them rather than waiting for a diagnosis. And I say that because the waiting lists are so huge.

I think another point to bring forward is the multi-functional services that I'm privileged to work with is, research states that that's the best way to go, so you've got people on site to be able to assist with any of the speech, the OT, that type of thing. Yes, they're very, very hard to find, and very hard to keep. But that is an approach that has been proven in research to be the best way to set up all early childhood services, plus with the ratio thing of having multiple children with particular needs.

The NDIS and the ISS program where you have an extra person onsite is one way of doing it, although they are often the lowest trained person, and I know they are an extra person. They're not there particularly to work with that child. But when you've got multiple people it's better to have that lower ratio with the qualifications, but that'll need substantial funding.

Now, I think that's all I really want to say. Thank you.

**Mr Nicholls:** Yes, funding seems to be a common theme, I'm sure. If I can just remind everyone to use the Menti slides in the background, and that's another way of getting us some information while you're listening to the speakers. Please feel free to fill those in. I might jump to Margaret

**Ms Megan Cooper:** Hello! We were going to say about that, the difficult discussion workshop that we present is the most requested and demanded content that we get asked for educators, young and old, experienced and not experienced. Everyone wants to do that a lot better, and we have a great Webinar that focuses on that. I'll put the link to our free NSW Educated webinars in the chat, just in case anybody has educators that they want to share that with them.

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I can again completely agree that all the ISP funding might attract an untrained assistant which can just crowd a room. The main message that we give in all of our Webinars, and all that training to educate is that wherever that child or family is at in the journey, for want of a better word, I'm not interested if they've got a diagnosis or not. That's not my business. What we want every educator to do is to confidently go 'this is the little person in front of me I can assess easily within routine activities'. Nothing fancy; what that child needs to just push up their progress a little bit and develop their skills in natural regular routines and activities. We very much have felt the last 10 years this overcrowding of allied health and therapists, with big respect to their specialties and expertise.

We believe that that regular educator on the floor is a key worker in this moment. The child sees them the most, they do the most work with that child. We want them to have the confidence and training and all that work that we do is through that coaching and mentoring - which a lot of it is not just imparting information, but facilitating the educator wherever they're at, to identify what they're doing that's going really well, pointing out evidence-based strategies that they are already using, and they can grow on. So it's really building that confidence. What I want is for them not to be brilliant while I'm in the room, but to be brilliant once I've left them for the rest of the weeks.

So we spend a lot of time in those training workshops, talking people down from this obsession with diagnosis, and 'but mum and dad are in denial', and all this, I don't care, that's their business, and every parent has a right to be wherever they want to be, and denial plays a very important role in survival, and I've got nothing against it. So that's not my business. I can gently guide people towards making a relationship with the GP or paediatrician. That's fine, but it doesn't get in the way of my business of making sure this child is engaging and participating in regular everyday activities, which, therefore means they're included. Good. That's about it.

**Mr Nicholls:** Great. I'm not sure on that call, who's Margaret? And who's, you're...?

**Ms Cooper:** Megan Cooper.

**Ms Margaret Meaker:** I dragged her in!

**Ms Cooper:** I manage the Lighthouse Program, we support a bunch of early childhood services to do this more systematically on a weekly basis, which is a privilege for all of us.

**Mr Nicholls:** Right Megan, thanks for those comments. Fantastic. All right. Deb, I think you've got a question.

**Ms Cope:** Yeah, it's a slightly different topic. We have touched on it around the casualisation of the workforce, and I was just wondering if anybody had any insights, because I know within the aged care sector there's a really strong policy amongst the businesses, that they employ their workers on a casual basis. It just seems to be the industry norm for a large quantity of the workforce. There was a comment from one of the providers in one of our earlier public hearings that said that there are workers within the sector that want to be casual, and they didn't go into why, but I was wondering whether anybody here knew whether the casualisation of the workforce was being driven by what the people wanted. Maybe because it means they get more dollars per hour because they get all their loading stacked into their pay packet, or whether it seemed to be just a way the businesses and the not for profits approached engaging people in the sector.

**Mr Nicholls:** Okay. Who would like to have a start at that question?

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**Ms Cope:** If you don't know that's fine.

**Ms Clifford:** I'm happy to make a comment on that. I think it was a period of time where it was thought that that was a good way to be able to shed people when you didn't need people, and there was a greater supply of educators. I feel like that has changed a little bit now, and often it might be the person, the worker saying, I don't want to be 100% committed. I'd rather take the loading and say what I'm going to do, and when I'm going to do it. But then there is a disconnected way. Positions may only be allocated or funded for a certain period of, back to the ISS funding, that you only get so many days of absence for the child, and then you don't receive funding for that child in the ISS model, and if that child it has attracted the funding comes for lots of days, and then I have, a few days off, see the service it has the burden of, they may have still engaged an educator for that day, but then they're not going to have that funding offset. So there's some challenges there.

And again, I think that we have a predominantly really young workforce, and sometimes people want to be free, and do what they want to do when they want to do it. But to try to balance those family life responsibilities other people might be looking for greater security. Our organisation has always attempted to engage people and work with them to find the fit that works for them, whether it's permanent part time, full time. But yeah, I don't have any magic wand to tell you how it could be better. But, if you're on the lowest income, and you're going to get a 25% loading sometimes that would be a whole lot more than thinking 'am I going to get paid for this day that I'm going to be sick?', so I don't know.

**Mr Nicholls:** Thanks, Mary-Louise, Angela you've put your hand up.

**Ms Bodini:** Hmm, I think it's very much to do with the loading in some instances. But I think another perspective to that is the burnout pace that the parent earlier on was mentioning. And people have perceived that if you're a casual then your responsibilities are less. The responsibility for safety is not less, although the responsibility for the pressures of observation taking and the following through with children's learning is lessened. So I think it's sort of getting out there that that responsibility piece for that, I think, has attracted a lot of people that I've worked with over the years into that casual space. And wanting to be an independent person and do what they want to do at any particular time. is a factor. But I think it can be broader than that, because again, the training and the pay levels and the acknowledgment of the complex job we do, I think, would draw people back into full time, because, as educators on the line, we know that that consistency of being full time is the best thing for the children. But yeah, that's a bit of all of it I suppose.

**Mr Nicholls:** Yes. Sandra might have a question.

**Ms Gamble:** Yes, I do. So I'm really interested in what barriers might exist to some sections of the community to join the early childhood education and care sector as educators. And I'm thinking of people from non-English speaking backgrounds, you can potentially bring amazing language and culture to an early childhood setting.

I'm also thinking of men. we couldn't help but notice that a large percentage of people who were involved in the industry, and as advocates as well, are women. So, what might be the barrier to a broader range of people taking on the profession.

**Mr Nicholls:** Alright, who'd like to have a start at that one?

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**Ms Clifford:** I feel like I'm jumping in all of the time again! One thing that I am bewildered by time and time again is that there isn't recognition of overseas qualification. I have had recently someone working with me who holds a Master of Education in Iran, and that qualification wasn't recognised at all in any way in Australia, and that person has gone back and had to take in a certificate 3 to be working at our service, where she has this incredible knowledge that she has from her country of birth, but we don't recognise it here.

In terms of people accessing, who English perhaps isn't their first language, there is always a challenge of the learning materials that we have sometimes can be very difficult. And I'm sure that we could be supporting the training providers to be delivering flexible ways to undertake assessment without forgoing the level of skill, of literacy, and competency and delivery of English. It must be other ways that we could do that.

And I would love to see more and more guys working. We only have two on the site at the centre I'm at today, and one on our other site, and it would be my perfect 12 if I could get 50-50, but again it's a caring profession that's tended to be considered girls' work. And I think that the environment would be richer if we could attract more guys to be joining us and staying with us.

**Mr Nicholls:** Fantastic, thanks Mary Louise. Look, I hate to wrap the conversation up, but we do have a stop point at 12:20, and I'd like to make sure that we are on people's diaries in time, and we'll stick to that. But we could obviously talk to you for a lot longer, and we are very interested in following up with case studies, hearing from you with your submissions reaching out on some of the specific issues you've raised so everything we've heard today has been really, really valuable. So thank you very much, but I might to pass over to Carmel Donnelly, who will close out the hearing for today.

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## 5 Closing remarks

**Ms Donnelly:** Thank you, Andrew, and on behalf of IPART, I would very much like to thank everybody for your contributions today for making the time and for all of the insights that you've shared. It's been extremely valuable and helpful for us.

I'll just talk a little bit about next steps. We will put a transcript of today's hearing on our website as well as the presentation slides and we are still seeking feedback on our issues paper by the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, and we certainly welcome you giving feedback through either the website or New South Wales Have your Say.

We're going to consider everything that's been said today, and through the rest of our consultation to work towards the next stage, and we'll develop an interim report that'll be released in August, and we will have more consultation then. But in the meantime we're also meeting with organisations and looking at where we might have some workshops or site visits as well, so we'd be having consultation outside of that. And really we do want you to get in touch with us, and we'll put some contact details up on the next slide, if you have some additional information that you can share and draw to our attention, or some case studies, and so on. We very much welcome you getting in touch. So Jennifer Vincent and Jessica Clough are the 2 people that we're giving you their contact details, or have a look on our website and get in touch with us through that.

And I will just say, before we go, we are interested if you have any feedback on today's session, so we are going to put up a quick poll for you to give us feedback, because we work very hard to make sure that the way we engage helps people contribute their input, so if you are able to do that, we'd appreciate it. So just let me close, then, by thanking you. I hope that today has been helpful to you. It has been enormously helpful to us, and we look forward to engaging with you as we go through this review. So have a good rest of the day and thank you again.

**Ms Cope:** Thanks so much, everyone. It's been really good.

**Mr Nicholls:** Thanks, everyone.