

National Quality Agenda for early childhood education and care

Why is there a National Quality Agenda for early childhood education and care?

- The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) recognise that children's early years have a profound impact on their future health, development, learning and wellbeing. Positive experiences in early childhood lead to positive productive outcomes for the future. Australian children are spending more time in early childhood education and care services and the quality of their experiences is crucial for their future wellbeing.
- Quality early childhood education and care is also important in supporting families' participation in the workforce.
- At the present time, there is varying quality across early childhood education and care services and settings. There are also complex regulation and administrative arrangements in place with different roles for the Commonwealth, States and Territories, and different standards applying across the different types of services (long day care, family day care, preschool, etc).
- Families do not have access to consistent information about the quality of care available to their children so that they can make well informed choices and decisions.
- The National Quality Agenda seeks to address these issues through providing:
 - strong and nationally consistent standards for early childhood education and care;
 - a quality ratings system that will provide parents with important information about the services their children receive;
 - streamlined regulatory arrangements that improve national consistency and reduce the administrative burden on service providers; and
 - an Early Years Learning Framework, that will guide practice and support quality teaching and learning.
- The Early Years Learning Framework has now been endorsed by COAG and is the first element of the National Quality Agenda.
- The next important step is the development of nationally consistent standards and the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments are seeking views on a range of options to improve the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia.
- These standards include possible changes to staff to child ratios and staff qualifications, which are important indicators of service quality.
- Views are also sought from the sector and families on a proposed quality ratings system and streamlined regulatory arrangements.

What is the Early Childhood Education and Care Quality Reforms Regulation Impact Statement?

- A Regulation Impact Statement (RIS) has been developed for the National Quality Agenda reform options to ensure that the community, particularly parents and the sector, have the opportunity to provide feedback on proposed quality changes and their potential impact.
- The consultation RIS proposes a National Quality Standard and Ratings Framework, initially to cover long day care, preschools, family day care and outside school hours care.
- This consultation RIS contains a number of options for improving staff to child ratios and staff qualifications, and seeks some national consistency for these important elements of the quality picture.
- The other important part of the consultation RIS are the options for reducing the regulatory burden on services.

What does it mean for long day care and preschools?

- The consultation RIS contains four options for staff to child ratios in long day care and preschools:
 - no change to the status quo, with staff to child ratios being determined on a state-by-state basis;
 - moving to national staff to child ratios of 1:4 (children 0-24 months); 1:5 (children 25-35 months) by the end of 2015 and 1:11 (children 36 months to school age) by the end of 2016;
 - moving to national staff to child ratios of 1:4 (children 0-24 months) by the end of 2011; 1:5 (children 25-35 months) by 2014 and 1:11 (children 36 months to school age) by 2015; and
 - moving to national staff to child ratios of 1:4 (children 0-24 months) by the end of 2010 and improving to 1:3 by the end of 2020; 1:5 (children 25-35 months) by the end of 2015 and 1:10 (children 36 months to school age) by 2013.
- Regarding staff qualifications, the consultation RIS proposes:
 - all staff to have Certificate III qualifications (or be enrolled) by the end of 2013;
 - 50% of staff to have a Diploma level or higher qualification by the end of 2013; and
 - access to a university qualified early childhood teacher in proportion to the number of children.
- The consultation RIS proposes that long day care services and preschools will be assessed and rated against the National Quality Standard and Ratings Framework. Assessment and transition arrangements will be developed in consultation with the sector.

What does it mean for family day care?

- The consultation RIS contains two options for carer to child ratios in family day care:
 - no change; and
 - mixed age groups of children to have a carer to child ratio of 1:7, with a maximum of four children under school age by the end of 2011.
- Regarding qualifications, the consultation RIS proposes:
 - all carers to have Certificate III qualifications (or be enrolled) by the end of 2013; and
 - family day carer coordinators required to have a diploma qualification by 2013.
- The consultation RIS proposes that these family day care services will be assessed and rated against the National Quality Standard and Ratings Framework. Assessment and transition arrangements will be developed in consultation with the sector.

What does it mean for outside school hours care?

- No changes are proposed to staff to child ratios or qualifications for outside school hours care services at this time.
- The consultation RIS proposes that outside school hours care services will be assessed and rated against the National Quality Standard and Ratings Framework. Assessment and transition arrangements will be developed in consultation with the sector.

New ratios might mean that services have to engage more staff, raising their costs—won't that mean higher fees for families?

- COAG is mindful of the costs to parents and governments of the proposed reforms and is interested in views about how the National Quality Agenda could be implemented in the most efficient and sustainable manner having regard to other early childhood priorities and the current economic environment.

What differences will I see in services once the new National Quality Agenda begins?

- Some elements of the National Quality Agenda (such as staff to child ratios) are currently different across the various States and Territories, so the changes will vary according to where a service is located.
- Families may see changes in staff to child ratios, more highly qualified staff and changes to the service environment.
- Overall the National Quality Agenda will lead to better quality for early childhood education and care, and improved outcomes for children.

Will this new system replace the current Commonwealth Government accreditation system and State and Territory regulatory processes for service providers?

- Yes. The new system aims to integrate the currently separate systems of accreditation, licensing and regulation. At the present time, many service providers have to deal with both levels of government. This can take up a considerable amount of time in paper work and service visits.

How will services be assessed? By whom? How often? What feedback will be provided?

- Details including frequency of assessments and who will conduct the assessment will be carefully considered in consultation with key stakeholders and informed by public consultation.
- The focus for the assessment process will be on the experiences for the child and reducing the administrative and regulatory burden, to allow services to focus on providing quality education and care programs.

Won't these changes add to existing difficulties attracting and retaining good, qualified staff?

- Governments recognise that the workforce is a big part of providing good quality early childhood education and care.
- The Australian Government has already announced significant initiatives in this area, such as increasing the number of university places for people studying for qualifications in early childhood education and care, meeting the tuition fees for people studying for Certificate qualifications at TAFE and HECS-HELP relief for early childhood teachers who work in regional and remote areas, Indigenous communities and areas of high disadvantage.
- Views expressed through the consultation process will help in developing a workforce strategy to help address the changing needs of the early childhood education and care workforce.

How will a service's rating be determined? Will it be made public? If so, how?

- All services will be required to participate in a comprehensive assessment process. This will determine how a service is rated. It is proposed that a service's rating will be publically available.

What support will be provided by governments to transition to the new system?

- It is expected that all early childhood education and care service providers will transition to the new system, although initially the system will apply to long day care centres, preschools, family day care services and outside school hours care services.
- Strategies to assist the transition of services to the new National Quality Agenda will be developed in consultation with the early childhood education and care sector. Services will also be provided with training and will be able to access professional support services to help them meet the new standards.
- For families, the Australian Government currently provides Child Care Benefit and the Child Care Tax Rebate to help meet the out of pocket cost of their children's attendance at approved services.
- Both levels of government are keen to hear the opinions of families and service providers on how they can be supported in the transition to the new quality arrangements.

Have Indigenous Australians, migrant or refugee families or families of children with additional needs been considered?

- An important principle of the National Quality Agenda is that it sets out a universal approach that works for all children and families, and has flexibility within the one system to meet different cultural needs and experiences.
- Throughout the development of these options, COAG representatives have been meeting with, and listening to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrant and refugee families, and service providers and families of children with additional needs. This will continue throughout the consultation period, and will inform the final decision on quality reforms.

How can I find out more about what is in the consultation RIS?

- The consultation RIS document, and a summary paper, will be available on the COAG website at www.coag.gov.au.
- The Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is setting up a dedicated email facility to take any questions you may have on the National Quality Agenda and the consultation RIS. These can be emailed to: ECECQualityReformEnquiries@deewr.gov.au
- Public information sessions about the consultation RIS are being held in all capital cities and some regional centres later in July. These are being organised now, and the details will be available very soon through the DEEWR internet site (www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood) and on the *mychild* website (www.mychild.gov.au).
- There is more information about the consultation RIS and the consultation process on DEEWR's internet site and on the *mychild* website.

How can I have my say?

- DEEWR will host an on-line survey so that you can have your say about the options in the consultation RIS.
- You can express your views through public forums, and you can also provide written comments to:

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What are the next steps ?

- The first element of the National Quality Agenda, the Early Years Learning Framework, will come into effect from July 2009.
- Through the consultation RIS, COAG representatives are seeking views on nationally consistent standards, a quality ratings system and streamlined regulatory arrangements before making any final decisions.
- COAG will consider the information from the coming round of consultations before any final decisions are made.
- Governments will then work with families and service providers on the best way to transition to the new, high quality, system.