

COVID-19 Response Inquiry Panel
Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
Canberra ACT

Submitted via email: COVID-19Inquiry@pmc.gov.au

Dear Panel Members

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry. This submission provides insights on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the outside school hours care (OSHC) sector and [REDACTED]

Background

[REDACTED]

Our sector provides affordable care for the children of over 350,000 Australian families who rely on our services to be able to work & support family needs. OSHC services operate on school sites and sessions are booked on a casual basis meaning that when students do not attend there is no ongoing revenue.

The OSHC sector was significantly impacted during covid, facing genuine threats to its viability. While the impacts varied across Australian jurisdictions depending on the severity of lock downs and school closures the OSHC sector more broadly struggled to stay afloat in an environment where services were required to continue operating despite attendance sometimes being as low as 8%. Across the OSHC sector, many services operated with 1-2 children per session for an extended period.

As [REDACTED] we take our responsibility to our school partners and families very seriously and will only close services as an absolute last resort. Throughout COVID, we continued to fund the operation of services even when only a very small number of students were attending. However, the sector was pushed to its limits and in the months and years that followed covid. The capping of services became a common occurrence and service closures were actively considered by many providers due to ongoing operational challenges including reduced attendance and staff constraints. For an extended period following lock downs approximately 80% of services that support approximately 100,000 students, remained unviable.

[REDACTED] operated for much of 2021 without additional Government support. Despite this, the sector remained open and steadfast in the provision of care, ensuring parents who needed to work were able to, and that care was available for our most vulnerable children.

After substantial efforts by our sector, we received [REDACTED] (provided between Aug 2021 – October 2021) from the federal government, it is not exaggeration to say that had that funding not been provided the OSHC sector would have had a questionable ability to continue to operate to support the children of essential workers and would not have been able to return to functional levels following the Covid-19 period.

[REDACTED]

Several key issues that impacted the ability of the sector to be appropriately supported during the Covid-19 period are outlined below.

Key Issues

- A lack of understanding across government of the way OSHC services operate and are funded, with a focus on the casual nature of bookings which meant that service revenue was impacted significantly and for an extended period, even far beyond the impact felt by long day centres who have regular booking arrangements. The casual nature of the bookings in the OSHC sector means that [REDACTED] is extremely vulnerable to changes to regular operations such as those seen during Covid-19.
- A disconnect between, state and federal governments. During Covid-19, OSHC services were recognised as an essential service required to remain to open to support the children of essential workers. This direction was provided by state and territory governments who regulate but do not fund OSHC services. That left [REDACTED] as the middlemen, required to seek funding from the federal government to support a direction required by the states. In a BAU environment funding is provided via parent subsidy to OSHC services through the childcare subsidy. This significantly extended the time it took for the OSHC sector to receive support.
- The OSHC sector experienced a significant loss of experienced staff during the Covid-19 Period. The pressure of working through the peak of the COVID pandemic and associated lockdowns, took its toll on educators at the “coal face,” with many leaving the sector because of the considerable levels of stress and pressure. Services continue to feel the loss of these experienced staff in 2023.
- Government support was reduced before time which meant that for an extended period there was legitimate concern about the future viability of the OSHC sector which many considering service closures. Even once lockdowns had ended, attendance within [REDACTED] in Australia’s most populous states were well below viable levels, in part due to changes in parents working patterns. [REDACTED] for support in the transition period, a point at which 80% of services were operating at unviable levels, to put that in perspective the closure of those services would have impacted an estimated 100,000 families.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this process. [REDACTED] is happy to assist if panel members have additional questions. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] can be contacted on [REDACTED]

Yours Sincerely

[REDACTED]