

# Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres (ASELCC) Evaluation –

## Recommendations by O'Brien Rich Research Group, Government Response, Action and Timing

### Summary

Where appropriate, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) has implemented a number of strategies and/or changes to address these evaluation recommendations. These are listed in the actions below. For of the recommendations that require further consideration or evidence FaHCSIA has arranged to employ a consultant to investigate the issues, consult with stakeholders, and to develop options that will lead to feasible solutions. The consultant will also be asked to address a number of related issues that were raised by Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centre (ASELCC) management and researchers at the recent ASELCC forum.

The consultant will be asked to relate options to the Child and Family Outcomes Strategy (CFOS) and associated report recommendations, where this is appropriate.

### **Recommendations: Priority to early intervention / long day care**

1. The centres are evolving in two clear and different directions. There is a threshold issue that requires consideration and determination by the department: What is the primary objective of the ASELCCs? Is it early intervention for children; or is it the provision of supported child care incorporating an appropriate early learning program to enable parents to participate in the community? This issue needs to be considered in the context of the whole package of services offered under the Helping Children with Autism (HCWA) Package.

#### **Government Response**

Support in Principle

#### **Actions and Timing**

- 1.1. *Requires Further Consideration* – A preliminary review of the Operational Guidelines has simplified the objectives and the new funding agreement places an emphasis through performance indicators on provision of autism specific support within the centres. FaHCSIA will make further enquiries with service providers and other stakeholders on how this issue is affecting effective outcomes. The consultant may recommend further modifications.

2. Centres are providing family support of different types and intensity. This has significant implications for resource allocation. Clear guidance on the expected type and extent of family support will assist centres.

#### **Government Response**

Support

#### **Actions and Timing**

- 2.1. *Ongoing* - FaHCSIA has made some changes to the operational guidelines to emphasise that parent support, while being an essential part of the initiative, should not be undertaken to the detriment of other outcomes. FaHCSIA will continue to encourage centres to utilise other services, including other HCWA services to provide additional support.

**Recommendation: The priority of access guidelines**

3. In light of the evidence from the centres and in accordance with the best practice guidelines a review of the rationale for priority of access to the year before school should be undertaken.

**Government Response**

Support

**Actions and Timing**

- 3.1. *Ongoing* - Further work will be undertaken by the consultant in regard to Priority of Access with stakeholders, including the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), and options will be developed on the issue. See 1.1 above.

**Recommendation: The importance of the physical space**

4. In any expansion or modifications to the ASELCC model, the adequacy of the physical space needs to be carefully considered.

**Government Response**

Support in Principle

**Actions and Timing**

- 4.1. *Ongoing* – Based on this recommendation and with the availability of funding, the South Australia (SA) and West Australia (WA) ASELCCs are being provided with additional funding to refurbish and relocate respectively to increase the physical space available to children and staff of the facilities. To be factored into any new model in the event the ASELCC initiative is extended. FaHCSIA would consider this issue more broadly on a case by case basis.

**Recommendations: Sustainability and replicability**

5. Over the period of operation the ASELCCs have struggled with sustainability. Each auspicing body is currently supplementing departmental funding. Every centre has made modifications to the original ASELCC model in order to continue providing their services. At this stage it is not clear if all of the centres are sustainable in their modified form.

**Government Response**

Support

**Actions and Timing**

- 5.1. *Ongoing* - FaHCSIA has made some changes to the operational guidelines in response to this issue. The outcomes for the initiative have been rationalised, to reduce the emphasis on secondary objectives. Work will continue with sponsoring organisations to assess the longer term impact on both outcomes for families and on sponsoring organisations.
6. The current model does not appear to be suitable for replication without modifications to a number of elements. The objectives of the ASELCCs also require re-consideration and clarification.

**Government Response**

Support

**Actions and Timing**

- 6.1. *For Future Consideration* - See 5.1 above. To be considered in the event the ASELCC initiative is extended.

### **Recommendations: The long term view**

7. There is potential for expansion of the ASELCC services in the longer term. An important outcome of the ASELCCs has been the development of skills and expertise in working with children with ASD in child care settings. An expanded model should build upon what has been achieved and ensure that the knowledge gained is not lost but is spread as widely as possible in the child care system.

#### **Government Response**

Support in Principle

#### **Actions and Timing**

**7.1. For Future Consideration** - See 1.1 and 5.1. above. To be considered in the event the ASELCC initiative is extended. Is also dependent on the outcome of further consideration of **Recommendation 1**.

8. The expansion process should be considered a longer-term goal. Current ASELCCs will need to refocus following the threshold decision discussed above. When they have proved to be sustainable in their modified form, careful expansion should be undertaken.

#### **Government Response**

Support in Principle

#### **Actions and Timing**

**8.1. For Future consideration** - See 1.1 and 5.1 above.

9. The Department could consider facilitating the development of an autism specific early learning or intervention program which could be used in 'spoke' centres. The Perth ASELCC has already done some work here, and it may be possible to build on what they are doing.

#### **Government Response**

Support in Principle

#### **Actions and Timing**

**9.1. Requires Further Consideration** - Further work needs to be done on measuring the effectiveness of the 'Hub and Spoke' model, including cost analysis and assessment of outcomes.