

Disability Standards for Education Review Team
Disability Strategy Taskforce
GPO Box 9880
Canberra City ACT 2601

Our Ref: A3011059

Your Ref:

23 September 2020

Dear Disability Standards for Education Review Team,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the 2020 Review of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* as they relate to children with disability in early education and care. We see this as an opportunity to contribute insights from our experience delivering early years education and care services to our community.

To inform this submission we have consulted across the organisation and identified several key themes outlined below for your consideration.

Our operating context

In December 2019, municipal level data shared by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) indicated that 24% of active National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants in Wyndham were aged 0-6 years.

Wyndham City Council (Council) is committed to supporting the development of a healthy and robust early childhood intervention service system in Wyndham. Our *Accessibility Action Plan 2019-22* includes a focus on the provision of inclusive services, equity for vulnerable people with disability and advocacy for improved service provision across Wyndham.

The primary services delivered by Council that are relevant to this Review are Kindergarten Services and the Preschool Field Officer (PSFO) service.

Council has provided Kindergarten Services in Wyndham for over 40 years. Within the municipality, there are 23 Council-managed Kindergartens, and a growing number of Kindergartens that are managed by our external Early Years Partners.

The PSFO service is delivered to local Kindergarten programs to support the access and participation of children with additional needs. PSFOs provide consultative support, resourcing and practical advice to assist early years educators. They also link families into support and services available for children with developmental concerns.

In addition to service provision, Council plays a role in developing the capability of the local early education sector through the delivery of professional development training to early years educators and providers.

Disability awareness and diagnosis

One of the challenges we experience in our services is children commencing their first year in early education with undiagnosed disability. Many children remain undiagnosed for various reasons. This includes waiting for specialist assessment, undergoing assessment, a parent's awareness of developmental concerns and a parent's own personal experience in acknowledging developmental concerns in their child.

The issue of waiting times to access specialist services has been and continues to be a barrier for parents and educators in providing adequate support for children with disability. Timely access to early intervention improves outcomes for children with disability and their families. When families are aware of their child's needs and can share this information during the admission process, this allows our services to implement the necessary supports required to ensure that the child experiences a positive start to their education journey.

Applying reasonable adjustment

The existing *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* stipulates that providers must make reasonable adjustments to accommodate a person with disability unless making the adjustment would impose an unjustifiable hardship on the provider. Whilst Council is supportive of this requirement, challenges arise for families, educators, PSFOs and key workers in determining what constitutes 'reasonable' as it relates to adjustments and 'unjustifiable' as it relates to hardship on the provider.

Council's role in supporting the sector includes the provision of information and advice regarding reasonable adjustments to enable services to be more inclusive. We would welcome further guidance around how the term 'reasonable adjustment' is interpreted in an early education and care setting with practical examples of how reasonable adjustments have been made in other services. In addition to this, we recommend accessible resources be made available to parents describing reasonable adjustments and outlining what can be provided in an early education setting to enable them to support and advocate on behalf of their child.

The requirement for reasonable adjustment can also impose significant cost pressures on providers. Council is exploring opportunities to implement reasonable adjustments more efficiently across our services, however this remains an ongoing challenge for us.

Impacts of COVID-19

One of the less recognised contributions that access to early education provides is identification of disability and developmental delay that may otherwise be missed. COVID-19 restrictions have meant that educators and PSFOs have had limited direct interaction with children and their families for most of the year, resulting in fewer opportunities to observe behaviour.

Specialist and early intervention services have also operated with modified or reduced face-to-face engagement. Disrupted access to early intervention and education services may result in the additional needs of some children, particularly those with undiagnosed disability or developmental delay, not being identified before transitioning to school.

Given the additional needs of children with disability, the shift to remote learning has resulted in them being disproportionately impacted by this interruption to their learning. The adjustments and supports that were being implemented in a peer-based learning environment have not always transferred to the home learning environment.



Sector collaboration

Working collaboratively with the child, their family and other key supports is recognised as a crucial component of ensuring participation in early education, as well as continuity of support throughout early years transitions.

It is our experience that engaging across a child's key support network improves a shared understanding for their individual support needs, builds relationships and trust between the service and their family, and increases the child's participation in early education.

Transitions between home, early education and school are significant adjustments for all children, especially those with disability. Our consultation has highlighted that the needs of a child with disability can be met when these transitions are supported by a collaborative approach.

It is important that early years educators and PSFOs be recognised as integral contributors to the development of a child with disability, especially during transition points.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a submission as part of this Review.

If you would like to discuss any of these themes further please contact Jenna House, Senior Policy Officer via email at jenna.house@wyndham.vic.gov.au.

Regards,

Melinda Chapman

Manager Community Support

