

No vacancies for our children ^[1]

Government scraps promise to build more childcare centres

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EXCERPTS

Politicians commonly welcome babies at election time - unless the baby is one of the thousands on a child-care waiting list and in the arms of a frustrated voter.

If we are serious about helping parents - especially mothers - to return to work or training after their children are born, then we need to provide local, affordable and quality child-care places.

In 2007, sensing that increasing numbers of frustrated parents felt the same way, and after parents had diligently given birth to "one for the country", all political parties placed child care squarely on the political agenda. An election commitment from Kevin Rudd to "invest in an additional 260 child-care centres on school sites and community land" won the praise of parents and the child-care sector across the country.

The Rudd government was duly elected but in April 2010 declared that 91 per cent of child-care centres across Australia have vacancies and the commitment to build 260 centres has been abandoned after completing only 38.

Many parents were bewildered about the claim there was suddenly now adequate childcare - particularly in Victorian cities such as Melbourne, where the government cited 92 per cent availability. The allegedly high levels of vacancies don't match the experiences of parents.

To make sense of this disconnect, the research team at Greens checked the government's MyChild website for vacancy rates of centres in the electorate. We then called the centres to confirm what places they had available. The results corroborated parents' reports: inner-city centres were largely full to overflowing. Only 28 per cent, not 92 per cent, of centres in the federal electorate of Melbourne reported vacancies for 0-2-year-olds.

Our snapshot also showed considerably more pressure on the community, council and not-for-profit centres, where only 12 per cent of centres reported any places. Nearly all of these centres had long waiting lists. These figures reveal that parents prefer not-for-profit to commercial child care. Many parents wait 12-18 months for places in community managed child care rather than place children in commercial care. A similar preference was documented in Victoria in 2006 in the Report of the Childcare Taskforce: "Differing views of demand are held dependent upon location of the child-care services, or whether the service provider is from the commercial sector or community sector."

Parents' preference for community child care explains the existence of both vacancies and long waiting lists in particular areas. It is borne out in the experiences of parents and child-care operators.

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While a market approach to child care has been vigorously defended at the federal level, the collapse of ABC Childcare and higher vacancy rates in commercial child care should be clear signals that some "products" are a harder sell to parents looking for affordable, accessible and quality care.

Arguably, the government is hoping parents will move to private providers rather than forcing expansion of the community sector. But imagine if the same approach were adopted at primary school level, stalling infrastructure until children fill a private school when the local community school is full. Parents need the government to get back on track to build more community-based child-care centres.

The government has dismissed the Greens' research as inconsistent with departmental data. However, the data on the MyChild website does not reflect the responses we received directly from centres. In fact, our analysis of the MyChild data found that 42 per cent of the child-care centres in inner Melbourne did not provide any data on vacancies on the website and many centres reported they had vacancies when a phone call to the centre confirmed that no vacancies existed.

Some good work has been undertaken at both the state and federal levels on the standards and quality assurances around child care. However, the remaining issue of undersupply cannot be brushed away with a statistic that fails to measure the situation on the ground

and the reality that a demand for not-for-profit childcare is not being met.

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-reprinted from the Sydney Morning Herald

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