

# Private childcare operators struggling with reforms, mounds of paperwork <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Private childcare operators say they are struggling to remain viable as they deal with red tape and extra costs linked to reforms.

Childcare SA president Kerry Mahony said the association, which represents 60 childcare operators in the state, will soon launch a campaign to lobby against the changes.

Childcare centres had already cut places for babies aged under two after staff ratio requirements were changed to five children per staff member from 6 to 1, he said. The association predicted 3000 baby places would be lost in South Australia.

"You can imagine the doubt in terms of potential investors banks now will only lend 60 per cent of value," Mr Mahony said.

Mr Mahony said there were also new requirements for any childcare centre being renovated or changing hands to discount baby sleeping rooms when they calculated minimum space per child requirements.

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New staff training requirements were also introduced. Centres are now required to have anyone left in charge of the centre to be registered involving significant paperwork and a minimum 60-day turnaround for the application.

"There are nearly 1000 pages of new legislation for this industry that became operative on January 1," Mr Mahony said.

As the industry dealt with numerous changes and more paperwork they had been told by state Education and Childhood Development Minister Grace Portolesi there would be no review until 2014, he said.

"We might not be here in 2014," he said.

Husband and wife childcare centre owners Richard and Sandy Munro said they were forced to redeploy staff from looking after children to administrative work.

The couple, who run Matilda's Child Care and Early Learning in Littlehampton, said it was a good idea to improve standards but they were "drowning in paperwork to fix something that wasn't broken".

New staff ratios meant they could only offer fewer places with the same numbers of staff leading to new waiting lists.

Mr Munro said new rules requiring the ratio of one staff member to 10 for two-to-five-year-olds changing to one staff member to five children in 2016 would mean doubling staff numbers or cutting places.

And fees were likely to rise. "People will pull their children out and use unregulated backyard care," he said.

George Skrembos said the majority of his 13 Stepping Stone Childcare and Early Development Centres were at capacity or close to it. The 100-place Happy Valley Centre had a waiting list of 80.

"At all of our centres we have no (or only a few) vacancies for under two year olds," he said.

"This is because childcare centres are accepting fewer under two years old as they are the most expensive age group to look after."

He disagreed with comments by Federal Early Childhood Minister Kate Ellis blaming councils for stalling childcare centre approvals.

"The reason childcare centres are in decline is that they are generally unviable and generate very little profits," he said.

Ms Ellis said all state and territory governments introduced higher standards "so that parents can have peace of mind that when they drop their child off to child care they are receiving quality care to a high standard".

"We took deliberate action to phase in the new quality standards over 10 years to give centres time to adjust," she said.

Ms Portolesi said she wrote to Childcare SA late last year to advise she would raise the matter of ratios and other transitional issues with her interstate and Commonwealth ministerial colleagues.

The ministers decided the appropriate avenue for considering these matters was through the nation-wide review of childcare regulations in 2014, she said.

"This review will be undertaken by the independent Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, and will be completed before the implementation of new ratios," she said.

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