



Speech by

DIANNE REILLY

MEMBER FOR MUDGEERABA

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CHILD CARE BILL

Mrs REILLY (Mudgeeraba—ALP) (12.09 p.m.): I am happy to rise to support the Child Care Bill 2002. This bill is the culmination of a number of years of careful and thorough planning and development. In 1998 the Department of Families began to develop a strategic plan for child care which would incorporate a review of the current regulatory framework in place for child care services in Queensland. In late 1999 the Queensland Child Care Strategic Plan 2002-2005 was released. One of the key outcomes from this strategic plan was the development of a new regulatory framework that would promote flexibility and innovative service delivery.

The current regulatory framework for child care in Queensland operates through a system of licensing. This licensing system comprises the Child Care Act 1991, the Child Care (Child Care Centres) Regulation 1991 and the Child Care (Family Day Care) Regulation 1991 and prescribes certain types of child care which are required to be licensed. This current framework does not regulate all types of child care in Queensland; for example, school-age care, preschool as defined under the Education (General Provisions) Act 1989 and various types of informal care.

Throughout the life of the current regulatory framework, a number of problems have been identified with the present act and regulations. While the current legislative framework was considered best practice at the time it was developed, a number of factors have contributed to the need for change, including an increased demand for greater integration of child care and early education services to enhance the equity of provision for three- to five-year-olds; gaps in service provision to particular groups and the inability of some types of licensed services to respond to emergent needs; the growing need to provide child care for some children throughout their whole childhood and not just in the years before school; rapid changes in and market pressures on the child care industry; viability issues resulting from unplanned growth in the numbers of child-care centres; increased numbers of families making informal arrangements for the care of their children; the increasing cost of child care and the impact this has on people's ability to remain in or enter the work force; the limited mechanisms for families to influence the provision of care and education services for their children; and major changes in the way the Commonwealth government provides subsidies and the quantum of these subsidies for public and private centres. The member for Indooroopilly touched on these issues a moment ago.

As a result of these concerns, in late 1999 the Department of Families began to develop a proposed new regulatory framework for child care in Queensland. In order to ensure any legislation reflected the needs of parents, children, service providers and the community, the Department of Families undertook extensive consultations on the proposed new regulatory framework. Parents were consulted during the statewide consultation process undertaken for the strategic plan, and copies of a consultation paper on the proposed new legislation were sent to all parents and citizens associations and parents and friends associations. Further consultations with the child care sector occurred in March and April 2000, and these consultations helped to inform the proposed new regulatory framework and the drafting of the bill and regulation.

An exposure draft of the bill and regulation was released in late 2001. The department held statewide consultations on this exposure draft between December 2001 and April 2002. Over 52 consultation sessions were held throughout the state, with sessions being held with government departments, local government authorities, peak organisations, departmental staff and child care services. Regional offices invited all child care services to attend sessions in their local area. Depending

on the needs of a particular area, sessions either were held for each service type—family day care, centre based care, school-age care—or covered all service types in one session.

Consultation sessions were held in Brisbane, Logan, Redlands, Gold Coast, Caboolture, Sunshine Coast, Toowoomba, Roma, Hervey Bay, Rockhampton, Gladstone, Longreach, Mackay, Cannonvale, Mount Isa, Townsville, Cairns, Atherton and Innisfail. Each session ran for two hours. The sessions focused on the provision of feedback and questions and answers. Feedback on the exposure draft of the bill and regulation was due to the department by 31 March 2002 and could be provided in a number of ways, including via the Internet, by telephone or by written feedback. The draft bill, regulation, information paper, building standards and feedback pro forma were made available on the Department of Families' web site prior to consultation sessions being held, allowing participants time to read the documents before attending a consultation session.

In May and June 2002 a further four small focus group sessions were held with representatives from the family day care, centre based care and school-age care sectors. The purpose of these focus groups was to work through some of the more difficult and contentious issues raised during consultations. Further consultations were also held with departmental staff at this time. Finally, three round table consultations were held with peak stakeholders in August to focus on a small number of outstanding issues.

This extensive consultation process enabled participants to be informed about the proposed child care bill and regulation and the proposed child care building standards and have opportunities to provide feedback. Additionally, the strategy enabled Department of Families staff to get feedback on the draft bill and regulation prior to finalisation and to assist the sector in understanding the direction of the new legislation.

The bill contains a number of key changes in the approach to the regulation of child care in Queensland. For example, the bill reduces duplication in standards which are covered by other legislation. It moves away from prescribed service types. It establishes a framework in which standards are set and monitored, depending on the number of children being cared for, the number of hours children are in care, the ages of the children and the setting of the service. It introduces standards that allow for flexibility in service delivery whilst maintaining high standards of care and safety for children in care.

It expands the framework to include school-age care services for the first time. This type of care has to date had access to Commonwealth funding for parents but has not been required to be licensed. That is a very important change, in my opinion. Finally, it incorporates recognition of qualifications in accordance with the Australian qualifications framework and takes a competency based approach to the recognition of qualifications.

The issues which the bill addresses have been identified over the life of the current act and include the prescriptive nature of the system, ambiguity of terms leading to inconsistent interpretation and lack of effective enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance. I believe that the licensing system in the bill allows for a more flexible approach to service provision without lowering standards.

As a mother of a young child in care much of the time, these issues are very important to me. I chose family day care over centre based care for Louis when he was nine months old. I wanted one day a week to give myself a break and to get back into some writing and some part-time work. At that time I wanted him to be cared for in a family setting, in a home environment. At just over three, he now has two family day carers. Last week he had his first day at a centre based care service—or a kindy as we call it—where he fit right in because of the extensive contact he has had with other children through play group and in care and the extensive and varied experiences he has been able to enjoy while in family day care over the last couple of years.

What is most important to me as a parent? I think it is what is most important to all parents; that is, safety first and then choice and flexibility. It is important not only for working women and families; it is important also for children. Child care, kindy and family day care provide an opportunity for kids to become socialised, to learn new things, to become comfortable with different people and to be in different situations. These are learning experiences for our young people. That is why I support and understand women and families who seek to access care for small children for reasons other than a return to work—looking for work in itself, seeking to retrain or re-enter the work force after having a baby, or seeking time for themselves, especially if they have other children in the house to care for. For those reasons child care provides a welcome relief and freedom for women and is desperately important. I mention this because I understand how hard it is for women to leave their precious little people in the care of our people.

Mr Reeves: It is hard for fathers, too.

Mrs REILLY: And fathers. I keep referring to families and parents, although as I am the only driver in the household it is my role to actually take and leave said child. I know that it is hard for dads, too, but in my case it is not dad who does the dropping off and picking up so far. However, I am sure

that he will be doing that now that we take our child to a child-care centre that is within walking distance of home.

The reason I mentioned the need for child care for families who are not seeking care for their children for the purposes of work is that recently some letters to the editor in my local paper have accused parents—mothers in particular—of using child care as a dumping ground because they are too lazy to be mothers. I found that to be offensive and I took objection to that. Child care is there not only for families with two working parents; it is there for families however they are made up. Of course, many centres have a policy of providing places to working families or single parents first—and that is fair enough. That is why choice, flexibility, innovation and having a range of types of care situations such as family day care and community kindergartens are so important. Parents, whatever their circumstances, their family make-up, their personal or professional situation, their age, their ethnicity, their race or religion want one thing more than anything in their choice of child care and that is the peace of mind that it can give them—knowing that their child is being cared for in a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment.

I want to add that in recent weeks I have been visiting my local child-care centres. Of course, as a mum, in recent years I have checked out a number of my local centres—almost of all of them. A growing area such as Mudgeeraba and other areas on the Gold Coast have a lot of child care facilities. I want to report that I have been overwhelmingly impressed by the quality and high professional standards of the services in my electorate in particular. Indeed, I think that we are very much spoilt for choice on the Gold Coast. The YMCA administers a first-rate family day care scheme, which ensures that only the very best-quality carers and the very best home environments offering a broad range of family types are chosen. Child-care centres ranging from long day care to community based kindergarten and creche programs and brilliant Montessori programs and centres on the Gold Coast ensure that Gold Coast parents have a wide range of programs and care situation types to choose from.

In general, the industry and local operators have such a good reputation that when I sought word of mouth referral from friends or community members for somewhere to take Louis, there was no centre that was not recommended or highly spoken of. But with rapid population growth on the Gold Coast, in particular in the hinterland, demand is very high and child care places are rarely available if people want them at short notice. So parents can expect and know that they have to put their children on a list and wait weeks or months for long-term placements.

I want to congratulate the YMCA Gold Coast north family day care scheme—they are the organisers with whom I have had the most to do in recent years—and also the many centre operators whom I have met with recently and, in particular, the new centre that I have chosen at Tallai. They have demonstrated a commitment to providing quality services of a high standard to local residents.

I have spoken to many directors and owners about the proposed bill, regulations and licensing requirements and I have spoken to parents and carers as well. The feedback that I have received has been extremely positive in the main and I am confident that the concerns that have been raised with me—and they have related to issues such as flexibility of service, recognition of prior learning, particularly within the Montessori schemes, competency based training and learning that has been conducted outside the programs that we are possibly used to in Queensland, the accreditation process, and a number of other staffing issues—are or have been adequately addressed through the improved framework. I am happy to continue to talk to the minister and the minister's staff about those issues in more detail and how they relate to the services in my electorate.

I look forward to working further with my local child care providers and with parents to continue to bring these issues to the government's attention. It is very important to keep doing this, because these are fluid and dynamic environments. These are growing little people and their needs are different and their needs change on a regular basis. These environments provide the very vital building blocks of early education as much as day care, a care environment, or a babysitting environment. They are the start of these little babies' education. So we need to make sure that child-care centres are continually monitored, evaluated, improved and supported.

Finally, I want to thank the Mudgeeraba community kindergarten for a great night at their annual fundraising fashion parade on Saturday night. They demonstrated their commitment and their endeavours to provide community care and a good creche and kindergarten program. They have about 38 families involved in the centre and over 100 people attended their fundraiser, which typifies the community support for this very important, very well thought of service. I particularly want to thank them for the courtesy and the hospitality that they showed me on that night and congratulate them on their work and their endeavours. I also thank the minister and the minister's staff for the continued updates, briefings and information packs that have been made available about the bill. That has really been of use. That has helped me to be able to go out into the community and talk through some of the issues with the carers and directors. For all of those reasons, I commend the bill to the House.