



Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES BILL

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (7.55 pm): It is a pleasure to rise tonight to speak in support of the Education and Care Services Bill. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge Ken and Christine Tyson, who are in the gallery tonight. Christine is my Burnett SEC chair and has worked tirelessly to help me get elected. Ken and Christine were instrumental in the Hinkler result in the federal parliament, and all accolades and congratulations to them both. It is always nice to shout them a meal if we can, so thank you for that.

The majority of early childhood education and care services are now regulated by the national law that came into effect in January 2012; however, there are still some types of services that are not covered by the national framework and are still regulated by the Child Care Act 2002. These are often smaller service providers, and it is unfair for them to be in a situation where they have to carry the burden of unnecessary red tape because they are not covered by the national law. Some providers operate a service such as a kindergarten, which comes under the national law, plus another service such as limited-hours care, which is covered by the Child Care Act. This means that they have to comply with two separate sets of regulations. That is a situation that needs to be rectified. Many of these smaller and mixed services I have mentioned exist in regional and rural areas such as the communities in my Burnett electorate, and so I welcome the opportunity to help these providers to operate under a framework which reflects common sense and, in turn, helps them better serve the families in my electorate who utilise their services.

There are several key areas this legislation addresses that I can see will help bring more consistency and efficiency to those providers who are currently not regulated by the national law. Firstly, in the area of licensing, service providers are currently issued with three-year licences, which have to be renewed when they complete their new application. Under the new regulation they will simply pay an annual fee, with inspections taking place every three years to ensure standards are being met. This represents an easier and much better process, at the same time meeting the necessary requirements. New providers stand to save \$300 in administrative fees in their first three years of operation. This may not sound like a lot of money, but to a small centre \$300 is certainly better spent on educational toys or books than on government administrative fees.

Another area that this bill addresses is exceptional circumstances. This will allow services to relocate to suitable premises when their existing premises have been affected by natural disasters—something we in the Burnett could talk about at length. Many of us represent electorates that have been affected by flood disasters in the last few years, and we all know that it is vital to quick recovery that as many services as possible, including child care, are able to keep operating. For many families who are directly affected by a disaster, child care is vital during those times because it allows parents to deal with their own situations in the knowledge that their children are being well cared for. If their child-care provider is unable to keep operating, it places an added burden on our community and the families that use these services.

Another area in which the legislation takes a common-sense approach is in allowing temporary waivers that excuse services from complying with particular requirements for a short time. For example, if we want centres to continually improve their premises and services, it is inevitable that at some stage they will have to carry out work that may affect an area of compliance such as available floor space. Instead of requiring them to reduce the number of children they can take—and as a result inconveniencing families—a temporary waiver will allow them to continue operating at normal numbers while the work is completed.

I also welcome the provision in the bill that puts a more realistic expectation on senior staff with regard to their qualifications. Currently, under the Child Care Act, the director of the centre usually holds a three-year Advanced Diploma in Children's Services. It can be hard enough for any centre to find a suitably qualified person, let alone a small service in rural and remote Queensland. As I said earlier, many of the services still operate under the Child Care Act. Under the new regulations, a provider will appoint a supervisor who holds or is actively working towards a two-year diploma. This more realistic expectation will open up a pool of available staff as well as improve the job prospects for those studying those courses.

Finally, the bill carries on those aspects of the Child Care Act 2002 that relate to compliance and stand-alone services. As is currently the case, officers from the Department of Education, Training and Employment will be able to investigate compliance issues and take action where needed. Families can be reassured that none of this service provision will change. The regulation of a stand-alone service with six or fewer children will remain the same. While these services are not required to be licensed, the minimum requirements—such as appropriate levels of insurance and blue cards for carers and occupiers of the home—are still in place. Again, these types of services are quite common in rural communities, and families should feel confident that this legislation continues the current standards required to operate such an important service.

In summary, a situation has existed since January 2012 whereby a minority of early childhood education and care providers have been operating under regulations that differ significantly from the national law that governs the majority of providers. This bill is needed to ensure that those providers can now operate under a clear framework that is more consistent with what is required in the wider industry. More importantly, it minimises red tape and maximises common sense. I thank the minister for bringing this bill before the House. I thank my committee colleagues and I commend the bill to the House.