



Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion

Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2022-2023

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Asked by: Mrs Elizabeth Kikkert

Reference: Hearing on 13 November 2023, Annual Report of Community Services Directorate

In relation to: Early Childhood Development and Hours of Service at Child Development Service

Hours of service provided at the Child Development Service (CDS) were 16,944 in 2021-22 and 15,520 in 2022-23. For both years, the target was 21,125. The Annual Report attributes last year's low result both to 'appointment cancellation and nonattendance due to illness' and to 'labour shortages and unexpected leave across the service' (p. 418).

- (1) Can the minister please quantify the 'workforce challenges' (also p. 418) experienced by the CDS during the reporting year?
- (2) Did these challenges improve over the course of the year, worsen, or largely remain the same?
- (3) It was stated during Estimates hearings that, despite fewer hours of service, a larger number of families were accessing services, resulting in even fewer hours of service on average per family seen. What has been the impact of that situation?
 - a) Are families waiting longer to access services? Being rushed through services?
 - b) Or have efficiencies been introduced to meet needs in less time? If so, what are those efficiencies?
- (4) Reported hours of service currently do not include 'expanded CDS' (the new suite of early intervention programs for children aged 24-36 months). On average, how many hours of these services are being provided each week?
- (5) What is the target for hours of service for 2023-24, and does this target include 'expanded CDS'? If not, what is the target for these new early intervention programs?

Minister Berry: The answer to the Member's question is as follows:–

- (1) The Child Development Service undertook several rounds of recruitment in the 2022-23 year. The number of vacancies has varied across the year and peaked at 9 FTE.
- (2) New staff have been successfully onboarded, and further separations have also occurred.
- (3) Waiting lists to access Occupational Therapy and Speech Pathology have increased while waiting lists to access Physiotherapy have remained largely stable. Children aged 24-36 months are being prioritised for timely access to all services.

A number of additional groups utilising Early Childhood Teachers and allied health assistants have been developed to expand the range of programs that families can access to support their child's development. These include two newly established playgroups called Learning Through Play. These targeted programs are run as weekly playgroups, facilitated by an Early Childhood Teacher and supported by an Allied Health Assistant. Families are referred to the program following assessment by an allied health professional, who has identified delays in the child's development, which could be supported in a playgroup environment.

- (4) On average, 25 hours of early intervention programs were provided for children aged 24-36 months each week at the end of the financial year. This has increased to approximately 40-45 hours per week in October 2023.
- (5) The target for 2023-24 is 14,787 hours. This target does not include the 'expanded CDS'. Currently there is no set target for the new early intervention programs being established.

Approved for circulation to the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion

Signature:



Date: 28/11/23

By the Minister for Early Childhood Development, Yvette Berry MLA