



TOWN OF
VICTORIA PARK

LOCAL HISTORY AWARDS

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Billabong Community Early Learning Centre 40th Anniversary



Helen Creed

Category
Original Research

BILLABONG COMMUNITY EARLY LEARNING CENTRE 40th ANNIVERSARY

The original Victoria Park Community Child Care Centre opened in 1985 in its current location in Sussex Street in East Victoria Park. To celebrate the 40th anniversary of what is now known as Billabong Community Early Learning Centre, Helen Creed who lives in East Victoria Park and was involved in the Centre's original development has written this brief history.

Context

As Deb Brennan explains in *The Politics of Australian Child Care*¹:

“When it came to office in 1983 Labor had a far more detailed child care policy than it had in 1972. The policy reflected the key concerns of trade unionists, women’s organisations and child care groups. These concerns were, firstly, that a publicly-funded child care program should be maintained as the central feature of government policy; secondly that any expansion of child care services should not rely on submissions but be planned on the basis of demographic data and other relatively objective sources of information; and thirdly, that the funding formula for child care services should remain linked to the payment of award wages for child care workers.”

Brennan outlines how the planning approach “provided a basis for co-ordination between the commonwealth, state and local levels of government” and that it also meant that “there could be some streamlining of the tasks and processes involved in establishing services”.

“Above all, it was only through a planning approach that there could be any guarantee that services would be located in areas of greatest need and would be developed in line with other government objectives, such as the need for work-related care.”

Western Australian Child Care Planning Committee

While Child Care Planning Committees (CCPC) were formed in each State and Territory, the WA State Government took a very active stance establishing the CCPC early in 1984 not solely in terms of the Commonwealth State Planning Agreement, but to “provide co-ordinated planning for the development of children’s services in WA.” The CCPC promotional flyer indicated that:

It has representatives from State, Commonwealth and Local Government Departments. Community organisations and individual members. It is breaking new ground in developing a planned allocation of priorities based on greatest relative needs, thereby changing the emphasis from the submission model which has existed in the past.

A detailed methodology was developed for assessing need which was based on Local Government Areas. Initially LGAs were grouped according to urban type (using research developed by C P Harris) and then ranked according to relative need for additional services using broad population data as well as more specific census data such as number of children 0-5 with working mothers.

As well as researching need and making recommendations on the siting and design of children’s services, the CCPC in WA developed community participation models for the services’ planning and implementation.

In WA there were some unique features about the way in which the CCPC operated.

¹ Deborah Brennan *The politics of Australian Child Care*. Cambridge University Press. 1994

Firstly, after coming to Government in 1983, (elected the month before the Hawke Government) the WA Labor Government established the Welfare and Community Services Review which was a major review into the Department of Community Welfare.

While the bulk of the Review's recommendations² were directed to the Department's traditional functions such as the range of services for vulnerable children and young people, in recommendation 26 it addressed preventative services and specifically in part (b) Day Care. It considered three options and opted for:

The licensing and regulatory functions of the Early Childhood Services Unit be transferred to a Child Care Licensing Board, to be established under the Community Welfare Act.

and further:

We note and endorse the extension of child care services under the proposed Commonwealth State Planning Agreement for child care provision.

We recommend that the State provide direct financial support for the provision of child care services within the community.

These origins meant that from the outset, the CCPC took a wider role in Children's services than envisaged by the Commonwealth. It had an independent Chair, rather than a State or Commonwealth bureaucrat in the role, which led to a more active negotiating stance between all three levels of Government. Moira Rayner, the inaugural Chair of the CCPC was also the Deputy Chair of the Review's Board. One of the cornerstone recommendations of the Review was in relation to the establishment of community houses- the location of which became part of the CCPC planning process.

Secondly, the WA CCPC membership reflected a much broader base than the government committees in other states and numbered at times up to 30 people. While such a number may have been seen as too unwieldy, it provided a large pool of resources on which to draw. A considerable amount of detailed work was undertaken by sub-committees which formed the background to many of the decisions subsequently taken by the CCPC.

Thirdly, a range of resources were provided through the CCPC. For example, the project officers who were initially employed, worked with local communities to establish a community committee to run the centre and provided a variety of resources, such as a standard constitution, setting up community meetings etc, to facilitate this. The CCPC itself provided a copy of the AECA's Handbook on Day Care and the Day Nursery Association's Director's Handbook for each centre³. Subsequently other resources such as a Financial and Management Adviser to assist services to plan and implement efficient financial accounting and management practices, without removing authority from community groups, was engaged.

Lastly, in determining need all existing services were factored in. In some of the other states, this did not occur and only those receiving a Commonwealth subsidy (ie community based) were included.

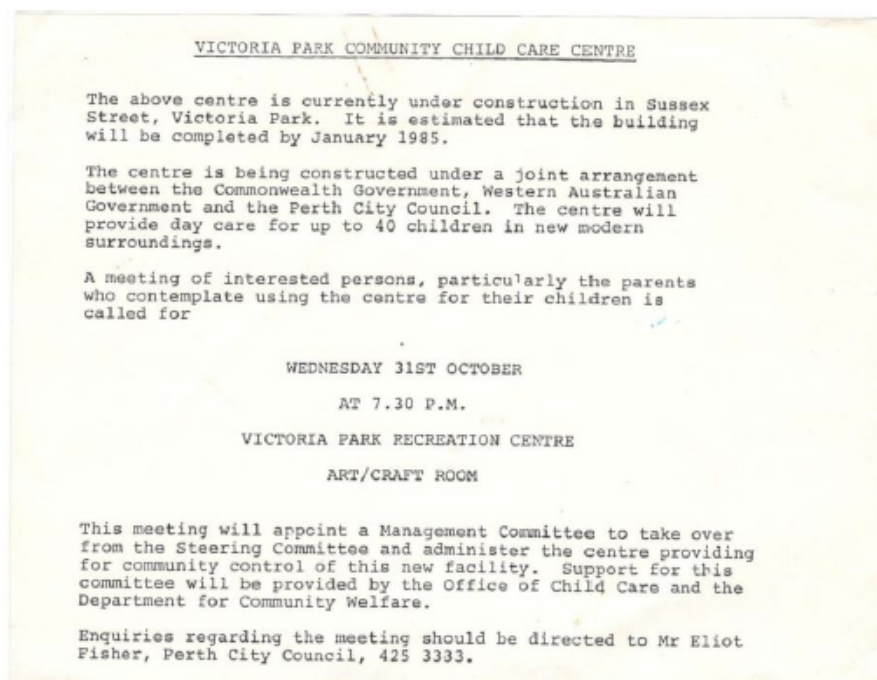
² The Wellbeing of the People. The Final report of the Welfare and Community Services Review in Western Australia. 1984

³ Summary of Combined meeting of Child Care Centres Steering Committees, 13 September 1984.

Vic Park was one of the first three services

The first three services established as a result of these significant reforms were 40-place centres in Coolbellup, Duncraig and Victoria Park. Funding was approved in the 1983-84 financial year. This expanded dramatically the following year when community houses in 6 locations, 7 new day care services, 4 neighbourhood houses and 8 existing submissions to the Commonwealth were approved.

In Victoria Park, construction of the new child care centre commenced in 1984, in Sussex Street, one of the streets on the boundary of the Park Shopping Centre which had been built on the site of the East Vic Park Primary School and opened in September 1977. The Centre was built on land owned by Perth City Council, with funding from both Commonwealth and State Governments.



As noted above, the Child Care Planning Committee was not only responsible for identifying where new services were needed, but actively involved in their establishment as community based services, which included the formation of a child care centre committee.

The meeting of "interested persons, particularly the parents who contemplate using the centre for their children" was held on Wednesday 31st October at 7.30pm in the Art/Craft room of the Vic Park Recreation Centre, just down the road from where the centre was being built.

The first meeting of the Management Committee was held on November 7th, 1984. Cathy Corrigan was elected Chair, with Jane Drew as Secretary. Committee members included Anne Bradley, Vaillie Dawson, Carolyn Jones, Gwen Wai, Jane Taylor, Grytsje Doust, Mary Beazley, Sharyn Thomas-Povey, Ian McLean and Greg Macarthur.

Others who participated in those early meetings included Jill Cameron (Director, Lady Gowrie) and her Finance/admin assistant, Liz Clubb; Helen Blankensee, then working as an Early Childhood Adviser with the State Government, Elliot Fisher from Perth City Council, Liz Marmion from Office of Child Care (the Commonwealth Government Department) and Helen Creed from the Child Care Planning Committee.

At its first meeting (November 7th, 1984), the Committee agreed that “there should be a full report from the Treasurer at our next meeting to be known as the Funding Report” and two Sub-Committees were also established; a Finance Sub-Committee and an Equipment Sub-Committee. The Department of Social Security had provided a grant of \$15,000 through Perth City Council for purchase of equipment at the Centre. Training was also being provided by the Department for Community Welfare for Management Committees and representatives from the Vic Park Centre attended the first workshop on Saturday 15 December, 1984.

The Committee was also very active in publicising the centre and seeking registrations of interest from potential users of the service, particularly through Carolyn Jones who had taken on the role of Community Liaison Officer. Posters were displayed in a range of local facilities, including the rec centre, child health centres, Ngala, supermarkets and the Post Office. Two community health workers- Sister Nicholson and Nga Tran appear to have been very important in identifying interested families. Local newspapers including the Vic Park Gazette and Belmont Gazette, as well as the West Australian were also approached.⁴

The Sussex Street Centre, conveniently located at 29 Sussex Street and which at that time was a social work agency operated by the Department of Social Work at the WA Institute of Technology was very supportive. Not only was it the collection point for the posters and provided a temporary office for Judy Tennant while the construction of the centre was being completed, but:

*Sussex Street Centre made space available for all our forms, business letters and job applications. Terry Dufty Sussex Street centre receptionist was provided with a list of people who would have access to these.*⁵

It is clear that the Centre enjoyed the support from a range of key players in the local area, including Kim Beazley, then the Federal member for Swan and staff from the Homeswest office in Victoria Park who undertook quite a lot of the minor maintenance at the centre.

First Director: Judy Tennant

A key activity was the appointment of a Director for the Centre. From an initial list of 19 applications for the role, the Committee interviewed four candidates and recommended the appointment of Judy Tennant (now Gorton) to the meeting on November 21st. Judy was an early childhood teacher, who had been working at the Lady Gowrie Centre, which had moved from its main location in near-by Gloucester Street to Karawara several years before. Judy herself ran the Gowrie’s program at Brownlie Towers, which had been constructed in 1969/70 as the high-rise component of a State Housing Commission development comprising 582 houses and flats on a sixty-one acre development in Bentley. Judy started in the role on 14 January, 1985. She recalls being excited albeit a little apprehensive at the prospect of starting a new service from the ground up.

“Although the Centre was still under construction and the members of the management were still finding their way, everyone was enthusiastic and keen to help.

⁴ From report by Carolyn Jones Community Liaison Officer January 1985

⁵ Minutes of Management Committee, 7 November, 1984

Reflecting on the time now 40 years later, this was a wonderful example of true community spirit and management. It seemed that everyone in Victoria Park and surrounding suburbs knew about the new child care centre. It was impossible to walk to the nearby shopping centre without being stopped by someone enquiring about the progress of the new Centre. The days and weeks prior to opening were busy and long with rules and procedures to be developed, staff to appoint, equipment to purchase and parents to be interviewed. Finally, opening day arrived and the staff and I welcomed some very nervous and anxious parents leaving their babies and toddlers in the care of strangers whilst they went off to work. Needless to say, there were lots of tears (mostly from the parents) in the days and weeks to follow. Before long, the staff and I soon became an extended family for all of the children that came through our door, and I pay tribute to the dedicated staff and the parents who worked tirelessly in those early days of the Vic Park Child Care Centre. I believe we offered quality childcare in the true sense of the word and I am proud to have been a trailblazer in this exciting initiative.”⁶

The advertisement for the position of Director also attracted interest from others interested in working at the Centre and during January, Judy assisted by members of the Committee undertook a range of interviews with applicants holding both Child Care Certificate (CCC) and Mothercraft Nursing qualifications. Staff were employed from Tuesday 5th March, a week before the Centre accepted children. This enabled the Director and staff to get to know each other, set up the rooms in the Centre, planned the programmes, completed enrolments which included interviews with parents. The two conversations with staff below indicate Judy’s commitment to her staff.

As a young 15 year old, Margi Smolders left school because as she describes it, *I was more social than academic in those days”.*

My mother insisted that I wasn’t going to sit at home and having a long family connection to the Vic Park area she was aware of the Lady Gowrie Centre. After only a couple of weeks working there as a volunteer, and given Judy’s Gowrie connections, I was told about the opportunity for a job as a child care assistant at the centre in Vic Park and applied. With Judy’s encouragement, I gained my Introduction to Child Care certificate, then Child Care Certificate and early childhood teaching qualifications. I have worked in a variety of settings in the early childhood sector and am still working in the sector today - as the Quality Assurance Co-ordinator at REED (Regional Early Childhood and Development).⁷

One of the parents who knew Judy from her work at Brownlie Towers, Marilyn Bennett, was employed by Judy as the first cook at the centre; a role she remained in for thirteen years. Marilyn recalls having been asked by the Director if she would consider applying for the position of cook at the new Centre:

“I was shocked by the request but Judy convinced me that I was up for the task”. The Centre was run at a very high standard and food management was given top priority. My recipes

⁶ Personal communication between Helen Creed and Judy Gorton

⁷ Personal communication between Helen Creed and Margi Smolders

*were a great hit with the children and one of the caregivers, Megan produced a cook book of the children favourites meals.
I loved my work and meeting wonderful parents and watching babies and children grow and graduate from the Centre as preschoolers, was a real highlight. I am still in contact with some of the amazing staff.”⁸*

Early days

The Centre was officially opened on 15th April, 1985 by the WA Minister Hon Keith Wilson, whose portfolio included the responsibility for the child care initiatives that were taking shape. Although the initial registrations indicated a demand for both full time and part-time care and there was some discussion within the Committee about whether fixed percentages of both should be set, there was an increasing number of full-time placements and the centre was soon at maximum capacity with a waiting list, particularly for those under 2 years of age. The Centre was licensed for 43 children, aged 6 months to 6 years. Priority for users of the service were identified as:

- Full-time and part-time working or studying parents
- Low income families
- Single parent families
- Others in need.

The Centre was open from 7.30am to 5.30 pm and closed for four weeks over the Christmas/New Year period.

Another important role for the initial Committee was to formally incorporate the Victoria Park Child Care Association under the relevant state legislation. The inaugural meeting of the newly incorporated body was held on 27th May, 1985 and its main focus was on electing a Committee and making some changes to its constitution, specifically to add in the role of Vice-Chair as an Office Bearer and for the number of Ordinary Committee members to be not less than three nor more than ten.

A number of the existing Committee members assumed new roles. Sharyn Povey was elected Chair, Bev Richter as Deputy Chair, Grytsje Doust as Secretary and Greg Macarthur as Treasurer. Jane Taylor was appointed Chair of the Fundraising Sub-Committee. Some of the original Committee members were not in a position to remain involved and new members joined, including Ella Scott who took over as Chair after the resignation of Sharyn Povey in October that year. From the AGM in 1987, Ella Scott became the Vice Chairperson, with Mario Palandri taking on the role of Chair; a position he held for a number of years.

Minutes from the meetings reveal a very active and engaged Management Committee with formal reports from Staff and the Sub-Committees.

Funding arrangements for child care

The Commonwealth *Child Care Act of 1972* provided Commonwealth funding to not-for-profit services (including those operated by local governments) of 75% of the salaries of trained staff.

⁸ Personal communication between Judy Gorton and Marilyn Bennett provided to Helen Creed

Initially this applied to qualified teachers and nurses but in 1982 was extended to those holding the CCC (Child Care Certificate – often referred to as the Triple C). As Deb Brennan explains:

This qualification, offered by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges, was originally intended for teacher's assistants, particularly in day care.....The course was designed around children in the whole 0-5 year old age range and specifically took into account the needs of children in day care.⁹

Funding also covered similar overseas qualifications; the most common of which was the UK equivalent- the NNEB (National Nursery Education Board).

These subsidies did not cover the full cost of providing the service and as well as charging fees, which were assessed according to gross family income, centres relied quite heavily on fundraising activities. It is interesting to note that this is reflected in the agenda of the early Committee meetings, with fund raising being the first of the reports listed - followed by Staff, Director and Treasurer reports. As well, from the outset, the minutes of the Management Committee note the variety of mechanisms used, including:

\$51.50 was raised in the Mother's Day raffle. Thirteen boxes of confectionary have been ordered from World's Finest Chocolate Sales Pty Ltd to raise funds. Two stalls have been organised at the annual charity fair in the Victoria Park Shopping Centre end of August.¹⁰

and:

Quiz night raised \$339.25. Fashion Parade to be held on 25th October – 76 King Street Perth at 8pm - \$4 a ticket. Ladies Only¹¹

A Financial Sub-Committee was formed in November 1986, with meetings to be held every month and the introduction of new fee schedules from 1 July, 1987 was a key item of discussion at the AGM held on 13 April, 1987:

Maximum rates will increase from \$85 to \$104 approx. All parents will pay an extra \$14 a week (approx.) to cover the difference between Government subsidy and actual costs.¹²

Leading the way

What is also apparent is the critical contribution that the Victoria Park, Coolbellup and Duncraig Centres (through their Directors -Judy Tenant, Maureen Miller and Gina McCulloch respectively) made to the implementation of the WA and Federal Government's partnership to expand the provision of child care services in WA.

One example of this is around improving the conditions of children's services workers. At the time in Western Australia there were a number of different awards (the formal document that sets out the wages and conditions of employment for employees covered by that award and legally binds the

⁹ Deborah Brennan The politics of Australian Child Care. Cambridge University Press. 1994

¹⁰ Minutes of Management Committee 27 May 1985

¹¹ Minutes of Management Committee 10 June 1985

¹² Minutes of Annual General Meeting 13 April 1987

employers who are party to that award) with different wages and conditions applying to workers holding different qualifications and differing between sectors.

Drawing on the pioneering work undertaken by the Lady Gowrie Child Care Centre (WA) – as it was then known- to standardise the conditions of all staff working at that Centre, the Miscellaneous Workers Union (now United Workers Union) developed an Award, known as the Children’s Services Consent Award 1984 No A1 of 1985. This Award covered the workers at Victoria Park, Coolbellup and Duncraig and provided standardised hours (37.5 per week), rather than the existing hours of 32.5 (teachers) 38 (Qualified Child Care Workers) and 40 (unqualified staff). In addition to 4 weeks annual leave, a provision for what became known as contact leave was introduced (an entitlement for all contact employees to one week’s leave on two separate occasions during the year, the first occasion being after four months’ continuous employment in the qualifying period, which was to be taken at regular intervals throughout the year by agreement between the Administrator/Co-Ordinator and the employee). Other initiatives included portability of entitlements between the 3 centres, the ability to apply for periods of short leave without loss of wages for professional or personal reasons and two hours Preparation and Reading Time, which recognised the work involved in preparing programmes, the need for non-contact time to plan for the care of children, and the need for all child care staff to keep abreast of current trends in child care.

These conditions subsequently flowed on to workers in other centres receiving Commonwealth Government subsidies.

Since the mid-80’s

What commenced as the Victoria Park Community Child Care Centre and is now Billabong Community Early Learning Centre has been part of many changes in the early years landscape since its establishment 40 years ago.

The term child care is used throughout this paper, as that reflects the terminology used when the centre was first established in the 1980’s when child care was seen as a welfare service. The terms early education and care, early learning and development and the like reflect the attempts to address the false dichotomy between education and care.

Educators have understood the importance of the early years for well over a century. In the past two decades, neuroscience has introduced powerful new evidence, helping us to understand why the early years are so important in establishing the underlying skills and behaviours that are essential to a child’s lifelong learning, behaviour and health. A child’s environment and experiences in his or her early years set key pathways for life. Children’s learning commences long before they enter school – children are born ready to learn. Each stage of brain development is cumulative and, as a consequence, children can enter school with clear differences in the cognitive and noncognitive skills needed for school success. These differences predict later academic achievements and, once patterns are established, they become more difficult and expensive to change.¹³

¹³ Susan Pascoe and Deborah Brennan. Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions. 2017.

The recognition of the importance of early childhood development has also been accompanied by a growing appreciation of the importance of such services to women's workforce participation:

Early childhood education and care services facilitate higher levels of workforce participation by parents and carers.

Parents with children in early childhood education who return to the workforce or increase their hours benefit from a higher income, and also improve their skills and employability – leading to higher earnings over time. Increased workforce participation by parents with children in early education also leads to greater superannuation contributions which in turn leads to less reliance on government assistance at retirement.¹⁴

The way services are funded has also fundamentally changed- particularly with the introduction of "fee relief" for families using for-profit services in 1991, which has seen a substantial increase in commercial operators, including large chains. At the time when the Federal Government changed the fee-relief arrangements it also announced its intention to introduce an accreditation scheme for child care centres. In announcing the scheme, Prime Minister Hawke focussed on the role that it could play in re-assuring parents of the quality of the care they were using: "*Parents are entitled to be confident they are getting quality attention for their kids whether they are using government funded or commercial services*"¹⁵

Another fundamental change was the introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in 2011, which provided a national approach to regulation, assessment and quality improvement for early childhood education and care services across Australia. The NQF comprised four main elements:

- National legislation and national regulations which outline the legal obligations of approved providers, nominated supervisors and educators and explain the powers and functions of the state and territory regulatory bodies and the national body, ACECQA;
- National Quality Standard sets a national benchmark for services identifying seven quality areas that are important to outcomes for children (such as educational program and practice, children's health and safety etc);
- Assessment and quality rating process, involving a rating ranging from exceeding, meeting and working towards National Quality Standard or significant improvement required for each of the seven standards as well as an overall rating for the service;
- National approved learning frameworks for young children (*Belonging, Being and Becoming*) and school-aged children (*My Time Our Place*).

Billabong Community Early Learning Centre is currently licensed for 47 places and has consistently been rated as meeting the NQS across all seven standards.¹⁶

The establishment of Thrive by Five by the Minderoo Foundation has significantly changed the early childhood landscape again, with its advocacy for a high quality, universally accessible and affordable early learning system. Since its launch on 1st September 2020, there have also been a range of quite significant inquiries into the education and care sector, including:

¹⁴ The Front Project. Economic Analysis of Early Childhood Education. 2019

¹⁵ Quoted in Brennan op cit p 202.

¹⁶ Information available from website of Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority

www.acecqa.gov.au

- in October 2022, the appointment of former Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, as Royal Commissioner into Early Childhood Education and Care in South Australia (report released in April 2023);
- in February, 2023, the Federal Government kicked off its consultations around an Early Years Strategy with a National Early Years Summit, culminating in the release of the Early Years Strategy 2024-2034;
- during 2023 the ACCC (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission) conducted its Inquiry and released its report;
- in November 2023 the Productivity Commission Inquiry commenced releasing its report - A path to universal early childhood education and care in 2024.

As Billabong Community Early Learning Centre celebrates its 40th anniversary it does so at a time when the importance of services for young children and their families are once again in the public spotlight and provides the opportunity to reinforce the importance of not-for-profit, community based services.

Sources of information:

This information has primarily been compiled by Helen Creed, from documents she has (hard copy not electronic) as well as her personal experience, having worked as one of the Project Officers at the Child Care Planning Committee for several months late in 1984 and then from February 1985 as the Children's Services Organiser with the Miscellaneous Workers Union. Helen was also involved as an ex-officio member of the Victoria Park Child Care Centre Committee during 1985.

Helen's involvement in the early years sector has continued since this time. Her work has included employment in both the Government (as Executive Director, Children and Family Services in the Department for Communities) and non-government areas (as Policy Manager Vulnerable People for WACOSS) as well as a number of Board positions including as Chair of Regional Early Education and Development (REED) and with Child Australia. Helen is currently a member of the WACOSS Children's Policy Advisory Council.

In 1989, Helen was awarded the WA Women's Fellowship which she used to study employer provided child care in the United States and the Centenary Medal in 2002 for her work in child care. Helen was inducted into the WA Women's Hall of Fame in 2018.

Particular appreciation also to:

Jill Cameron who was involved in supporting the Centre's initial development as Director of the Lady Gowrie Centre and after joining the Department for Community Development was also heavily involved with the Child Care Planning Committee and continues to work in the early childhood sector.

Judy Gorton, the original Director of the Centre, whose career in early childhood also included work in the Department for Community Development as well as several periods as Ministerial Adviser.

Shari Senevratne, the current Centre Manager of Billabong Community Early Learning Centre, who also provided access to the original minute book for the period 1984-88.