Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority™

# Excellent Rating
*Decision Notice*

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| **File Number:** | **EXR0123** |
| **Applicant:** | Jumofini Pty Ltd (PR-00001165) for Milford Lodge Child Care Centre (SE-00000199) |
| **Date of application:** | 20 April 2016 |

## Reasons for decision

### The Law:

The ACECQA Board determined and published the Excellent rating criteria in accordance with section 153(1) of the National Law. There are three criteria which must be satisfied to achieve the Excellent rating.

Under section 153, ACECQA must assess services in accordance with the published criteria to determine whether the service meets the Excellent rating and must take into account advice from the regulatory authority.

ACECQA must award the Excellent rating or refuse to give that rating (section 155(1)).

The power to award or refuse the Excellent rating has been delegated to me by the ACECQA Board under section 246(1)(c) of the National Law.

### Evidence before me:

I have considered the evidence before me, including:

- the application for the Excellent rating and its supporting statements and evidence
- the assessment and rating report
- advice from your regulatory authority.

## Assessment against the criteria

Milford Lodge Child Care Centre (Milford Lodge) must satisfy three criteria to be awarded the Excellent rating. I have assessed the application against each of the criteria. The reasons for my decision are outlined below.

***1 – The service exemplifies and promotes exceptional education and care that improves outcomes for children and families across at least three themes***

Milford Lodge nominated to be assessed against the following themes:

- Collaborative partnerships with professional, community or research organisations
- Practice and environments that enhance children's learning and growth
- Sustained commitment to professional development and support of educators

Milford Lodge is located in Buderim on the Sunshine Coast. The service strives to be part of its local community and has developed partnerships and relationships with many local businesses, has been involved in community initiatives and has developed its own initiatives which involve the community.

One ongoing partnership that the service has is with Urban Food Street, an initiative where many houses in the local area grow edible plants and trees on verges. Milford Lodge identified the importance of children knowing about food, where it comes from and being able to identify the range of fresh produce available to them after finding that children couldn't identify an unhusked sweet corn. Enabling children to discover the importance of eating healthily and seeing the process of growing food led educators to build a partnership with Urban Food Street. Children go on weekly excursions to work with Duncan, one of the founders of Urban Food Street, and learn how to care for and harvest the edible plants. Further, children harvest produce and deliver it to elderly neighbours, assisting them to maintain their independence in their community. The relationship with Urban Food is a true partnership, with children giving back to the project as well as benefitting from it. The partnership has also evolved to include quarterly 'family' visits where all families are invited to early morning walks led by Duncan, as many families could not attend with children during the day. The service has a 'community sharing journal' where people can record their thoughts and has included input from family members visiting from other states, as well as older siblings.

The service sees value in encouraging children to be visible in the community and decided to introduce excursions as a way to encourage this. The service identifies that its philosophy of encouraging children to be visible in the community has enabled children to become valued and confident members of society and

immerses children and families in the local community. Excursions happen frequently and can range from small to large groups of children.

To enable flexible excursions, the service created an excursion permission slip for families to sign which can be used throughout the year within a set zone. The service identifies a range of skills and intangible benefits from the excursions including children engaging with and contributing to their local community, hands on learning in a range of experiences and gaining life skills, developing oral language and conversation skills, promotion of family engagement and involvement within the service and the broader community, children sharing their own knowledge with educators and an increase in safety awareness including road safety and awareness of the weather. The service identifies that its flexible excursion program is promoting a lifelong love of learning for the children involved.

Children have learnt a great deal about art through the service's collaborative partnership with Art Nuvo, a local picture framer and gallery. Children enjoy drawing pictures of the artwork and statues at the gallery, as well as walking through the gallery admiring the artwork. Children also visit a local mower business, plant nursery, Buderim Park and Wunya Park, a local piece of Indigenous land with a rainforest.

The service collaborates with other local services. For example Milford Lodge shared its knowledge of beach safety with another local kindergarten, and that kindergarten has shared its professional development opportunities. The service also has relationships with local specialists and one speech pathologist offers free speech screeners to children, as well as hosting a workshop for educators about children's speech.

Milford Lodge identifies that teachers in local state schools can benefit from improving their knowledge and understanding of early childhood practice. To support this, the service offers one free ticket to a local state school so that a teacher can attend the professional development opportunities that Milford Lodge hosts. Because Milford Lodge has built strong relationships with a range of early childhood consultants, it asks presenters to tailor presentations to the identified needs of educators and teachers.

Milford Lodge values recycling and sustainability and started a Community Market Day where families could donate items. Children were given "Milford Money" to spend at the stalls. Local family and community business were invited to hold stalls as well. The service added a gold coin donation system for adults so they could join in. The service then donated these proceeds. A range of charities as well as families who need support have benefited from the money raised, and children appreciate the process of recycling and reusing items.

Milford Lodge has a ballroom, a high ceilinged room in the service where children experience music and dance. The service invests in real musical instruments and hosts musicians to share music with children, including the local Rhythm Culture (African Drumming), from whom the service has also purchased African handmade drums, and Juzzie Smith, a one man band. Educators also share music with children.

The service shared its history in its application. The current director's parents built and ran the service for many years. It always had an extensive outdoor area and equipment was sustainably sourced, reused and recycled. While over the years there was a move towards plastic, purpose made equipment, the service was able to make a conscious move towards "bringing back the magic" in recent years, by returning to repurposed and reusable materials and equipment in its outdoor area and encouraging children to spend time in natural outdoor settings. The outdoors is always accessible to children regardless of weather and children are encouraged to immerse themselves in individual interests while playing together across age groups.

When designing the service, its founder identified that children would spend a significant portion of their time within the service environment and that it was therefore important that they had access to a home like environment and natural outdoor setting that is aesthetically pleasing, warm, inviting and nurturing. The service is furnished like a home with soft furnishings, rugs and comfortable places to relax. The areas absorb sound which helps rooms to be quieter, regardless of how many people are in them. The service notes that this enhances children's learning. Milford Lodge educators are in tune with the rhythm of the day and do not have time imposed routines, resulting in children feeling a sense of security and confidence.

To enhance relationships, educators transition with children at the beginning of each year, eliminating a stressful period at the beginning of each year which was traditionally spent getting to know families and children.

Milford Lodge notes that its practice is underpinned by the importance of nurturing relationships. The service involves children in every aspect of its program including sweeping paths, clearing water after heavy rainfall, cleaning animal enclosures, setting the dining room and hanging out laundry. The service notes that this practice supports children's agency, independence and positive self-esteem as children see themselves as important contributors to Milford Lodge. Further, educators observe that including children in every aspect of the program supports relationship building and assists children with regulating their emotions. Children also learn a lot about seasonal changes and the impact of the weather on the outdoor area. The topping up of sand and bark chips happens when children are present as they work together

with wheelbarrows and trucks to move the matter to where it is needed, with educators then observing the pride with which children share what they have done with their families at the end of the day.

The service conducted an action research project after identifying that not all children appeared to need sleep during the day. While having sleep time had been previously unquestioned at the service, the service started questioning its practice after observing that not all children required a sleep. To begin, educators questioned children who said they were not tired. They also spoke with other services across Australia and internationally to find out what they were doing, and discovered that many educators were using children's rest time to complete other tasks without questioning whether children needed sleep. After also talking to parents, educators at the service decided to be guided by what children felt they needed, and now offer rest time without requiring that children lie on beds.

After attending professional development, educators identified the importance of children playing together in multi age learning groups. The service notes that children show higher levels of engagement playing alongside different aged peers and scaffolding one another's learning through observations and interactions. However, the physical size, set up and attendance numbers in the service meant that accomplishing a multi age group service was a difficult task. Educators have changed the layout of rooms, allocating large areas to different activities rather than repeating experiences in each room for each age group. For example, in its blocks and construction room, the service has new and original wooden blocks that are thirty years old that children can build with. In another room, dramatic play resources are available. The service has a large art studio with open ended materials to encourage creative and critical thinking. Putting all resources together enables the service to have purposeful activity rooms. To assist with children's movements across the service, educators have also changed the way they communicate with one another about where children are going and where they are located.

Milford Lodge has its own dining room, offering healthy food prepared by qualified chefs. Families begin each day at the service discussing with children and the chef about what is being prepared that day, with a menu on the blackboard with a list of meal prep tasks that children can contribute to. Children have input into the weekly menu and provide feedback at the end of meals. Children are involved in the harvest and preparation of food. The dining room is decorated with fresh flowers and tablecloths and children set the table with crockery and cutlery. Children choose if they would like early or late lunch, but all meals are served as group meals. The service made a conscious decision to have group meals. When there was a growth in popularity of progressive meal times, educators asked families what

they thought. Families encouraged the service to continue traditional family style meal time which helps build children's relationships with one another. The service notes that having a mix of age groups has also assisted older children to role model appropriate meal time behaviours to younger children.

The service notes that there is a strong culture of professional development at the service which has led to high quality practice and exceptional educators. Educators are supported to achieve high qualifications and improve practice. The Milford Lodge educators' philosophy has been informed by the professional development educators attended and hosted, and the research and reading done. After attending professional development, educators fill out a review form, documenting three key points they took away from the training, how they would change the practice for Milford Lodge, and identify any resources or follow up experiences they need to take the information and implement it into their practice. Families are encouraged to attend professional development opportunities alongside educators. The service notes that this benefits educators, families and children. For example, educators and families can use consistent behaviour support strategies after attending the same workshop on behaviour.

Attending professional development has led educators to be more reflective of their practice. For example, at one point educators identified that approximately 80 per cent of interactions with children were commands rather than conversations. Educators now work hard to use language that is respectful of children and remind themselves of their philosophy of believing that children are capable and confident and should be spoken to as equals.

Educators also identified the importance of children having a natural childhood. They reflected on their own childhoods and identified what they enjoyed. The service also hosted its first conference with a consultant who talked about the importance of risk taking and spending time outdoors. Educators researched the work of nature play advocates and attended further professional development on outdoor environments. Rather than telling children to be careful, educators ask "do you feel safe?", encouraging children to challenge themselves. The service believes that children should be empowered to "give things a go".

After attending networking meetings, the educational leader identified that it would be beneficial for all educators to attend network meetings, as having professional conversations was beneficial to practice and philosophy. The service started a network with services with similar philosophies in March.

Recently the service has educated and cared for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including children who spoke Mandarin. An educator in the service also speaks Mandarin and used her skills to communicate

with children and families, supporting children's acquisition of English and documenting children's learning in Mandarin so families could access it. The service encouraged her to become a cultural support worker with the inclusion support agency and she now works in both roles.

**Analysis**

For a service to meet criterion 1, it must demonstrate that it exemplifies and promotes exceptional education and care against at least three of the six excellence themes. This requires applicants to nominate at least three excellence themes, explain how each theme is supported and promoted through the service's practices, and demonstrate how those practices improve outcomes for the participating children and families.

Milford Lodge has developed exceptional collaborative partnerships within its community. The service's partnership with Urban Food Street clearly aligns with the service's philosophy and improves outcomes for children and families. The partnership benefits children in a number of ways; children learn more about the importance of sustainability and where their food comes from and, in addition, the partnership has given children the opportunity to assist those in the community by providing them with an opportunity to harvest and deliver food to the elderly. Going on excursions has increased children's knowledge of the local community and also increased the local community's appreciation of children. The service, in my view, has met this theme.

The service's practice and environments also build on the service's philosophies and are guided and developed by a strong culture of critical reflection. The service has demonstrated repeatedly how educators consistently reflect on the service's practice and environments and extend on children's strengths and interests. The service's equipment and resources are reused, recycled and repurposed. The service has changed the way children spend their days, with children encouraged to spend time working on what interests them, as well as being encouraged to contribute to service operations. Rather than staying with a specific age range of children all day, children have the freedom to access indoor and outdoor areas and rooms are dedicated to different activities such as construction, art, dramatic and imaginative play. Children have access to real musical instruments and enjoy incursions with local musicians. Children are involved in food preparation for meals and can enjoy eating food they have helped to grow at sit down meals each day. The practice and environments extend on children's interests and are reviewed and adjusted to ensure the best outcomes for children. Milford Lodge demonstrates exceptional education and care which improves outcomes for children and families and, in my view, has met this theme.

Educators at Milford Lodge are involved in professional development that helps them develop their capabilities and knowledge in the areas of practice that the service believes are important. The service's application shared a journey of continuous improvement which educators have been on to improve practice and the service environment. The sustained commitment to professional development shown at the service contributes to the exceptional education and care that educators offer and improves outcomes for children and families because educators reflect on and change their practice as part of a culture of ongoing improvement and development. In my view, Milford Lodge has met this theme.

As Milford Lodge has demonstrated exceptional education and care across three nominated themes, in my opinion, Milford Lodge has met criterion 1.

***2 – The service demonstrates leadership that contributes to the development of a community, a local area, or the wider education and care sector***

The Excellent rating criteria state that successful applications will show how the service takes the initiative to develop and model exceptional practice that improves outcomes for children and families, and willingly shares this to inspire and educate others. An applicant needs to demonstrate how the service's leadership contributes to the development of a community, local area or the wider education and care sector.

Milford Lodge collaborates with local schools and is committed to developing and supporting teachers. The service hosts local teachers who talk to families about school readiness, ensuring these teachers' philosophies mirror their own – that children need time to play and develop self-help and self-regulation skills. Children who previously attended Milford Lodge have been involved in giving their teachers from local schools tours of Milford Lodge. Teachers have shared how they took ideas from Milford Lodge and incorporated them in their classrooms. The service has met with its local school to discuss transitions to school. Most of this practice was in response to a parent coming to the service after her child started prep at a local school and was told by the teacher that her child was not adequately prepared for school. At that time, the educational leader at Milford Lodge met with the principal to discuss their concerns and encouraged the principal to review the Early Years Learning Framework and the Queensland Kindergarten Guidelines, which the school was not familiar with. The service notes that it has continued to visit and speak with teachers at this school to share its knowledge of children's development.

The service has also continued to speak to the education department about the importance of early childhood. For example, after continuing to work with a local school and share the importance of early childhood education and care, the service notes that the principal has recently encouraged prep teachers to provide more play

time and asked the service to work with him to develop a transition to school plan. The service notes its role in influencing the school which was initially reluctant to work on a transitions strategy due to time restraints.

After identifying that there were limited professional development opportunities in the nearby area, Milford Lodge decided to improve access by holding its own conferences. Initially, it held a one day conference for educators in the region. After a few years of one day conferences, the service is now holding a two day conference in a central location which will be accessible to more educators. This conference is titled 'Village Ways', based on the concept that it takes a village to raise a child. Educators will attend workshops including circle time which will focus on facilitating children's explorations and learning construction, facilitating outdoor learning experiences, learning about democratic education and examining physical environment and safety to promote good practices and facilities. Response to the conferences has been very positive and the service ensures that presenters and topics align with its own philosophies. Milford Lodge also funded a workshop on natural learning for a local primary school.

Milford Lodge has a team of parents and educators who enter the Sunshine Coast Marathon, running the half marathon. This began after one parent wanted to be a better role model to his son and began running for health. One family in the service provided team shirts through their screen printing business. The service plans to enter again this year.

**Analysis**

Milford Lodge actively supports the development of the education and care sector by offering professional development and making opportunities for teachers at local state schools to extend their knowledge and appreciation of early childhood education. It holds an annual conference for the wider education and care sector, holding it in a central location so that it is available to more educators who would not necessarily have the opportunity to attend professional development otherwise. Milford Lodge has developed a network with local services which it hopes to continue to build so that the services can support and learn from one another.

The service has also inspired change in the community. It has been involved in educating local state schools about the importance of early childhood education, play and transitions. This has positively impacted on local state schools, including one school offering more play time for children and a greater focus on supporting transitions. The service has taken many opportunities to strengthen its relationship with local schools. This has helped to highlight the importance of early childhood education in the school sector and has led to positive changes in primary schools in the local area, including influencing teachers' programs and practice, and

expectations of new children.

In my view, the service's practice demonstrates leadership which is contributing to the development of its local community and the wider education and care sector. Therefore, it is my opinion that Milford Lodge has met criterion 2.

***3 – The service demonstrates commitment to sustained Excellent practice through continuous improvement and comprehensive forward planning***

The Excellent rating criteria state that successful applicants will embrace the responsibility of maintaining excellence. The criteria recognise the importance of pursuing opportunities for further improvement, and the need for services to demonstrate how exceptional practice and leadership will be sustained over the three year rating period.

Milford Lodge has been operating for thirty years and has shared how it has grown and changed in that time, with new purpose built buildings, changes in leadership and refurbishment. It has shared its long term plans for renovation and refurbishment of its kitchen and other rooms which will be completed in conjunction with educators, families and children. The service is building another facility which will be a home base for kindergarten aged children with a science lab, tinkering and woodwork areas. The service is also developing its library. Milford Lodge is also working on a plan to create a large produce garden and will work with contacts from Urban Food Street. The service notes it is continuing to update its outdoor areas, including expanding its bicycle track.

In meeting the first and second Excellent rating criteria, Milford Lodge has demonstrated a commitment to excellent practice. Milford Lodge notes that it is continually changing and this has been helped by its relationships with others working in the early childhood education and care sector. The service also points to its culture of reflecting, questioning and challenging one another to continue to build quality. Milford Lodge maintains and builds its relationships with the community through its excursions and involvement with Urban Food Street. The service has shared a range of projects that it has which will continue to improve its service and what it offers to children. Based on the service's culture of continuous improvement, the reflective practice of its educators and the service's commitment to children shared in its application, I am certain that Milford Lodge will continue to sustain its excellent practice.

Milford Lodge has demonstrated its commitment to sustained Excellent practice through continuous improvement and comprehensive forward planning. Therefore I am of the view that the service has met criterion 3.

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**Overall conclusion**

Under section 153(2), I have assessed the application from Jumofini Pty Ltd for Milford Lodge in accordance with the Excellent rating criteria and have determined that the service has met the three Excellent rating criteria. For this reason, under section 155(1)(a), I have decided to award the Excellent rating to Milford Lodge.

As a result, the overall rating of Milford Lodge changes to Excellent.

**SIGNED**

(Karen Curtis)

Chief Executive Officer, ACECQA

2 June 2016