

19 May 2023

Early Childhood Education and Care
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2, Collins St East
Melbourne Vic 8003
Via: childhood@pc.gov.au

To the Productivity Commission,

Re: Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

GrainGrowers is a voice for Australian grain farmers with grower members across Australia. Our vision is to build a more sustainable and profitable grains industry for the benefit of Australian grain farmers. GrainGrowers welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the public consultation to the Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care.

Our understanding and experience of the issues suggests that early childhood education and care creates significant challenges for those living in rural and remote Australia, particularly farming families. With this being an issue raised by growers and many examples of how it impacts their workforce on farm, GrainGrowers has been proactively focusing on this and is hosting a Childcare Roundtable in May 2023 so it can be explored in more depth.

The Australian grains sector directly employs over 34,000 people¹, and is a powerhouse of regional Australia with 22,500 farm businesses growing on average 65 million tonnes of grains, oilseeds and pulses each year for domestic and global customers. The gross value of Australian grain production in 2021-22 was \$28.6 billion, accounting for 33 percent of the total gross value of Australian farm production². We are a major contributor to both regional Australia and the broader Australian economy.

Childcare in a rural Australian context

Growers have cited 'Workforce shortages' as one of the top three issues facing the grains industry for two consecutive years in GrainGrowers' Annual Policy Survey. With women comprising more than 50% of all university agricultural graduates³ but only one in three agricultural workers being female⁴, there is a clear gap in attracting and retaining female workers within the agricultural sector. The scarcity of childcare options for farming families represents a significant barrier for parents re-entering the workforce following parental leave.

As identified in the "Australia's Children" report⁵, vulnerable children living in rural and remote communities are priority population groups with a greater need of health and welfare

¹ [Labour use in Australian agriculture: Analysis of survey results, 2021–22 - ABARES](#)

² [Agricultural Commodities: March quarter 2023, Statistical tables - ABARES](#)

³ [Award Course Completions Pivot Table - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

⁴ Census of Population and Housing 2021 - Australian Bureau of Statistics

⁵ [Australia's children, The health of Australia's children - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#)

services and support. The “Childcare Deserts and Oases” report⁶ identified that Australians living outside of major cities are more likely to be living in an area classified as a childcare desert (more than three children under four years per childcare place), with 62.2% of families living in outer regional areas and 87.5% living in remote areas existing in a childcare desert. About 1.1 million Australians live in regional and remote areas where there is no childcare available at all. The regions with lower access to childcare also have lower levels of workforce participation for women who have a child aged under five years.

The latest “Regional Movers Index” report⁷ indicates that net migration from capital cities to regional Australia remains stronger than the reverse, which highlights the need to ensure a forward-thinking approach to solutions for childcare shortages in rural and regional Australia geared towards a growing population. Targeted overseas migration will also play an important role in ensuring adequate childcare coverage across Australia’s regions. Migratory pathways to permanency are a strong incentive to overseas workers and will be a requirement in ensuring skilled childcare professionals and other carers such as those undertaking domestic duties like au pairs and nannies are allowed to become a part of the communities that need them.

As highlighted in the Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report 2022⁸, there were two key considerations for Rural, Regional and Remote Early Childhood Education and Care. Firstly, assisting family day care operators with start-up costs and providing support with associated ‘red tape’, while expanding mobile childcare and playgroup service coverage. Secondly, extending the Assistance for Isolated Children - Distance Education (AIC-DE) allowance to 3 - 4-year-olds who are undertaking an approved pre-compulsory distance education program. This second measure would reduce the financial burden on isolated families who have no option other than to deliver a preschool program themselves.

The Australian Government is currently developing the Early Years Strategy⁹ to create an integrated approach to the early years across Commonwealth departments and better coordinate functions. GrainGrowers notes the commitment of the Australian Government in providing parental support and ensuring sufficient access to childcare options through recent Budget allocations. It is also encouraging to see government initiatives prioritising support for First Nations educators, and educators in regional and remote areas.

Conclusion

Grain farming families in rural and regional Australia are at significant disadvantage compared to family businesses in a metropolitan area when accessing childcare solutions. GrainGrowers will be hosting a Childcare Roundtable in May 2023 to deepen the understanding of barriers and explore potential solutions to regional childcare-related issues. This has the potential to unlock an engaged and experienced pool of labour who are eager to contribute to the grains industry.

GrainGrowers will continue to work to improved outcomes within grain growing regions and as such any collaboration with other organisations with similar interest or expertise is always encouraged and welcomed. Should you require any further information, please contact Constantine Theodore, Policy Officer on (02) 9286 2000 or constantine.theodore@graingrowers.com.au.

⁶ [Childcare deserts & oases: How accessible is childcare in Australia? - Victoria University](#)

⁷ [Regional Movers Index – Regional Australia Institute](#)

⁸ [Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report 2022 - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

⁹ [Early Years Strategy - Department of Social Services, Australian Government](#)

Yours sincerely,

Shona Gawel
Chief Executive Officer
GrainGrowers