



14 February 2024

Re: Glenelg Shire Council's Submission on the Productivity Commission Enquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

Glenelg Shire Council appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's extensive draft report on the Enquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Council recognises the comprehensive nature of the report and its aim to reform and improve the ECEC sector in Australia. Glenelg Shire, located in Southwest Victoria, represents a diverse community with unique challenges and opportunities regarding ECEC provision. This submission seeks to provide insights and recommendations from a local perspective, aligning with and building upon the draft report's findings and recommendations.

Glenelg Shire encompasses rural and coastal regions, with a population that experiences both the richness of local community life and the challenges of regional service provision in the ECEC sector. Council values education and care in the early years as foundational to children's lifelong learning, well-being, and active participation in society. However, the regional nature of our Shire brings forth specific challenges related to geographic spread, service accessibility, workforce attraction and retention, cultural inclusivity, affordability and flexibility of ECEC services.

Glenelg Shire Council support the draft report's recommendation to modify the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) to enhance accessibility and address the affordability barriers to ECEC access. In our region, the economic diversity among families necessitates a nuanced approach to subsidy structures. The draft reports modelling highlights the variety of circumstances and presents a range of possibilities for adjusting the CCS, aiming to improve accessibility and overcome affordability obstacles. Each option offers potential benefits tailored to the diverse situations encountered within the community. Acknowledging the cost-of-living pressures that our community confronts, Council is also aware of its own vulnerability to escalating expenses, which, in a rate capping environment in Victoria, outpaces revenue. While Council remains attentive to the structuring of fees and charges, it's important to note that ratepayer funds currently provide substantial subsidies for the provision of childcare services in the Shire. The proposed revisions to the CCS thresholds may in turn bolster stability of private and government operated services.

Council acknowledges the challenges in attracting and retaining a qualified workforce, particularly in regional areas. The recommendations for supporting workforce development are crucial for our Shire. Workforce shortages in ECEC have profound implications for regional communities and the inaccessibility and waitlists for childcare services due to workforce shortages hinders workforce participation and negatively impacts the regional economy. Regional areas already face disadvantages in attracting a skilled workforce, and the barrier to accessing childcare exacerbates this challenge. As the report acknowledges addressing pay and conditions are essential for attracting and retaining early childhood educators, ensuring that regional communities have access to quality ECEC services and a skilled workforce to support their social and

Council acknowledges the imperative for a universal ECEC system that is truly inclusive of all children, recognising current limitations and advocating for significant reforms to best support children with disabilities or additional needs and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Council supports the key recommendations outlined in the report, acknowledging these recommendations are aimed at fostering improved access and experiences for children with additional needs, moving towards a more inclusive, fair, and supportive ECEC system.

The need for ECEC services to be flexible and responsive is particularly pronounced in the more remote areas within our Shire, where families may be required to travel long commutes for work, may work in neighboring states, may work in jobs that are seasonal (farming) or be employed in a workplace with varying shift patterns. All of these factors impact families' unique ECEC needs. Council faces the complex challenge of addressing community needs while simultaneously striving to sustain an adequate workforce not only to maintain existing service delivery models but also potentially extend service hours to better align with the community requirements.

In addition to the draft report's recommendations and findings in relation to the regulatory bodies responsible for quality, Council express our concerns in this area after experiencing firsthand the protracted intervals between quality assessments conducted by state regulatory authorities and the subsequent issuance of draft and final reports. The extended duration, often spanning several months, significantly detracts from the efficacy and relevance of these quality ratings. This delay not only compromises the timely implementation of potential improvements but also erodes the confidence that ECEC teams have in the regulatory process. Prompt and efficient feedback is crucial for maintaining the integrity and value of these assessments, ensuring that our services continually meet and exceed the standards set forth for the betterment of our ECEC framework.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the protracted timelines for quality assessments and responses to serious incidents may reflect a lack of resources within the regulatory authorities. This observation lends credence to the draft reports recommendations that these bodies must be adequately resourced to function effectively. The significant delays, especially in addressing reports of serious incidents, raise legitimate concerns regarding the operational capacity and prioritisation within these regulatory bodies. If the goal is to genuinely safeguard and enhance the quality of ECEC, then ensuring these authorities are well-equipped, both in terms of human resourcing and tools, is not just beneficial but essential. Without adequate resources, their ability to respond swiftly and effectively remains compromised, potentially jeopardising the wellbeing of the children.

The establishment of an ECEC Commission aligns with Council's view of the need for a coordinated approach to ECEC policy and delivery. However, it's crucial that the commission recognises and addresses the unique challenges faced by regional communities and when developing the stewardship model that representatives with regional expertise are included.

Glenelg Shire Council is committed to supporting the Commission's endeavor to reform and improve the ECEC sector. We believe that the recommendations outlined in this submission, grounded in our local context and experience, will contribute to shaping

an ECEC system that is inclusive, flexible, and responsive to the needs of all Australian children and families. By focusing on regional specificities and fostering collaborative approaches between local, state, and national entities, we can ensure that the benefits of high-quality ECEC are accessible to every community, including those in Glenelg Shire.