

Productivity Commission into ECEC Draft Report Response February 2024

By Five Wimmera Southern Mallee Early Years Initiative and North Central LLEN are pleased to offer a response to the Productivity Commission draft report *A pathway to universal early education and care, 2023*, particularly from a rural Victorian perspective.

As two rural place-based organisations, strongly embedded within the rural setting and heavily involved in early years, we have formulated comments relating to the key points outlined in the draft report for consideration.

- **Children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, who are most likely to benefit most from ECEC services – are less likely to attend.**

A universal ECEC system making quality services accessible to all children and families, tackling inclusion gaps (is required).

ECEC services should be inclusive of all children, including those with disabilities and those from diverse cultural backgrounds.

We concur with all statements. There is plethora of evidence and supporting data highlighting the rural disadvantage in early child development with up to 1 in 3 children from our region arriving at school developmentally vulnerable on 1 or more AEDC domains. Only 50 percent of communities in these areas have access to a Long Day Care Service (LDC), therefore attendance at a service is not an option as it simply not available.

It is imperative that ECEC services are planned and delivered as an integrated manner, specifically in small rural towns (Modified Monash Model 5) to build resilience in the system and to deliver efficiency and effectiveness of all levels of government investment.

To enhance attendance and access, adequate base-level funding is required in small rural towns. Ongoing funding supports service continuity along with provider and community confidence. This funding must support rural providers to deliver high-quality ECEC in response to the diverse needs of all children who call these rural areas home. This includes those with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Put simply, rural communities require appropriate base-level funding delivered in an integrated approach to enable equitable access for all children.

- **Workforce challenges facing the sector.**

With qualified Early Childhood Educators taking up employment in supermarkets due to superior pay and conditions as captured through our local interviews, we support all efforts to improve and recognise the Early Education profession and the importance of the service it delivers.

Base-level funding for rural services not only contributes to enhancing conditions, but also provides secure employment opportunities, avoiding situations where contract conditions hinge on fluctuating enrolment thresholds. Furthermore, the provision of guaranteed funding to rural services promotes the sector as a secure career pathway for locals to confidently pursue.

A differentiated EBA commencement point for employees in rural areas has been successfully utilised in the Victorian Public sector for Allied Health and could be used as a guide for implementation.

We support efforts that value all educators through improved pay and conditions.

○ **Affordability should not be a barrier to ECEC access.**

The suggested reassessment of the Activity Test is welcomed, as it is a known access barrier for rural families. We know rural children simply due to where they live, are more vulnerable, yet meeting the activity test criteria can be more challenging due to the nature of the work environment or recognizing the full benefits of ECEC. There are many children and families who would benefit from a more accessible, flexible service system not currently reflected within the criteria of the existing activity test. Families shared with us their struggles with post-natal depression and mental health and how LDC would have been a genuine support, but due to the requirements to attend, this was prohibitive. We hear repeatedly, that ECEC services are so much more than just 'a LDC or kindergarten' providing a breadth of support and opportunity for families.

We recommend the removal of the activity test for all families in the Monash Modified Model areas 5-7.

○ **ECEC services should be flexible and responsive to the needs of families.**

Rural families and service providers have reinforced this point and to achieve this a place-based response is required. This extends to service models, infrastructure design, supporting funding and policy. Compromising on quality is non-negotiable. Centre-based LDC is the preferred option of parents, with service models including Family Day Care (FDC) being a valuable adjunct, not the primary service arrangement. LDC provides a sense of service security often not experienced in the FDC service model.

Each community has a differing set of conditions requiring a flexible responsive service model which communities are best placed to influence.

○ **Quality is paramount to achieving the benefits of ECEC.**

Quality is everything when it comes to Early Educationⁱ, yet evidence relating to the quality of ECEC in our rural area demonstrates we are again falling behind our Metropolitan counterparts, with less than 5 percent of our services reaching the quality indicators of Restacking the Oddsⁱⁱ (RSTO) compared to 30 percent across Victoria.

Any effort to support the delivery of high-quality ECEC to all children is well-supported by our partnerships.

○ **Australian, state and territory governments should sign a new National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education and Care, which would outline their respective roles and responsibilities as stewards of the system, as well as the objectives all governments seek to achieve in ECEC.**

A new independent Early Childhood Education and Care Commission should be created to support, advise, and monitor governments' progress towards universal access to ECEC.

With less than 50 percent of our communities with populations between 500-5000 having access to LDC, a more consistent, coordinated approach to service provision underpinned by equity is welcome. The appointment of an independent National ECEC Commissioner, to advise government on the impact of intersecting State and Commonwealth policy will improve resource efficiency and is a solid solution to support the attainment of our rural ECEC goals.

Defined system stewardship is supported.

By Five and the NCLLEN have recently completed a report into the state of rural ECEC across the Wimmera Southern Mallee, Mallee and Loddon Campaspe Regional Partnership areas and would be very willing to share our findings and solutions upon request.

We anticipate the results of the Productivity Commission and the recognition of the diverse requirements of rural children throughout Australia.

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ⁱ Tayler, C., Cloney, D. & Niklas, F. (2015). A bird in the Hand: understanding the Trajectories of Development of Young Children and the Need for Action to Improve Outcomes. *Australasian Journal for Early Childhood*, 40 (3), 51-60.

ⁱⁱ RSTO – Murdoch Children’s Research Institute Initiative. <https://www.rsto.org.au/>