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Early Childhood Education and Care
Productivity Commission
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Dear Professor Brennan, Mr Stokie and Ms Gropp

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care.

I believe that the benefits of education and workforce participation should not be limited by location. Education helps people imagine and create better futures for themselves, and this starts in early childhood. Your review provides an opportunity to consider how to improve access to early childhood education and care for people in regional, rural and remote (RRR) Australia. Regional communities' needs differ from the needs of people in cities, and from each other. In particular, approaches that work for people in cities often fail in the regions, particularly as population density and the availability of skilled workers decrease.

While RRR communities are diverse, they face common challenges. Australia's regions are great places in which to grow up, live and work. But even in the most resilient and well-resourced RRR communities, the tyranny of distance and reduced population density increase the challenges people encounter compared to their city counterparts.

About the Regional Education Commissioner

As Australia's independent Regional Education Commissioner, I have the privilege of championing the needs of people from our regions through their education journey from early childhood through school, vocational education and training and higher education, and the pathways between.

In line with this remit, my comments focus on early childhood education and care in RRR Australia, including availability, affordability, workforce constraints, the compounding problem of poor access and participation for parents of young children in regional areas, particularly women, and the importance of cultural sensitivity and co-design when considering solutions, particularly in First Nations contexts.

Improving access to early childhood education and care in regional Australia

Based on extensive stakeholder feedback I have received over the last 18 months about the needs of RRR families (as discussed in my 2022 Annual Report <https://www.education.gov.au/regional-education-commissioner/resources/regional-education-commissioner-annual-report-2022>), I encourage you to examine the practicality of specific interventions for increasing access to and participation in ECEC in our regions, including the following options:

- improving support for family day care operators in RRR areas to meet qualification and operational regulations and assisting with start-up costs.
- expanding mobile childcare services to areas where there is no, or limited access.
- increasing the number of mobile playgroups and giving existing playgroups certainty to invest in equipment and recruitment of skilled workers by offering grants with several years duration.
- considering the practicality and effectiveness of online delivery of early childhood education curricula in remote and very remote regions where qualified early childhood educators are either not available or in short supply, but carers may be available.
- extending the Assistance for Isolated Children — Distance Education (AIC-DE) allowance to 3-4 year olds undertaking an approved pre-compulsory distance education program, to reduce the financial burden on isolated families with no option other than to deliver the preschool program themselves.

An effective approach will engage and collaborate with regional communities to design tailored delivery models that recognise communities' diversity.

Workforce issues

Many stakeholders, unsurprisingly, raised workforce shortages with me as a key issue across the board in regions, and early childhood education and care is no exception. A strong regional ECEC sector needs to attract and retain a qualified regional workforce. This skilled workforce will help to sustain quality of life in our regions and ensure that the people who live there are not denied access to education and the opportunity for fulfilling careers.

Skills shortages in the teaching workforce has been a recurrent theme of stakeholder feedback in my discussions over the last year. Better access to early childhood education and care in these communities would help reduce teacher shortages and support greater female participation in the workforce, study and training.

Poor access to early childhood education and care makes regional workforce shortages in other sectors worse, as without reliable childcare, parents may have no opportunity to participate in the workforce. This results in missed career opportunities, loss of or failure to develop skilled workers to supply communities and regions, families with reduced spending power, and reduced local economic activity.

Lack of sustained access to childcare is a barrier to participation in education and the workforce

Lack of childcare stops people participating in the workforce, and also in education and training. It follows that one way to improve opportunities for parents with caring responsibilities to study and participate in the workforce is through improving access to early childhood education and care services.

Existing programs like the In Home Care Program (<https://www.education.gov.au/child-care-package/child-care-subsidy/approved-care-types/home-care>) and mobile childcare initiatives may help parents return to study or work sooner, but only if they can be rolled out reliably to the communities that will benefit from them the most. Access and availability for these initiatives currently limits their effectiveness.

Poor provision of childcare opportunities affects whole communities. I noted in my Annual Report (p. 23) that recent research by the Mitchell Institute in 2022 (<https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/early-learning/childcare-deserts-oases-how-accessible-is-childcare-in-australia>) into the incidence of 'childcare deserts' in Australia found that more than 300 communities in Australia have a school but no childcare centre. While affordability is a key issue in urban areas, access is the main problem in rural areas, where lower population densities can make sustainability of standalone childcare centres difficult.

This shows the importance of flexibility, and reinforces the need to involve local communities in designing childcare solutions, particularly when addressing the needs of First Nations families. I encourage you to investigate ways to support fairer, flexible, more reliable access to early childhood education and care for regional, rural and remote communities, potentially through programs to support smaller operators, improving access to mobile and in home services, supporting businesses in thin markets, and good-faith consultation with the people at the coalface of our regional childcare shortage — providers, workers, parents and other carers.

I hope that this information is useful.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Nash

Regional Education Commissioner

19 May 2023