

*This submission is made on behalf of the Regional Development Australia (RDA) Wheatbelt Inc.*

Regional Development Australia (RDA) is a national initiative which seeks to grow and strengthen the regions of Australia. Made up of 55 committees, the network of RDA committees covers metropolitan, rural and remote regions across the country. RDA committees are strong advocates for their region and drivers of change and, as such, have a pivotal role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of regional Australia. RDA committees focus on the economic, social and environmental issues of importance to communities in their region.

The region we represent - the Wheatbelt of Western Australia - is located in the south west of the State and comprises an area of 154,862 square kilometres, extending out to the north, east and south east of the Perth metropolitan area.

The region is home to 73,817 people (projected June 2012 Population, 2011 ABS census) making it the third most populous region in the Western Australia.

The Wheatbelt is a large and diverse region encompassing a range of environments, social and economic characteristics. Opportunities and constraints differ greatly across the region, especially when comparing the high growth peri-urban and coastal communities with the broad acre farm land in the east and south of the region.

The population of the Wheatbelt is dispersed over 43 Shires and approximately 160 towns, villages and smaller settlements with the highest density occurring in towns close to Perth. Travelling towards the far north and east of the Wheatbelt, there are further distances between towns and a smaller concentration of people.

The Wheatbelt is divided into five distinct but interconnected Sub Regions. Each of these are serviced by a regional centre. They are: Avon, Central Coast, Central Midland, Central East and Central South. There are no major cities in the Wheatbelt. Northam is the largest regional centre with an estimated population of 6,580. There is no one dominant regional centre. This means the infrastructure and service provision models that work in other areas are not suitable for this context.

The Wheatbelt region as a whole is experiencing population growth. This growth however is not evenly spread which provides challenges for planning in the region.

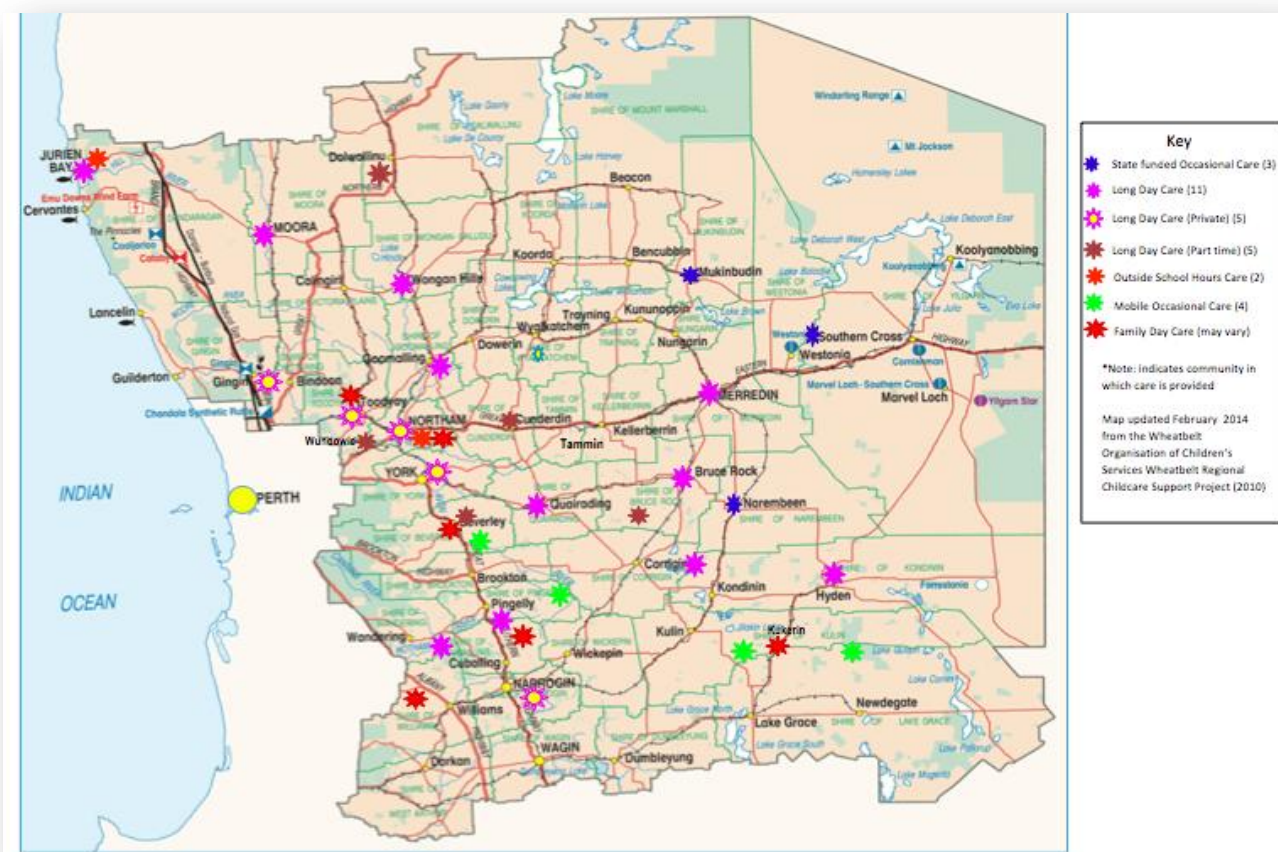
### ***Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in the Wheatbelt***

There are approximately 510 licensed long day care places in the Wheatbelt region, with the largest number of places being offered in the bigger population centres such as Northam, Narrogin and Toodyay (DEEWR 2012).

Currently the Wheatbelt has:

- 28 Centre-based Child Care services in the Wheatbelt, 16 of which are full-time Long Day Care and five are part-time. Notably only five are privately run and four are in reasonably close proximity to Perth Metro in the *Avon Arc* at Northam, Gingin, Toodyay and York and where parents and carers can undertake a daily commute.
- Family Day Carers which operate under Home Care Schemes are managed externally to the Wheatbelt by Not For Profit (NFP) organisations.
- There are currently no in home care services operating but there previously there has been one in the regions.
- Region has 27 active Playgroups managed predominantly by volunteers.
- Limited Occasional Care (before and after school) with only four in the region.
- Recreational opportunities are limited to school holiday activities.
- Mobile Services operate in four remote Wheatbelt towns in the south of the region.
- As noted in the scoping document there is no consistent information on informal ECEC Services, either approved or registered, due to the unofficial nature of the services that make them difficult to track and monitor.

**Figure 1: Map showing locations of ECEC Services in the Wheatbelt.**



**Table 2: Local Government's that currently do not have any ECEC Services.**

Shire of Chittering	Shire of Trayning
Shire of Dowerin	Shire of Victoria Plains
Shire of Gingin	Shire of Wandering
Shire of Kellerberrin	Shire of Westonia
Shire of Koorda	Shire of Wickiepin
Shire of Nungarin	Shire of Wyalkatchem
Shire of Tammin	

*Please note that this does not include areas of high growth such the towns of Cervantes and Bakers Hill.*

## Key Issues

The change of funding in 2010 by the Australian Government had a major impact on child care service provision across Australia. The National Quality agenda for Early Childhood Education and care has had ongoing implications and will continue to do so.

For the Wheatbelt the most significant impacts are the Policy change from Neighbourhood Model for Occasional Care, family day care start up payment and the remote area family day care start up payment.

Availability of childcare and early learning services has always been difficult for the Wheatbelt due to its relatively small and highly dispersed population across a large geographic area.

In June 2012 DEEWR hosted a Wheatbelt Early Childhood Education and Child Care Industry Roundtable. This event pulled together a broad cross-section of stakeholders in the Wheatbelt Child Care sector to provide their views on barriers and solutions to effective service delivery in the region. A number of issues were highlighted during this workshop:

- Recruitment and retention of child care workers in the Wheatbelt is very challenging due to uncompetitive wages.
- Staff losses are expected as a result of the requirement under the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, for staff to have attained or be working toward a Certificate III education and care qualification due to a reluctance to study and limited access to training options.
- The lack of funding and support available to occasional care centres, which provide a very valuable service to our smaller communities, is rendering some of these services unviable.
- Lack of mentoring and support for inexperienced Directors.

Further to the Industry Roundtable, there are a number of issues that have been highlighted by the Wheatbelt Organisations for Children's Services (WOCS) over the past decade, many of which are ongoing and yet to be resolved. The information collated from Wheatbelt ECEC Services by WOCS is further bolstered by recent observations and anecdotal references:

- **Flexibility of ECECs:** The current operating hours of ECEC services are generally only available in blocks of half or full day periods, which prevent those parents that are employed as shift workers from accessing services. This has a significant impact on essential services in regional communities such as Health and Police.
- **Government regulation:** Many ECEC Services are confused by the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) and Child Protection Laws, etc. Smaller ECEC services struggle to meet new regulatory requirements due to limited resources and appropriate skills. ECEC Services need infrastructure and mechanisms to support the NQF changes to be made. There is funding available but it is unsystematic but often not well promoted or not easily accessible.
- **Volunteer dependency:** The majority of ECEC Services are governed by a voluntary Board or Committee which is often comprised of parents utilising the service. Whilst most welcome the NQF changes, the increased workload and legal compliance is overwhelming. The financial and time cost of governance training is often prohibitive and ineffective with the transient nature and finite terms of the Board or Committee.
- **Temporary Exemptions (waivers):** Delays to WA involvement has meant a backlog of assessments. Many services have not yet been assessed. Little or no assistance available to assist. Child Australia is indicating this will be addressed in the future however this is generally metro- based which continues to be an issue for access.
- **Staffing:** Competition from other industries is already impacting on the recruitment and retention of workers and this will only continue to increase. Changes to Visa stipulations may also result negatively on the potential staff. The new staff qualification standards will also mean that Long Day Care staff will be qualified to work in Preschools where higher salaries and better conditions may be offered. If an ECEC Service does operate on a part-time basis, attracting staff who are willing to travel long distances for limited work is difficult.

- **Sustainability issues:** The number of children that ECEC Services provide care for in a given community is small and in many cases, barely financially viable. The uncertainty of ECEC Service demand year-on-year and subsequent funding makes it difficult for them to remain sustainable. If and when an ECEC Service closes for annual festive breaks or similar, there are often no other alternatives for families.
- **Access to funding:** Given the Wheatbelt's geographical dispersion, ECEC Services such as nannies and au pairs are particularly well-suited but rarely accessed due to limited knowledge of and funding from the Federal Government.
- **Additional Mobile Services needed:** There are only four in the region but are key to provide services to remote communities.
- **Child Care Benefit:** CCB not available for Occasional Care, which many of Wheatbelt ECEC services are.
- **Services for additional needs:** Limited availability for children with additional needs. If funding is made available it is often only enough to employ a support staff member, often untrained.
- **Availability:** For some families, their preferred type and level of care is not available when or where they need it. This may be because there is a shortage of childcare in their location, there may not be vacancies in the age groups required or the days of care that are available may not match a family's needs. Obtaining appropriate childcare becomes more complicated when families have multiple children of the same or different ages needing care.

### Opportunities

This Productivity Commission Inquiry is timely. In 2013 RDA Wheatbelt was successful in being awarded a two year tender to develop a Wheatbelt Children's Services Plan. Please see *Connecting the dots* flyer attached.

The primary activities associated with this project are:

- Production of a Regional Children's Services Plan and provision of input into the development of a state-wide plan. A draft of this will be available in May 2014 and finalised before October 2014.
- A report and implementation plan will follow.
- The project is completed by October 2015.

A key function of this project is to identify and trial or pilot any identified opportunities for better outcomes in the region. The Implementation Plan will identify and confirm partnerships and collaborations with key stakeholders and service providers. Wheatbelt RDA will be working across the region with communities, organisations and individuals. This will include all 43 Local Government's as well as Federal and State government agencies such as Health and Education.

As part of this project an online survey has been developed based on many of the issues indicated for the Productivity Commission Inquiry. The survey closes formally on February 28<sup>th</sup> and information results will be available and can be provided to the Inquiry if required. Please follow this link to the survey <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/WheatbeltECEC>

### Summary

RDA Wheatbelt is encouraged by and in full support of the Australian Government's commitment to *"establishing a sustainable future for a more flexible, affordable and accessible child care and early childhood learning market that helps underpin the national economy and supports the community, especially parent's choices to participate in work and learning and children's growth, welfare, learning and development."*

As discussed above, RDA Wheatbelt is undertaking a project to develop a Regional Children's Services Plan for our region and would be happy to provide further information as it becomes available, including the results of our survey.