



LEETON SHIRE COUNCIL

Preserving the Past, Enhancing the Future

ABN 59 217 957 665

23-25 Chelmsford Place, Leeton NSW 2705

Telephone: (02) 6953 0911 Facsimile: (02) 6953 3337

Email: council@leeton.nsw.gov.au Website: www.leeton.nsw.gov.au

Childcare and Early Childhood Learning
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra ACT 2601

28 January 2014

Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Public Enquiry

Leeton Shire Council would like to make a submission to the Inquiry based on the evidence of a comprehensive business survey undertaken in 2012, which included childcare as one of five sections, and the experience of Council staff, working in the Council childcare facility, the Leeton Early Learning Centre.

The Shire of Leeton

Leeton Shire has an area of 1,167 square kilometres, adjacent to the Murrumbidgee River, falling within the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area.

The primary land use is intensive irrigation farming, with the manufacturing of agricultural products being a major employer of residents. Leeton has the highest number of people involved in manufacturing, predominantly agriculturally based, of any Shire in the region, including nearby regional cities.

Council recognised that Childcare is a critical issue in the workplace in the Shire, and as a result, took over one of two childcare facilities to support the working population.

Childcare in Leeton Shire Planning

The Leeton Shire Community Strategic Plan refers to ensuring the viability and supply of childcare in strategy 7D *"Maintain support to child services that care for and educate our children,"* as well as ties to Strategy 20F *"Seek development of a greater number of skilled tradesmen."*

The Childcare Data from Leeton

As part of a business survey in 2012, Council undertook to assess the needs of business and employees regarding childcare.

This survey was hand delivered to 195 businesses, which represented the bulk of those in the CBD and industrial zones, and then retrieved by hand, from 180 of those businesses. This resulted in a completion rate of 92.3%, ensuring the validity of the results, now and into the future.

The results of note were:

- 39% of businesses surveyed employed 139 staff with childcare needs
- Of these staff, 24 were university qualified, 43 were considered highly skilled, and 40 were clerical.
- 78% worked 20 hours or longer per week with 22% of these working less than 20 hours per week.
- 90% of businesses supported their staff needing childcare with flexible working hours.
- When asked, 75% of businesses advised they would do more to assist with childcare if assisted in a relevant way.

The conclusions which stand out from this data is that Leeton businesses are dependent on childcare facilities for their staff, and are prepared to manage their workplace and work flows to suit.

Council sees the economic and social difficulties involved in Childcare, and as the previous hard data indicates, businesses are already doing what they can to manage their own individual situations.

From an economic standpoint, the issues with childcare involve skills attraction, skills retention, and the growth and development of an existing workforce.

Workers are financially worse off to return to work due to the cost of childcare

There are many examples in Leeton Shire of skilled and experienced workers not returning to work after children, as the cost of childcare is greater than the wage they would be paid.

This is a clear hindrance to businesses retaining staff they have trained and skilled, regardless of the worker's desire to return.

The rebate on childcare favours the non working, when from a productivity standpoint, it should favour those wanting to work, and contribute to the economy.

The emergence of unregistered childcare providers

As a consequence of the increasing cost, workers are turning to unregistered and unqualified home carers, instead of regulated carers.

This is creating risk situations for the children, and for Council, as a regulatory body, to manage.

Council's approach to facilities such as playgrounds and parks is hindered by the lack of knowledge of where these "unofficial" carers are locating themselves, and with the proliferation of social media, their growth is unmanaged.

The earliest Council finds out about some of these sites is when something goes wrong or a complaint is raised.

Skills attraction needs affordable childcare availability or they locate elsewhere.

It has been long a problem for regional areas to attract skilled professionals, and with the growth in the number of double income families, it has become critical to be able to provide regulated childcare facilities with vacancies.

Council expends annually through the Economic Development Department on programs to attract workers, preferably skilled, to the existing and growth industries of the region.

Without skills retention, as mentioned earlier, this task is compounded by looking for replacements for those choosing not to return to work.

Employer preference for workers inadvertently becomes tighter.

Issues with start and finish times

Being an area heavily involved in manufacturing workers are currently frustrated by the limitation of hours available for drop off and pick up of children from centres.

This applies a restriction to the availability of workers to business, and also places a strain on the workers themselves, when trying to complete tasks by set times, rather than by quality first.

Flexibility by way of a longer window for drop off and pick up would alleviate the matter for these experienced and skilled workers.

From a social standpoint, the issues with childcare are far less measurable, however no less important to the fabric of Leeton.

Personal support and community involvement

The emergence of double income families as a norm, has meant that not only childcare accessibility is critical to carry out roles in the workforce, it is critical to allow double income families to manage their personal lives efficiently, therefore becoming better long term workers and employees.

Put simply, it allows families to enjoy periods of rest, making them better parents and better members of the community, because they are not constantly tired.

This also allows for community participation in functions and events, which leads to a better, happier and more resilient community group.

In the University of Melbourne 2011 report Separating Adaptive Maintenance (Resilience) and Transformative Capacity of Social Ecological Systems, Dr Samuel Wilson surveyed residents of Leeton to measure natural capital, built capital, human capital and social capital, and found that Leeton had extremely tight social interactions, when compared to similar locations, regardless of the stress of a decade long drought.

This social and human capital is dependent on support systems, such as the availability of cost effective childcare, and any loss, be it gradual or dramatic, will undermine the town as an entity going forward.

For your information, the town in the above report described as "Smith" is Leeton.

Yours faithfully

Peter Kennedy
Economic Development, Tourism & Events Manager