



IMPACTFUL

The negative impacts of inaccessible early learning on regional, rural and remote communities

SEPTEMBER 2024

TheParentHood

About The Parenthood

We are a community working together to make Australia the best place in the world to be a parent. Because when parents are supported, children can thrive and our whole community is stronger.

We launched in 2013 with the ambition of creating a movement of Australian parents working together to create a better world for our children. With the support of long-term partners and collaborators we've built a community of over 80,000 mums, dads and carers. We come from every state and territory across Australia, we are not-for-profit and independent.

Author

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Maddy leads our campaigns as Campaign Director. Maddy has a background in communications, volunteer management, organising and campaigning. Her work spans from writing on kids' television show The Inbestigators to working with parents- and community-based advocacy groups. With two small kids of her own, Maddy's main passion is fighting for a better future for our children!

Your stories

While this report may be published, this campaign is far from over. The Parenthood will continue to advocate for improved access to regional, rural and remote early childhood education and care. A key component of our campaign is collecting stories from parents, carers, educators and community members with lived experience. If that is you, please send your comments and stories to Maddy Butler at maddy@theparenthood.org.au

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Parenthood acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to both their land and seas. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and recognise that universal access to early childhood education and care must include First Nations-led solutions for First Nations families. This report was predominantly written on the land of the Wurundjeri people, in Naarm/Melbourne.



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Message from Our Sponsor, GrainGrowers

GrainGrowers is a national organisation working to enhance the profitability and sustainability of Australian grain growers. We achieve this through our focus areas of policy and advocacy, grower engagement, thought leadership and active investment in future focused activities.

Our involvement with The Parenthood's campaign stems from a shared commitment to improving the lives of families in regional, rural, and remote grain growing areas of Australia. We joined the Access for Every Child Coalition because we recognise the critical role that early childhood education and care (ECEC) plays in supporting the wellbeing and economic stability of our members and supporters. Backing this report is an important part of GrainGrowers' advocacy for the workforce underpinning farming communities.

The lack of accessible, affordable and quality ECEC services has a profound impact on our members and supporters. GrainGrowers' members Brett and Laura, and industry supporters Alisha and Matt, have all faced the challenges that inadequate childcare imposes on their ability to farm, live, and contribute to their communities. Their stories are featured in this report.

Without reliable ECEC, parents in our sector face tough decisions, often forcing one partner to forgo work or even leave the industry, jeopardising their career aspirations, their ability to undertake paid work thus impacting the long-term sustainability of farming operations and the vitality of our regions.

GrainGrowers advocates for ECEC policies that recognise the diverse needs of regional, rural and remote Australia. We believe government must play a significant role, alongside industry, in developing and implementing solutions to ensure all families have access to ECEC services. Addressing these challenges is key to securing a thriving future for grain growers and their communities across Australia.

Shona Gawel
Chief Executive Officer
GrainGrowers



Executive Summary

IMPACTFUL examines the lack of accessible and affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) in regional, rural and remote Australia, revealing its widespread impacts on children, families and communities. Drawing on the experiences of 162 parents, carers, educators and community leaders, supplemented by an online poll of 855 regional, rural and remote parents, and a comprehensive review of relevant literature, this report provides a detailed analysis of how the lack of ECEC services is negatively impacting the social and economic fabric of these regions.

Key Findings

This report finds that the absence of accessible and affordable ECEC services in the regions has far-reaching consequences for regional, rural and remote communities:

Part 1: The Cost of Living

Australia's cost of living crisis is further exacerbated by the scarcity of ECEC, which prevents or limits parents (predominantly women) from working, placing additional strain on families already grappling with financial challenges. Our poll found that 86% of regional, rural and remote parents struggling to access care face financial stress as a result.

This part of the report examines how the absence of ECEC services is not only a personal burden to families, but also a broader economic issue that hinders the growth and sustainability of communities.

"It has economic costs to communities without childcare. Many areas are experiencing workforce and skills shortages, and also a lack of housing makes outside recruitment difficult. Meanwhile, we have parents of young children wanting to work who are limited by no access to childcare." -
Rob Kerin, RDA SA





Part 2: Liveability of Regional, Rural, and Remote Communities

The inaccessibility of ECEC services has a direct impact on the liveability of communities across regional, rural and remote Australia. Families are increasingly forced to relocate to urban areas in search of better opportunities for their children. This is illustrated by stories like that of Sophie Simmons, who moved from Orange to Sydney due to the lack of care.

The exodus of young families is a symptom of a deeper issue. Service provision of any kind, including ECEC, can be limited and thus is diminishing the viability of these communities.

This part of the report delves into the many flow-on effects, including essential workforce shortages, childhood disadvantage and poorer mental health outcomes.

“Living in such beautiful places comes with compromises, such as accessing regular or any childcare.” - Rachel Jaeschke, Coles Bay TAS

Part 3: One Size Fits None

Australia’s current ECEC system is failing to meet the needs of regional, rural and remote families. The existing market-driven approach, which prioritises areas with higher demand and where families have a higher capacity to pay - typically urban and higher socioeconomic locations - leaves other communities behind.

The ‘one size fits all’ approach to ECEC policy and funding does not account for the unique challenges and diverse needs of different regions. Part 3 of the report calls for tailored, bespoke solutions that can address the distinct circumstances of each community.

“The lack of childcare access gives me insane anxiety and fear of not being able to afford to live. We have a mortgage, on top of other day-to-day bills, groceries and the rising cost of living there is no way we can afford being a one-income household, our bills are over that amount. I need to return to work four days a week at least to keep afloat and it’s terrifying hearing that centres only have limited space so you won’t get in. If we don’t get a 2025 spot we will have to sell our home.” - Jess, Dapto NSW



Photo credit: Katie Phillips

Recommendations for Families and Regional, Rural and Remote Communities

The final part of this report envisions a future where every family, regardless of where they live, has access to high-quality ECEC. Universal, holistic early learning and care is a necessary reform and it requires deliberate, measured actions as part of a long-term vision.

This section expands on a joint statement released by the ‘Access for Every Child’ Coalition, led by The Parenthood, in May 2024. The joint statement, endorsed by over 50 organisations, outlined six steps for achieving universal access in regional, rural and remote Australia. The actions are directed at the Federal Government, to be executed in coordination with State, Territory and Local Governments:

- ✔ Implement strong public management of the ECEC system in collaboration with State and Territory governments
- ✔ Offer a range of supply-side subsidies for ECEC providers in rural and remote areas
- ✔ Invest in quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early years services in rural and remote areas
- ✔ Implement a regional, rural and remote national workforce strategy including culturally-safe training for First Nations educators
- ✔ Improve family day care and in home care provision
- ✔ Provide interim solutions ahead of a broader reform of the ECEC system

These recommendations are further explored from page 68.

By taking these steps, Australian governments can ensure that all families and communities have the opportunity to thrive.

Methodology

The research that underpins this report uses a mixed-methods approach to explore the impacts of ECEC inaccessibility in regional, rural and remote Australia. Central to our analysis is the qualitative evidence collected from 162 parents, carers, educators and community leaders from these areas. These accounts provided rich insights into the lived experiences of those most affected. To complement the personal narratives, we conducted an online poll of 855 parents from the regions. Additionally, we reviewed an extensive body of literature on ECEC and its specific challenges in regional, rural and remote communities, grounding our findings in existing research to provide corroboration for the data that was collected. This approach ensured that our report reflects both the personal experiences and the broader systemic challenges faced by these communities.

What do we mean by ‘Early Childhood Education and Care’?

We have taken a broad approach to ‘Early Childhood Education and Care’, incorporating childcare, long daycare, preschool, kindergarten, family daycare, outside school hours care (including before and after school care, and vacation care), mobile early learning services and governesses.

What do we mean by ‘Regional, Rural and Remote’?

We are insistent on using the terms “regional”, “rural” and “remote” as they are not a monolith. We use the Modified Monash model and generally include areas from MM2 (inner regional) to MM7 (very remote).¹ These areas have differing needs, challenges and opportunities, and all have the right to universal ECEC.



“Accessible, affordable and equitable access to early childhood education and childcare is not only a mother’s or family’s issue – it’s an issue for communities, economies and workforces right across Queensland.

“Getting the fundamentals of childcare right can deliver benefits to not only the child, but unlock civic participation for the immediate and long-term benefit of the child’s family and community.

“Childcare is not an issue but an opportunity – an opportunity for children to have the best possible early education, an opportunity for families to participate in their community and workforce, and an opportunity for local economies to benefit from a thriving industry sector and engaged community.”
- Emma Clarke, Queensland Rural, Regional and Remote Women’s Network Inc.

Introduction

The needs of regional, rural and remote communities are often neglected. Digital access and inclusion rates decline with remoteness, lagging those of the capital cities.² Rural and remote Australians have poorer health outcomes, and lower rates of year 12 completion than in capital cities.³

One stark disparity between urban Australia and the rest of the country is early childhood education and care (ECEC) access. While ECEC is not necessarily easy to come by in our capital cities, it is clear that in regional, rural and remote areas accessibility falls short. Sometimes, it is nonexistent.

The latest report from the Mitchell Institute, *International childcare report: Mapping the deserts* (2024),⁴ confirms that ECEC access has largely not improved in regional, rural and remote Australia. Communities are stranded in ‘childcare deserts’, where there are three or more children for every available position within a 20-minute radius. As this report has found, these early learning limitations engender a range of impacts, the ripples of which are felt across whole regions.

“This has a serious impact on families. Families have to sell their houses after dropping to one wage, families are struggling to make it through week to week. The stress of raising children is so massive as it is, without all these added extras on top.” - Angie Dwyer, Casino NSW

This report serves as a follow-up to our 2023 publication, *Choiceless: The plight of parents in accessing regional, rural, and remote early learning and care*. *Choiceless* highlighted the struggles of families through 166 stories and case studies, shedding light on the significant challenges they faced in accessing ECEC.

IMPACTFUL delves deeper into the negative impacts caused by the lack of ECEC, drawing on new perspectives of parents, carers, educators and community leaders. Unlike its predecessor, this report uses direct quotes and excerpts from these stories to substantiate our arguments, providing fresh insights into the ongoing crisis. We have received 162 new submissions, illustrating that the obstacles posed by early learning inaccessibility will not subside until effective action is taken by governments.

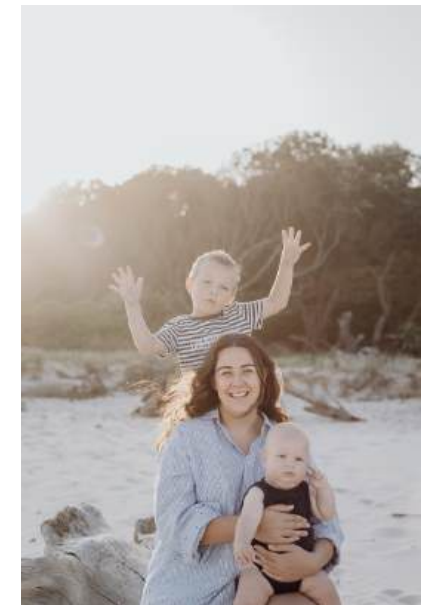


Photo credit: Yasmin
Rose Photography



The impacts

Families are already feeling the crunch of the cost of living. This is exacerbated by early learning inaccessibility and the resulting struggle to engage in paid employment. Finding work that is appropriate for the current economic climate can already be a challenge in the regions, and this is worsened by the limitations of available ECEC.

“Work options in the direct area are limited, up until a month ago my partner was a FIFO worker, two weeks on and two weeks off, it’s hard for him to find local work to match the current cost of living.” - Bec Famularo, Beachport/Mount Gambier SA

Regardless of their personal aspirations, the vast majority of parents and carers are required to engage in paid employment in order to survive. Yet it is a struggle to do so without some form of care for their children. As Georgia Rees from Kangaroo Island SA shared, “I am unable to go back to work, because there aren’t any spots available to increase our son’s childcare days for at least nine months... This is starting to have a financial impact on us, we have managed to get by up until now, however, the cost of living is ridiculous and only seems to be increasing.”

As this report will demonstrate, the ramifications of ECEC inaccessibility extend far beyond the immediate challenges of finding care - they touch on financial stability, workforce participation, child development,⁵ and community liveability.

Heather Sherwell, from Hopetoun VIC, found herself faced with a dilemma when the town’s only centre closed: “My fiancé and I are now in a scary position as a family where I either have to give up a career I have built over the past 15+ years or we are going to have to leave our community, mortgage and lifestyle behind to start again.”

This sentiment is echoed throughout many of the stories we collected, where families are faced with excruciating decisions in order to balance caring, work and life responsibilities.

The Parenthood makes no assumption that this report contains an exhaustive list of the impacts felt by regional, rural and remote communities. Included are the top themes which emerged from the stories we received, but it is worth noting that there are likely additional impacts caused by inaccessible ECEC in the regions.

Children miss out on vital educational, social, emotional and health benefits; parents struggle to strike a work-life balance; essential industries are understaffed; and local economies feel the strain of limited workforce participation and inequitable service delivery.

IMPACTFUL highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions and equitable solutions that address the unique needs of these communities, ensuring that every child, regardless of where they live, has access to high-quality ECEC.

“My son started prep last year and after school care and vacation care were scarce. My husband exhausted all of his leave to care for our son. I took leave where possible... We have no before or after school care or vacation care that we can access after next week. We have limited leave that we can use at work. Either one of us will have to quit our jobs or we will have to move back to the city.” - Sarah Boxall, Kingaroy QLD

Our Recommendations

In order to achieve universal early education, which would include some form of provision for every child regardless of their location or circumstances, bold and strong reform is required. This report outlines some steps towards universal ECEC from page 72.

PART 1

The cost of living

The financial blow of ECEC inaccessibility

“It's so hard, with this cost of living crisis. I am working at night as a tutor on Zoom. I do this four times a week to make up for the loss of income. It's not enough, but our heads are above water.” - **Kristy Arntz, Mount Saint Thomas NSW**

“If you live in a mining town in regional WA you cannot afford not to work - the cost of living is very high.” - **Kitty Prodonovich, RCCIWA**

The cost of living is rising. In the June 2024 quarter, living expenses increased for everyone, rising almost twice as fast as inflation. Many families are feeling the heat as their higher mortgage repayments and insurance costs offset any benefits from wage increases, tax cuts and government assistance.⁶

The cost of living crisis in Australia often requires all parents in two-parent and single parent households to earn a wage. Without paid employment, families struggle to make ends meet: the groceries, bills, rent, mortgage and other expenses that form part of daily living weigh heavily on families.

Furthermore, these expenses are more costly in regional, rural and especially remote Australia. Data from the Northern Territory Government in June 2024 revealed that living costs have risen more in remote towns than in metropolitan areas, due to transportation, limited storage and supermarket monopolies.⁷ A basket of food in remote locations in the NT costs 40% more than 'average district supermarkets'.⁸ This places further pressure on families to earn more to manage these inflated costs.

Without early learning and care options, parents and carers who want - and need - to work face a dilemma. They must either forego paid employment and career opportunities to stay home with their children, or devise makeshift solutions which often come with their own setbacks, as explored in this report.

The result is that a significant proportion of regional, rural and remote families are wrestling with financial hardship. This year, The Parenthood conducted a poll of 855 regional, rural and remote parents. 86% of parents struggling to access care responded that this lack of access causes financial stress.

This data is backed by the anecdotal evidence we have received. Numerous comments sent to The Parenthood from regional, rural and remote families and community leaders speak of the devastating impact lack of care, and therefore lack of paid work, has on families, businesses and local economies.

“It is almost impossible to go back to work unless you have family support to look after your children. In this day and age there is no option not to work, as living off one income with a mortgage is next to impossible. The government needs to either do something about the childcare [situation] or make payments available for one parent to stay at home with kids.” - **Clancy Matthews, Bombala NSW**

“I don't know how families are meant to be without childcare for their children given these days you need a double income to survive.” - **Anon, Limerick NSW**

“[T]he recent closure of my family care provider just this month (reducing my ability to work to three days per week)... has significantly impacted my work capacity and career progression while increasing financial strain amid the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.” - **Angela Cochrane, Goondiwindi QLD**

“If we are unable to secure a childcare spot I will need to stop working altogether which is not financially possible for our family. Extremely frustrating.” - **Anonymous, Eden NSW**

“The lack of childcare access has meant that I needed to leave my corporate role and rely on online side hustles. Dropping from a reliable income of \$81,000 a year for four days' work in an office role to a very irregular payment from the side hustles that can't pay for living expenses.” - **K. Williams, Dubbo NSW**

“My partner and I are both required to work for the ability to buy our own house. The cost of living has kept going up which has both of us requiring to work just to live the "Australian dream". Yes, the house is a "choice", but the rental market has just gone up.” - **Emma, Bomaderry NSW**

“With the increase in our mortgage due to rate rises, it's a really tricky battle financially. It's certainly week to week and to have to um and ah about putting the heater on at night to keep him warm and wondering how the electricity bill is going is pretty scary.” - **Rhianna, Warrnambool VIC**

Families are failing to thrive because they cannot access care and paid work. It is causing immense pressure in a variety of ways, leading many to either relocate from the regional, rural and remote homes they love or to not move there in the first place, as explored in Part 2 of this report.

“It's the financial strain, from maternity leave when I had no payment - nothing from the government and no childcare available. We're still playing catch up, everything is getting more expensive, and childcare just raised their fees again last week.

“Half my paycheck goes to childcare... Rent is increasing at ridiculous rates so half your income goes to living out here. You can see why people won't come rurally.” - **Maddi, Goondiwindi QLD**

“I cannot take on full-time work nor can I work in the city due to limited daycare hours, costing our family around \$120k in annual income and having to rely solely on my husband.” - **Kiki, Macedon Ranges VIC**

“I'm not a citizen, I was born in the UK and because of that I don't get maternity leave. So it was stressful financially. I couldn't go back to work for a year after he was born, which heavily impacted our family.

“We had to look at our finances carefully and what we were buying each week. I had to really rely on my family back in the UK for financial support.” - **Jennifer Pollock, Goondiwindi QLD**



Juliane Vlach, Katherine NT

While living on a station there is no access to childcare services as such because you're too far away. We worked on different stations after having the kids and it's very hard to find a station or company which is willing to pay for a governess who will educate the kids so both parents can work and earn money, or at least pay one partner enough so that the family can then afford a governess. Then it's \$50,000, maybe more these days, that the family is losing either because one parent isn't working or they're paying that to teach the kids.

It was very daunting to me raising kids on a station especially as I had to step into the role of a mum and an early educator to make sure the kids met their milestones and weren't too far behind compared to urban kids. It was mentally very straining for me and then that transferred to my partner. It was not easy; as a parent you always worry you're not doing enough or the right things.

My son, now five, didn't go to any childcare. He was born in the Top End, where we had access to Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS) which was great. You have playgroups on the stations every so often with the kids all together with qualified educators who know what to look for and can see if the kids are behind or not.

The Central Australian Region has been without early childhood programs that extend past the township or are lying outside the community footprint for over two decades, and families on stations do not have any access to these kinds of services which is very hard and needs to change. During our five years there, RAISEducation popped up. Kylie has such a great program which is much needed in this region but due to funding shortages she now has to charge families a fee to keep the program going. We did her early childhood program which also included consultations with a speech therapist, with my littlest one, Bella, and the ideas she had - a new packet every week with books and tasks to do - were really good. It included literacy, numeracy and things that are really easy to follow through but I wouldn't have thought about otherwise. Like making cupcakes, then counting the cupcakes - simple and easy to do but out on a station I don't think many people would think of such educational methods.

We now live in town and even here the places are very limited due to educator shortages. My son was even on a waitlist to go to school, which was very surprising.

Due to the shortage of childcare availability in town, I have limited work opportunities as I still have to look after my littlest one for most of the week. There are not many jobs out there that are part time and compatible with school and daycare hours. And so we're still missing one income and we now have more outgoing costs than when on the station. In town, you rent or pay off your mortgage, fuel and groceries, whereas board and keep were provided on the station for us.

Bella is in two days of daycare at the moment, Monday and Friday. It would be ideal if she had more consecutive days at daycare so she could have a routine as it would make the transition from home care to daycare easier on her, especially as she hasn't had this kind of exposure before. At a young age it's easy to get very emotional if they don't have that continuous routine.

The cost of childcare is also a financial pressure. We pay \$130 a day, even when the kids are sick or it's a public holiday which is very hard. Also, the Child Care Subsidy is not covering the daycare cost as, for the government, I am still available to care for my child as I'm unemployed but to be employed we need more days at daycare. This cycle seems overwhelming at times.

I can understand why so many Australians decide not to have kids because it's a lot - mentally, physically and financially. It's years and years of ongoing cost - no matter if primary (school/daycare fees, uniforms, excursions, after school activities) or secondary (rent/mortgage, cost of living, fuel etc) to our children's education.



Women out of the workforce

“Without childcare I lacked the opportunity to work, contribute to the community, develop my career and earn money. This perpetuates the gender stereotype of a mum being the primary carer.” - Ceridwen Synnot, Tom Price WA

The lack of care in regional, rural and remote Australia forces parents and carers to make financial and career sacrifices. Overwhelmingly, this burden falls on mothers.

“I was on the waitlists since I was 12 weeks pregnant and it took two years to secure a daycare place. Due to lack of childcare I ended up having to resign from my full-time job as I had no idea when I would return and felt I couldn't leave them in limbo. (If I had stayed I still wouldn't be back at work.)” - Emily Thomas, Deniliquin NSW

Women in Australia already face an economic disadvantage, with mothers experiencing even greater disparities due to the gender pay gap and parenting policies which entrench gender inequity. These factors limit women's earning potential and superannuation accrual. Countries which promote gender equity through policies such as expanded paid parental leave and accessible, affordable ECEC reinforce the financial security of their working mothers.

In *Back of the Pack*, a 2021 report from Equity Economics and The Parenthood, the capacity of women to develop economic security and to participate and progress at work was evaluated against other countries with progressive, family-friendly policies, such as Sweden. The report found that “...if an average Australian woman had the same workplace participation patterns after having children as an average Swedish woman, she would earn an additional \$696,000 over her working life; and retire with an additional \$180,000 in superannuation.”⁹

Early learning inaccessibility is crippling women's career prospects and earnings in the regions. Mothers are relinquishing career opportunities and progression, are working less or not at all, and are accruing less superannuation because they cannot access care for their child(ren) when they need it.

“For myself, the impacts of the current daycare shortages include my ability to increase my hours at work. I can only work two days a week currently (with my mum helping out one day). I have a mortgage and this has added financial pressure to my life.” - Kathryn Henderson, Yackandandah VIC

“After COVID, my employer offered me a full-time role, but I could only accept a part-time position due to the ongoing lack of childcare. Now, I work four days a week with Wednesdays off.” - Judith, Bordertown SA

“I needed to resign from my job after my maternity leave finished as we couldn't find any childcare and have no family nearby.” - Rachel Ring, Tuckurimba NSW

“Personally, I've had to cut back hours, from three days a week instead of four. I work at a neighbourhood house as a manager.” - Erin Paech, Hopetoun VIC

“I have been trying to get back to work since the birth of my son. In an ideal world, I would have gone back to work one day a week when he was six months old. He is now 11 months old and I still haven't got a spot for him.” - Leah Ann, Swan Hill VIC

I haven't been able to return to work full-time because of the lack of childcare. Now, I only work part-time, two days a week, but even that is tough to manage.” - Ellen, Furner SA

“[O]ne day a week [in care] means six days at home with mum, so I have been unable to secure work (nobody will hire someone with only two days' availability as my husband works full time). We have now been offered one more day [of care] in the new year and unfortunately this has not improved employability prospects.” - Bre Stubbs, Yarraman QLD



“By not having childcare we financially struggle with not having the second income, and I really emotionally struggle not being able to go to work or ever get a break. I really love my job but to be able to do it I have to take the two kids with me and it just is too hard so I end up staying home instead. There is a big need for childcare in our region! I am surrounded by rural mums just like me who feel stuck and don't have many options!” - Eve Devon, Rolleston QLD

“I can't go back to off-farm work because I can't find a company where I can work remotely or less than two days a week because I can't get childcare. I can't travel for work because I'm the primary carer for my kids.” - K. Williams, Dubbo NSW

“I was a single mum. I had to access super to keep a roof over my children's head and put myself through uni, then go into teaching. My husband has double the amount of super I have now. I've only got 20 years' worth of super.” - Anonymous, Wodonga VIC

In some cases, women bring their children to work with them. This often occurs when there are last-minute changes to their care arrangements, for example, the early learning centre must close a room due to understaffing, a family member cannot mind their child, or their child is sick from the dreaded “daycare germs”. It is a struggle for these women to feel like a “good mother” and a “good worker” as they feel they cannot fully commit themselves to either role.

“It's stressful taking him to work as you're trying to give your employer the best and when your baby is sick and grizzly, you have to spend time with them. I am fortunate to work for an employer who is also a mum and allows flexible hours, but I still have the mother guilt.” - Chelsea Betheras, Beachport SA

During school holidays there is a tennis club that does one day a week from 9am-3pm but otherwise there are no school holiday programs, so there's no care for school-aged and preschool-aged children. I had a work meeting last school holidays and my seven-year-old popped her head in at 4:50pm asking when the meeting would finish and it was reported back to my boss. It was devastating. I've worked so hard to maintain my remote working arrangement with my flexible employer by consistently demonstrating high performance and so this felt like a real attack on working mothers trying to juggle."

- **Kate Brow, Bombala NSW**

"My four-year-old attended daycare two days a week at the time, but our early learning centre was full the extra days that I needed him in care. I ended up working from home those days or I brought him to the office with me. Or I would have meetings at my house which was fine but it also meant keeping it clean, tidy and presentable (= extra work in the mornings) when all I needed to do was just to get on with things.

"While my team and stakeholders in online meetings were quite understanding I felt extremely uncomfortable and inefficient in fulfilling my role – as CEO and as a mum. My son spent whole days in front of the TV (which is something I abhor and feel very guilty about) and I ended up working a lot more extra hours because I couldn't give work or my son the attention they needed."

- **Sylvia, Nintirri Centre CEO, Tom Price WA**

Reduced care forces many women to sidestep leadership roles and career advancement. This is prevalent in the agricultural sector, where the gender disparity in leadership roles is striking. Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) data highlights that only 1.9% of chief executive positions and 18.1% of executive and general manager roles in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing are held by women.¹⁰ Access to care would unlock women's career potential and see more mothers rise to leadership roles, having long-term effects of increased earnings and superannuation.

"It sucks saying no to [important roles] because of limited childcare, while I watch my husband say yes. His career has taken off in the last five years since I've had kids because he has access to childcare - which is me. I'm the default for childcare and that really impacts my career." - **Tegan Podubinski, Wangaratta VIC**

"I am resentful that I have to stay home and raise the children while my partner's career progresses. Mine has just stagnated in this spot that I'm going to have to spend another few years building up again. It was at a really great spot, then COVID happened, then kids happened. You think, I'm just going to be out of work a few years whilst they're babies but then it's five years later."

- **Isabel Young, Wangaratta VIC**

"Inequality for women is as prevalent today as it was 50 years ago, and if you look at data and trends around this it is clear that there is a lot of work to be done. Providing childcare so women can feel confident, capable and create self-determination for themselves is key."

- **Skye Prior, Narrawallee NSW**

"When I can't work it affects my career, my leadership potential, my super, my own wellbeing and our family income." - **Courtney Jones, Hopetoun VIC**



Kristen Hegarty, Cassilis NSW

Lack of childcare means I am unable to return to work. I was working as a Key Account Manager for a multinational pharmaceutical company, but have since been unable to return to work as I only have one day where all my children are in care at once, the other days I usually have at least one with me. The limited days I do get, I have to travel an hour to drop off the children as there is nothing in our own town even though we have a primary school.

Being unable to return to work has reduced our household income. While I love being with my children and shaping the people they grow into, being unable to seek even part-time regular employment is frustrating. I am lucky we live on a farm, that I have an agricultural background and have put my time and energy into our family business.

The extra 200 kms per day to get them to care and preschool that day means I focus on our farm business. I can stay on the farm and work there and be as helpful as I can with children afoot but returning to my prior career is not feasible with the lack of childcare. With the new rule that preschool children aren't allowed on the bus to or from the facility, the responsibility to get them to and from preschool (50 kms) most often falls to me. I do have a husband and family (in-laws) nearby but as is always the case it falls to the mother most often to get them to and from.



Local economies are in decline

Regional, rural and remote employers are struggling to find staff because potential employees cannot access care for their children. This is having an impact on a range of businesses, from mechanics to gift shops to banks, which due to understaffing are forced to limit opening hours or, sometimes with little notice, close.



"This has a domino effect on other businesses. When an educator is sick and the centre has to close, other businesses in town have to close. One parent works in the bank so if she doesn't work the bank closes for the day. It's the only bank in town and has to close because childcare is closed. A few parents are receptionists at the doctor's surgery or nurses, so then they have to find someone to cover their shifts."

- Dannielle Stevenson, Quilpie QLD

"Lots of people around here can't return to work because they can't get daycare and they have no other help. If governments want people to move to the regions they need to know that lack of daycare is an everyday issue."

- Stephanie Hoare, Speewa NSW

"My employee works in Eden and she could not secure any childcare for her baby. The only childcare she could secure was in Bega - 45 minutes away by car and 1.5 hours away by public transport. My employee was also without a vehicle for some time ... the travel to Bega was nearly impossible. Public transport times did not suit her job or long daycare requirements. Most days, including travel, were over 12 hours."

- Anonymous, Eden NSW

"Businesses [are] unable to grow their business as they cannot find the employees they need, when you have a latent workforce, locally based, ready to go that cannot work as there is no childcare."

- Kitty Prodonovich, RCCIWA

"Not being able to return to work due to the lack of care is not only putting pressure on our family financially but may also start impacting the community when I cannot return to my employment at Westpac. Our branch provides a valuable service to the community and it staying open to assist the customers of Goondiwindi and surrounds is vital. Staffing is a constant issue in rural banking and by me not being able to return on time, there will be a lot of added pressures to our Westpac Branch with another staff member being due to start maternity leave in the coming months as well."

- Meghan, Goondiwindi QLD

The Eden Recovery and Resilience Alliance recently ran a survey in Eden NSW. Eight out of the nine respondents said the lack of childcare services altered their ability to work the hours that they wanted. The Warrumbungle Shire Childcare Needs Survey similarly found that 85.4% of respondents had been unable to work or study due to a lack of childcare.¹¹ This reduced working capacity of parents in the regions has flow-on effects for local economies.

"The absence of adequate childcare options not only places a significant burden on working parents but also hinders our local economy by limiting workforce participation. It is crucial that we address this issue to ensure the wellbeing of our families and the sustained growth and prosperity of our community." - **Errin Williamson, Dubbo Business Chamber of Commerce**

"The lack of childcare in our town prevents many skilled workers from returning to the workforce. With Mudgee 45 minutes away, travel costs and rising cost of living make commuting unfeasible, further straining families and limiting our region's economic growth." -

Bethany Palmer, Rylstone NSW

"Presently, one of the largest employers in Corowa NSW, just across the border, cannot get workers and are presently bringing in workers from overseas and accommodating them in local motels. More long daycare facilities are needed and needed NOW in many, many towns across the region. Enable those people who wish to return to the workforce. Build it and they will come." - **Melanie, Wodonga VIC**

"I employ staff in my role and I used to be able to boast about our childcare but now that there are no vacancies, there is no drawcard to move here with a young family. It's embarrassing!" - **Tash Harris, Coles Bay TAS**

Additionally, as parents and carers have a reduced earning capacity, they are less likely to make local purchases, having an effect on the small businesses in their area. Emily Thomas from Deniliquin NSW shared that, "Many mums work and they are unable to return due to no daycare so then businesses across Deniliquin are affected by not having employees return. They are also affected as families then have less money coming in so may not be spending as much money locally."

"I find myself doing most of our shopping in Beaufort, and using their services such as the library and doctors. It's a shame because I would prefer to support businesses closer to home, but the lack of childcare options in Skipton means I spend more time and money in Beaufort. This situation isn't unique to me; it's a reality for many families in our community. The local economy suffers when parents are forced to spend their time and money in other towns due to inadequate childcare availability." - **Laura Bruce, Skipton VIC**

The capacity of regional, rural and remote economies is essential for the country's economy. "Regional Australia ... plays a critical role in the Australian economy, leading in productivity across the nation in five industries."¹² An extended decline in regional, rural and remote economies could prove grim for the nation.

"With an ongoing housing crisis and skills shortages, felt most acutely in regional areas around Australia, tapping into the skills of those who are already residents and wanting to work is critical. The childcare deserts in which we find ourselves, however, mean that limited childcare availability is hindering re-entry into the workforce as a parent or is holding parents back from expanding their working hours and prohibiting them from providing a more stable financial situation for their families. Businesses in Albany and the Lower Great Southern are in need of skilled workers and it seems ridiculous that we have them right here in our community but for the care options available to them for their children." - **Kristen Pyrz-Brown, Albany CCI**

Johnathan Neilsen, Commerce North West

Whilst I don't have children myself, as a business manager and active community member it's very clear there are issues with childcare in regional communities. The biggest issue I see through social media channels and speaking with parents in our area is not so much a lack of places, but a lack of resources, such as educators, staff and supplies that keep the centres operational.

Speaking to parents who work, some even have had to resort to obtaining permission from their employer to bring their child to work with them, as they had no other option. Some also expressed mental health concerns about being forced to be stay at home parents; living on a single income, even a mining income, is very hard with the increased costs of living. For example, there are families that alternate their working patterns with their partners who work on the mine shifts, seven days on, seven days off, so that there is always a parent at home to look after the child.

Some parents have been told there is a two and a half year waitlist for daycare. I was told of a family who moved here for work in the mines, was unable to secure childcare, so they moved back and resorted to taking on a FIFO role for their job.

Another issue facing parents is the costs of early childhood care, with the average cost of daycare being \$118.05 per day in Mount Isa.¹³ Meaning any secondary job income earned is just to pay for the daycare.

Attracting key positions to remote communities such as early childhood educators, and even home day carers, is not only vital to the liveability of a region but vital to the mental health and wellbeing of families and parents. Children shouldn't have to have a week on, week off arrangement with their parents who have to work and are unable to find care, and parents/couples shouldn't be forced to not spend time together as a family simply because they have to work alternate rosters to care for their children.

All the above factors influence the liveability of the town; if families cannot sustain themselves locally, they will leave, which has bigger socioeconomic impacts on the region. It would be great to see the government implement incentive programs such as incentives for early childhood educators to live and work remotely/regionally or provide cost subsidies of operating childcare centres in regional locations to assist with capacity and staffing issues.



PART 2

Liveability of regional, rural and remote communities

“We had to move out of Orange to Sydney and leave our jobs as we couldn't find any care.”
Sophie Simmons, Orange Sydney NSW.

The multiple flow-on effects of ECEC inaccessibility, explored in Part 1 and Part 2 of this report, influence the liveability of communities. Liveability relates to how “liveable” a place is, and the lack of ECEC access is driving young families away from the regions.

“Family members had to return to QLD because of the lack of childcare locally.” - **Anonymous, Eden NSW**

“Lack of space for children then stops families from wanting to or being able to move into the community and/or stops positions being filled by locals and/or away families.” - **Pip Clifford, Quilpie QLD**

“[A] family member wanted to move to the area - on researching the availability of childcare they have started to look elsewhere. They will not move to the area because of the lack of services available.” - **Anonymous, Eden NSW**

Results from the aforementioned survey in Eden NSW found that

seven out of nine respondents know someone who hasn't moved to the area due to lack of childcare services. This is endemic across Australia's regions.

“We are already at a disadvantage with the shortage of housing, the rental crisis, homelessness and the dire situation with the lack of doctors in the area. We are now faced with an area that is ever-growing and can't support the people that are living here.” - **Danielle Shacklock, 4615**

Part 2 of this report will explore the negative impacts lack of ECEC has on the liveability of regional, rural and remote Australia. While there are other contributing factors to the liveability of a region, it is clear that ECEC inaccessibility plays a significant role. The Regional Australia Institute has identified increased access to childcare as one of the ways to deliver on the potential of regional Australia.¹⁴

“In my opinion, longer-term planning needs to occur so that as these towns continue to grow consideration is given to the needs of families and young children in accessing quality daycare.” - **Kathryn Henderson, Yackandandah VIC**

“Families want to move to regional WA and often secure great employment, however, as there is no childcare the potential employee/s cannot accept the job offer. So, it prevents population growth. Families leave regional locations and move to metro areas where there is childcare available. Many families living in regional WA (particularly mining-based towns) don't actually have any family of their own there. So, they have no family support to provide the childcare support that relatives often do where there is none available. Often, they end up leaving those regional locations as they are unable to work.” - **Kitty Prodonovich, RCCIWA**

Essential workforce shortages are consuming the regions

Regional, rural and remote Australia is feeling the crunch from a decline in essential workforce sectors: hospitals and schools are understaffed, wait times to see medical professionals are growing, and services are being forced to close down. ECEC inaccessibility is aggravating the situation.

“We see and deal with the fallout if essential services are not provided because nurses, teachers, youth workers, health practitioners, social workers, etc are unable to find childcare to work. The knock-on impact of this in communities is underestimated.” - **Sylvia, Tom Price WA**

“Recruiting teachers can be difficult enough in remote locations and then with no childcare this is an added deterrent for families - especially single parents.” - **Telka, Mataranka NT**

“I couldn't go back to work as a secondary English teacher on the days my school wanted because we couldn't find care. My position was filled by ten different casual staff members over two years because I couldn't come back to work.” - **Kristy Arntz, Mount Saint Thomas NSW**

“Due to a lack of before and after school care for my children, from 2025 I will have to reduce my workload by half in order to do the school run. I am a teacher and this will in turn contribute to the teacher shortage as well as our family finances.” - **Sarah, 7307**

“I am a registered nurse and I am unable to go back to work until I have some form of childcare... I know recruiting nurses has been a major challenge in my area and I imagine not having access to affordable childcare would play a part in this.” - **Freya Clement, Woodlands NSW**



“This return to work delay meant our income was decreased for eight months, and my professional career has taken longer to re-establish (I am a physiotherapist). While I was on leave, my clients had to seek physio treatment elsewhere in Kadina, Moonta, Pt Pirie or Pt Broughton (instead of Bute). Some neurological and vestibular clients had no other option but to go to Adelaide for NeuroPhysiotherapy services (which is what I specialise in).” - **Veronica Trengove, Bute SA**

“My research work is on the rural health and mental health workforce, and access. If you are not providing people with the bare minimum to work in these areas then they can't come here. We have people who want to work in the hospital at Wangaratta but can't without housing or childcare access. If the government is serious about rural health access they need to get serious about delivering the infrastructure people need to get to work.”

“In addition to research work I'm a clinical psychologist. We have a dearth of psychologists in this area. It's a 12-month waitlist to see a psychologist, so I have a skillset that could be used. I've had to say no to a lot of jobs that have come up as I only have childcare Monday-Wednesday.” - **Tegan Podubinski, Wangaratta VIC**

"I have seen this impact our local hospital, which is so significantly short staffed. I left my hospital role to find a more family-friendly balance as a TAFE teacher. The hospital enquired about getting a daycare service established on site prior to me having my first child. Evidently, this has gone nowhere and they are struggling for staff as a large portion have small children. I truly believe if they had care facilities, their staffing issues would resolve." - **Anon, Rural NSW**

This impact on the workforce has been recognised by the Australian Government in key reports from 2023 and 2024, which acknowledged that, "...many regions are finding it difficult to meet their local workforce demands."¹⁵ The Annual Jobs and Skills Report 2023 found that, recently, "...skills shortages have been particularly acute in regional areas, especially for the highly skilled."¹⁶

The need for employees spans many sectors, however, what is most concerning is the employment gaps in essential industries. A number of parents who shared their experiences for this report and for *Choiceless*¹⁷ (2023) have had difficulties returning to work as a nurse, a doctor, a teacher, a paramedic or an allied health professional because they could not find an early learning spot for their children. The State of Australia's Regions 2024 report found that, while there are many industries seeking employees, the highest proportion of job ads are for medical practitioners and nurses.¹⁸

"With a female-dominated workforce in nursing and midwifery, it potentially does reduce the availability of the workforce. Those returning to work post-parental leave are not working to their ceiling in terms of hours so it adds to the workforce shortage. That flows on to the community for their availability of nursing services, and the safety and quality of care when accessing services because of those workforce gaps." - **Emily Shepherd, ANMF Tasmanian Branch Secretary, Launceston TAS**

"As a primary school principal living in Bordertown, South Australia, I'm facing a challenging situation as I prepare to return to work next year after my maternity leave. I have two young children - a three-year-old son who attends early childhood education and care part-time and a five-month-old daughter. I'm struggling to secure a childcare place for my daughter at the beginning of 2025. Despite being on the waitlist since before she was born, there are still 40 children ahead of us, and the earliest available spot might not open until mid or late next year - well after I'm required to return to work." - **Corrine, Bordertown SA**

"People are moving to the area. St Marys is an hour from me and has the closest high school. They had a mass exodus of teachers, and apparently many amazing teachers have come but can't get childcare for their kids so can't take up the positions." - **Rachel Jaeschke, Coles Bay TAS**

"Our midwife is unable to get childcare for her two-year-old and is relying on friends and family to assist only working two-three days a week and 'has to work' plus she is one of five midwives serving an area of 10,000 people give or take. Her role is so important to rural people." - **Elsie Stoel, Naracoorte SA**

This has an amplified effect in the regions. Akin to a 'catch 22', when community members, such as early childhood educators, can't access services, particularly medical, educational and allied health, they may move away, which can then result in fewer educators whose presence could improve early learning access. For a region to thrive, all services should be appropriately staffed. Additionally, increased employment growth has been forecast for regional areas between 2023 and 2030 (Jobs and Skills Australia 2023), making it even more important to address the skills shortages.

"If we are going to attract enough professionals to work in regional areas, childcare support for working parents will be a key factor."¹⁹

"If regional towns want to attract more emergency workers, they should try to make essential services like daycare available." - **Amy Cook, Wangaratta VIC**



"Prior to having my baby, my husband and I both worked full time. I am a physiotherapist and work for NSW Health. Unfortunately, there is no long daycare in Canowindra. My baby has been on waitlists for long daycare 30 minutes away from our home since I was 14 weeks pregnant. I am still on their waitlists." - **Danni, Canowindra NSW**

"Childcare accessibility poses challenges for the workforce. Health professionals often leave full-time or 0.8 roles to have children and come back with reduced hours. Sometimes it's their own choice but it's often due to the lack of childcare options." - **Christie-Anne Hunter, Charleville QLD**

Flexible ECEC would support the expansion of the regional, rural and remote essential workforces. Essential workers often encounter a high degree of shift work, which is not compatible with standard ECEC offerings. The Australian Medical Association recognises that the "inaccessibility of childcare" is a barrier for many medical parents, who already feel the burden of "shift work, on call hours, weekend work".²⁰

Operating hours at a long daycare centre are often best suited to standard working hours (9am-5pm), and the preschool day is generally even shorter. This poses further challenges for the healthcare sector and other professions (not only essential workers) whose shifts fall outside of these times. Flexible long daycare, outside of school hours care (OSHC) and family daycare services, when offered at non-standard hours, can support these sectors. In the absence of flexible care hours, shift working parents and carers must often rely on partners, extended family, nannies and babysitters;²¹ the latter two being costly options, to care for their children while at work.

"The 'Monday-Friday business hours' childcare offering just doesn't work for the health workforce as it is a 24-hour service." - **Christie-Anne Hunter, Charleville QLD**



“Research consistently shows that high-quality early childhood education and care is particularly beneficial for vulnerable children, helping to close the developmental gap and set them up for success in school and life... This can have a lasting impact on their ability to catch up, affecting not just their academic progress but also their social and emotional development.

“The early years are a critical time for brain development, with up to 90% of brain growth occurring before a child even starts school. The lack of access to early childhood services, especially in regional areas, deprives these children of the crucial early learning experiences that could help shape their future.” - Kerra-Lee Wescombe, Connect.Ed, SA

Children facing disadvantage

“For children experiencing the worst disadvantage, ECEC attendance can be life-changing.”²²

ECEC provides a suite of benefits for our littlest Australians: educational, social, health and wellbeing benefits. These are especially important for children whose circumstances are less advantageous. “ECEC is one important way of providing positive early learning experiences, particularly for those living in circumstances of social vulnerability and disadvantage.”²³

Given their often precarious situation, it is difficult to source anecdotal evidence from families facing vulnerability, disadvantage or under-resourcing. Research from reports and the observations of leaders in this field assert that many regional, rural and remote families may be experiencing disadvantage, and ECEC provides a safe, nurturing and educational environment for their children.

Children whose home environments are unpredictable, stressful and unsafe can benefit from a stable, routine environment in an early learning setting. ECEC can promote a sense of security in these children,²⁴ making ECEC access imperative. “Vulnerability and disparities start early, and when vulnerable children are particularly excluded from quality early care and education services, the impact is long lasting for their learning and in life. Children younger than three are particularly vulnerable to early disadvantage.”²⁵

“Rural children are not given the same start in life as other children... High-quality ECEC is evidenced to deliver substantial and sustained benefits for children, thus equitable service access in the years prior to school is critical in addressing rural disadvantage.”²⁶

Regional, rural and remote children have a higher likelihood of being behind on Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) outcomes. “Children living in major cities are less likely to be developmentally vulnerable on the AEDC domains than those who live outside the major cities.”²⁷ A child’s trajectory in their early years across the AEDC domains: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge, indicates future outcomes in “health, wellbeing and academic success.”²⁸

Improved access to early childhood education services could improve outcomes for regional, rural and remote children across the five AEDC domains. “Participating in high-quality early childhood services offers children significant developmental and social benefits, with children experiencing vulnerability experiencing the most benefits.”²⁹ Children who access quality ECEC are more likely to have happier childhoods, be healthier, attain higher levels of education, and have higher lifetime earnings.³⁰

“The huge concern is what is happening to the children. Are they being left at home without supervision due to the lack of care available!!!” - Danielle Shacklock, 4615

“There can be concerns for children’s safety and welfare – the 6/6 and 8/6 mining roster and region see a drinking culture on days off after working long, hard days on the mine, etc which can result in escalating behaviours/family disruptions. Stay at home parents/ single parents struggling with the demands of parenting present with mental health issues and concerns for their children if they don’t get a break.” - Sylvia, Nintirri Centre, Tom Price WA



Reduced readiness for school

A young child's access to early learning and care prepares them for their transition to school. "[E]ducational sciences have revealed that participation in early childhood care and education programmes boosts children's school readiness and reduces the gap between socially advantaged and disadvantaged children at the starting gate of school."³¹

"I am deeply saddened that my daughter has been denied the opportunity to benefit from the foundational educational experiences that a kindergarten program offers, and I now worry that she may face similar struggles in school next year as my son (who is now in year two) continues to face having been denied access to the same program." - **Angela Cochrane, Goondiwindi QLD**

In rural and remote communities, where population size can often be small, it is especially beneficial when the early learning service is co-located on, or associated with, the school site. This allows parents with young and school-aged children to do one drop off, and facilitates the transition to school.

"[W]ith the transition from daycare to kinder to school it makes for an easy, pain-free process to all be in one location. Especially in a smaller town, it helps the kids to get familiar and comfortable with the surroundings, see the same faces every day, and the bigger kids look after the little ones. It's much less traumatic on children." - **Chelsea Betheras, Beachport SA**

Beyond preparing children for school, the benefits of ECEC also equip children with the tools for life. "When children are healthy, safe and learning well in their early years, they are better able to reach their full developmental potential as adults and participate effectively in economic, social, and civic life."³²

Children are the next generation. They are the next teachers, nurses, doctors, farmers, therapists; they are the next parents; they are our next politicians and future taxpayers. Their success is the nation's success. The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) estimates that the yearly return on investment for workers who accessed high-quality ECEC as children will be \$15 billion.³³ Efforts to empower future generations must begin during the early years, with high-quality, accessible ECEC.

"Access to high-quality, culturally-safe early childhood education and care services plays a pivotal role in the early years. These services provide children with a strong foundation for lifelong learning, social skills and emotional regulation."

Early childhood environments support children in feeling safe, valued and understood, which is key for their overall development and can significantly change a child's developmental trajectory." - **Kerra-Lee Wescombe, Connect.Ed, SA**



Children with disability and additional needs

"Access to available spaces in childcare for children under two is extremely difficult at this time, we have been waitlisted since the week our child was born. Add in a child with a disability diagnosis and spots become even more rare." - **Anonymous**

Children with disability and/or additional needs benefit from early childhood services which provide inclusive education and care, links to early intervention and allied health services, and connections for families with therapists.³⁴ In a submission to IPART's final report, Royal Far West "demonstrated how a lack of services particularly impacts children with disability/additional needs because they may miss out on developmental assessments or be unable to access timely or affordable therapy and early intervention."³⁵

"Early years education using child-centred approaches is ... vital for children with a developmental disability or disorder. A holistic and multisectoral approach to learning for children with disabilities is crucial. Such an approach should include support from rehabilitation or health care professionals, accessibility measures and assistive devices, parental support and support for transitions from home to an ECCE setting and then to formal school."³⁶

While there are evidently considerable merits of ECEC for children with a disability and/or additional needs, access is often even more challenging for this cohort. This can have devastating consequences for these children and their families.

"I also faced significant difficulties in obtaining the necessary support for my son's special education needs while he was in daycare and found that my experience highlighted how inadequately daycares are supported in this sector." - **Angela Cochrane, Goondiwindi QLD**



"My eldest (who is now thankfully in school) is ASD, ADHD, non-verbal with very challenging behaviours and complex needs. In 2023, our daycare centre excluded our son by restricting the hours he was allowed to attend. I felt this was discriminatory because he was excluded due to his disability, but I was too scared and exhausted to fight it because we relied on the care in order to be able to work and I was booked in for a c-section the very next day to have our third child, so felt I needed to pick my battles. From my perspective (as a teacher myself) I felt many of the problems we faced with this early learning centre were largely because staff were untrained in supporting kids with special needs. It's not like in Brisbane where there are specialised early learning services for kids with autism - we only had the mainstream options and I was worried that if we pulled him out altogether, we wouldn't get a spot anywhere else." - **Kelly Harrison, Woodford Island NSW**

"Every child - regardless of their postcode, circumstances or ability - deserves the opportunity to realise their full potential. Quality, truly inclusive, early childhood education and care is not just a moral imperative, it is a vital investment in a thriving and equitable future." - **Georgie Dent, Chief Executive Officer of The Parenthood**

At the time of publication, The Parenthood has been informed that The Front Project and the CPD will publish a paper on inclusion and foundational supports later this year. We recommend governments consult this paper and both organisations.

Early childhood development

"[W]e know the children are the ones that are missing out on the learning and the friendship they make during childcare." - Erin Paech, Hopetoun VIC

Inequitable access to ECEC is causing regional, rural and remote children to slip through the cracks. Critical early childhood development delays and needs aren't being identified, as parents and carers are not equipped with the relevant expertise to solely adopt this responsibility. Early childhood education plays an important role in a child's progress, and those who attend ECEC programs "are more likely to be on track for development"³⁷

It is crucial that early childhood development is prioritised for regional, rural and remote children. "When children fall behind in their development of cognitive and social skills early in life, this disadvantage can become entrenched in later years."³⁸

As well as identifying the need for early intervention or developmental supports, educators can make referrals to allied health and other services to support children's positive development. "Early screening and interventions are vital for preventing achievement disparities and mental health problems that emerge early and persist among children growing up in adversity. There is clear evidence showing that early screening and interventions are also more effective in producing more favourable learning and well-being outcomes than remedial interventions implemented later in education."³⁹

"During the early years, a child's brain is developing at an extraordinary pace, forming the neuronal connections that lay the foundation for all future learning and development. Early intervention can significantly change a child's developmental trajectory, addressing challenges early on and, essentially, maximising their potential." - Kerra-Lee, Connect.Ed, SA

"The research clearly indicates that when children have access to quality ECEC services along with other key child development and family support services, they have better long term outcomes. Quality supports in the early years set children up for better developmental and social outcomes across their lifespan and allow them to grow into positive contributors to society." - Cassy Bishop, Benevolent Cairns & Gordonvale Early Years Centres

The routine and structure of ECEC - when consistent - are central to a child's development. This is not always a possibility, with chronic staffing shortages resulting in room and centre closures, and the exodus of many educators meaning children are not provided continuity of care. Understaffing has also led to children being stranded in rooms or situations that are inappropriate for their age or circumstances.

"She was in the infants room five months longer than she was meant to be. Her speech and everything was hindered because she was in a room longer than she was meant to be and around children much younger than her because they overfill the rooms due to demand. She only just moved into the right room." - Maddi, Goondiwindi QLD

"I was so upset that my tiny four-year-old starting prep was having to transition to school, the PCYC and a new daycare for before school care - so much change for such a tiny person." - Jess Janphitsamitra, Kingaroy QLD

"I'm a big believer in continuity. With me on leave, and not to mention the sicknesses going around as well, my students have already had three to four different teachers for half of this year. Being a small community we do the best we can, but at the end of the day little people need structure, continuity, for their learning to grow the best. Without that, nothing will flow and it will be quite tricky to make progress." - Sam Kelly, Bicheno TAS

Childhood isolation

Rural and remote children can have less opportunity for interactions with their peers compared to their city and even regional counterparts. This makes socialisation an important benefit of ECEC.

"Living remotely also means the kids don't often get to socialise with other children. These social skills which our kids miss out on makes it difficult when they do finally attend school whether it's via distance education or at a mainstream school." - Anonymous NT

"I worry about his ability to interact with others his age, his social skills with new people." - Rhianna, Warrnambool VIC

"[I]t also affects the children who are unable to get into childcare and interact with other kids their age, and give them a creative outlet for play and other activities outside of their home." - Imogen Pressler, Broken Hill NSW

"The opportunity to see the world from different perspectives was really amazing for our kids who went to daycare. The kids ate different things, not just what they were used to at home. There was socialisation; meeting kids from other nationalities and ethnicities, hearing different languages. They saw people from all spectrums of life. So my two big kids are a lot more worldly than the little kids growing up on Bruny." - Teisha Archer, Bruny Island TAS

The lack of social interaction for rural and remote children can affect the development of their social and language skills, and hamper their readiness for school. When they can't compare their children's behaviour and skills with children of a similar age, parents and carers can also miss any developmental delays presenting in their children.

"We are eager to get our kids into daycare to ensure they have the social interaction they need. For young children, social interaction with kids the same age is crucial for their development as it helps them build communication skills, learn to share, develop empathy, and build friendships." - Brett South, Beaumont SA

"[I]t breaks my heart when my two-year-old asks to go see all his friends at daycare. There is only so much mental stimulation I can provide for him and there's limited playgroup activities. As many studies have shown, the peer-to-peer emotional and play development in the first five years of life are crucial to raising a well-adjusted child into a well-rounded adult." - Heather, Hopetoun VIC



"I genuinely feel that childcare NEEDS to be more accessible and affordable for rural, remote and regional families to ensure our kids have all the opportunities we can provide for them to thrive and enjoy life rather than just existing in it." - Bre Stubbs, Yarraman QLD

By virtue of living in disparate communities, rural and remote children are less likely to have regular opportunities for social interaction and in-person educational activities. As Kimberley from Central Australia shared in *Choiceless* (2023), "Kids out bush can go three months without seeing another child."⁴⁰



Photo credit: Yasmin
Rose Photography

"My eldest is four and at the start of this year I was struggling with his behaviour because he wasn't getting enough exposure to other children. He didn't know how to socialise with other kids his age because he was the oldest one in playgroup. Behaviourally, my eldest was overdue for something like childcare or kindy. He needed the social aspect of play.

"He just started kindy this term, mid year intake. It's fantastic, I could not have seen him waiting any longer. He was just so ready, and he loves it. He was really craving that interaction with other kids his age which I couldn't provide for him." - Lauren Fitzgerald, Keith SA

There are solutions that work well in remote areas, such as the Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS) in the Northern Territory, RAISEducation, which was featured in *Choiceless* (2023), and the Remote and Isolated Children's Exercise (RICE) in South Australia. However, they require substantial funding and support to ensure optimal service delivery.

"KICS is the ONLY service offered in the Northern Territory to give these remote kids a childcare-like experience. KICS not only provides fun and interactive activities for the kids but it also provides support for parents. It is a community service so other families with children are urged to join in so the children get some interaction with other kids." - Anonymous, NT

RICE preschool supports remote children's educational, health and wellbeing outcomes through online sessions, home visits and face to face kindy experience days once a term in Port Augusta. They send specialised resources boxes to families in addition to program-focused resources to complement the online sessions to assist with their education.

RICE also offers in home care, online playgroup once a week, creche at Hawker and Orroroo, play days at families' homes, activity days at community events and individualised resource boxes.

"For us, having preschool done through RICE was great! If we didn't have access to this service, staying and working where we are wouldn't be possible. As a working mum and trying to teach our children last year it definitely would not have been possible for me to be able to continue working and keep my sanity if it wasn't for preschool.

"Getting our children the best start to their education is super important and the service provided by Tania/RICE was a great start for our child and made transitioning into school so much easier." - Bobbie-Lou, SA

Megan Holzwart, KICS

KICS is a travelling playgroup. Ideally, we have two teams out on the road during term time to do four playgroups a week. We cover 760,000 square kilometres and at the moment have about 23 Aboriginal communities, four townships and over 56 cattle stations on our books.

We divide the stations into clusters and try to host a playgroup in each cluster at least four times a term. Some clusters are bigger than a European country. Playgroups are held at a station and all the stations from that cluster are invited to attend, some travelling over two hours one way to attend the three-hour playgroup.

We deliver the playgroup 9am-12pm, then pack up and drive to the next stop, and do that all week. Parents, grandparents, aunties, nannies and governesses attend with their children. We never take duty of care; we don't have the ratios or insurance.

Our teams take with them everything that you would find in a normal playgroup: art activities, fine motor activities, toys the kids wouldn't normally have access to. We really are bringing some of those skills that are necessary for school readiness. We look at children's fine motor skills, literacy and numeracy skills, social and emotional skills, and we see benefits in these areas.

We have a diverse clientele who have different sets of needs, so our teams have to be incredibly adaptable.

We are a really big support for parents, who are isolated and don't have many people to talk to when things are tough, or they need support or referrals. We give them a check in point. For example, one of my team members is an early childhood educator and a doula, so we sent her to everyone who had had a baby over the wet season. She could provide them with support and knowledge. In every playgroup, the mums and dads will sit around and start talking and sharing their parenting realities. It's so important.

Socialisation for our station kids is really important. They often don't see other children, and at playgroup they have other friends to play with - and can learn to share!

Our benefits are in conjunction with other services and programs; we work together not in competition. Because KICS is fun with play-based learning, it can be offered as an incentive for attendance at schools that have low attendance rates. Sometimes we bring activities and services that other services might not have access to.



Many of our stations access in home supports to hire a nanny. While those students are meant to be recently qualified or in the process of completing qualifications, they can be very young and in a very different context from what the classroom prepared them for, and very isolated from anyone to debrief with. Part of our service is offering support and guidance for parents, but we can also do this for nannies and governesses as more families access these services so that both parents can work on the station or in the community. These nannies and governesses are often in their first job and can have a sharp learning curve.

The cities have access to many facilities and supports for families' mental health. If you're in a remote area there isn't as much to choose from and it can be demoralising. A teacher told us their facilities aren't up to scratch, there is asbestos, animal droppings and leaks. She asked KICS to come out, so we can give communities a boost and show they are not forgotten.

The disadvantage of children in the Territory is really, really holistic. We have high demands on all sectors responsible for healthy, thriving families. Housing and health are incredible strains. We don't have a paediatrician in Katherine, so one travels from Darwin one week a month, but because of understaffing there won't be appointments until November. KICS can offer some support for families during this time. Health and education are the same thing for young children; developmental delays lead to delays in education.

We have limited, inflexible funding options. I have a team this week who will cover 1500 kms over corrugated dirt road. They need their vehicle to get to people but funding is not flexible enough to see that. We're not on sealed roads most of the time. We just had a big wet so, for example, one community got stuck behind a big river which only went down three weeks ago. By the end of the dry season, some roads get so badly damaged that we can't get to our sites as they are too dangerous.

It is quite an expensive service to run but when you look at the area we service and the amount of kids who come through we are actually very cheap compared to the funding you'd put into a centre. And, unlike a centre, we are more flexible in responding to communities that can change rapidly.

The biggest threat facing early childhood education in regional and remote settings is staffing which, since COVID, has been a nightmare. If we can't get well-trained people there's not much we can do. We need to make early childhood education more of an attractive career. At the moment it's not seen with the same respect as teaching and that's saying something as teachers don't have a huge level of respect to start with.

The progression in the industry isn't well known. It's seen as transient - do it then move onto something else. Because we have less staff, the existing staff have too much placed on them which can lead to burnout. It can be an emotionally draining job, especially in regional and rural areas with lots of people with disadvantage. We need to consider that the people in industry aren't being asked to do too much and are being looked after as humans.

I grew up on a cattle station and went to KICS as a kid. I then lived on a cattle station with my two-year-old daughter and took her to KICS as a mum. It's very important, I can attest to it.



First Nations Families

When starting school, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are nearly twice as likely to be lagging in their developmental milestones than other children. Results from the *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021* show that the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are developmentally on track has declined.⁴¹ "These results are reflective of the multiple barriers that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children face including greater socio-economic disadvantage."⁴²

Investment in the early years through fully-funded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early years services (ACCOs) can help prepare First Nations children for school environments, and establish a pathway to lifetime success in an appropriate socio-cultural context. Access to these services can also reduce rates of children entering out-of-home care and of youth detention and adult incarceration.

"ACCO services also go beyond the mainstream scope of childcare and early education to provide holistic wraparound support for children and extended families. This approach is a cultural response to gaps in culturally safe services and community need of support in navigating government and non-Indigenous service systems. This includes supporting the interface for families with service systems including, but not limited to, justice, health, social and community services."⁴³

Dr Catherine Holmes, an early childhood educator and researcher, emphasised the importance of First Nations-led ECEC services that are developed holistically.



“First Nations children cannot be disentangled from their identity because it is their cultural capital, therefore, First Nations languages, knowledge systems and practices must be at the centre of the vision, principles and governance of early childhood education and care. First Nations children in Australia have the right to learn from local educators their first culture and language/s in their most formative years of life. If early years services continue to overlook the complexities of childhood, early years programs are likely to replicate the assimilating agendas of the past.

*“The value of mainstream school readiness cannot substitute sociocultural child practices because it is not the sole measurement of First Nations peoples’ success and does not align with societal values. The formation of wraparound, co-designed, co-constructed, community-led, community-driven and community-governed early childhood education and care programs will bring authentic self-determination.”*⁴⁴

“Measurements of success in the early years of a child’s life must be determined with and by First Nations children, families, Elders and the wider community. If the status quo continues, First Nations children and families will continue to be viewed within a deficit narrative.” - Dr Catherine Holmes, Research and Evaluation Specialist at Batchelor Institute

A review of ECEC by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) in NSW found that First Nations families are more likely to experience difficulties in accessing early years services.⁴⁵ Barriers to access include cost, limited transportation, the activity test, and mainstream environments which are not culturally-safe, appropriate or inclusive.^{46,47} “Providing a culturally-safe childcare environment is critical to ensure long-term retention of and engagement with First Nations children and households in childcare services.”⁴⁸

Culturally-appropriate early years services empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, nurturing in them strength, confidence, pride, belonging, peace and security, and improving their health and wellbeing. When early childhood education is culturally relevant, it empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by nurturing their confidence and security. This empowerment is linked directly to their health and wellbeing, creating a solid foundation for their future academic and social success.⁴⁹ “It is critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to have opportunities for cultural education alongside mainstream education, beginning with early years education. The development of a strong cultural identity supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in school readiness.”⁵⁰

“There is a significant body of evidence that current ECEC systems put up particular barriers to affordability and access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

“It should be no surprise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are less likely to be enrolled in ECEC services, which has an impact on efforts to improve life outcomes.

“ACCO services not only provide quality and culturally strong ECEC, they assist families and kin to access support services if and when necessary. They can make all the difference to setting children up for a successful transition to formal education, and close the gaps across a range of social and economic targets.” - Catherine Liddle, Chief Executive Officer of SNAICC

Properly-funded and resourced ACCOs will encourage attendance from First Nations families, where children, parents and carers will all benefit. The need for adequate funding for ACCOs is further explored in Part 4 on page 74.

Farming families

Agriculture is a vital element of Australia’s economy. “The gross value of agricultural, fisheries and forestry production has increased ... to \$94.3 billion in 2022–23.”⁵¹ Without the agricultural industry, Australia would be bereft of our food, fabrics and beverages which are essential to our lives and economy.

This growing sector has a strong demand for workers, particularly women in leadership roles. Available early learning spots would increase women’s workforce participation in the agriculture sector, and this need has been recognised by farmers’ lobby groups like the National Farmers Federation, the Victorian Farmers Federation and GrainGrowers. ECEC access “supports working parents by enabling them to pursue employment or education opportunities, thereby enhancing workforce participation and economic productivity.”⁵²

“With women comprising more than 50% of all university agricultural graduates, but only one in three agricultural workers being female, there is a clear gap in attracting and retaining female workers within the agricultural sector. The scarcity of childcare options for farming families represents a significant barrier for parents re-entering the workforce following parental leave.”⁵³

A common concern raised by the farming families who submitted stories for this report and for *Choiceless* (2023), was the safety of their children who were brought onto the farm due to limited care. Farms can be hazardous environments for children, with nearly 15% of farm fatalities being children under the age of 15.⁵⁴ Gillian Fennell, featured in *Choiceless*, stressed that “farming can be at times a dangerous occupation”.⁵⁵

“[M]y partner can sometimes look after the kids but it’s not safe for them to be on the farm.” - Stephanie Hoare, Speewa NSW

“Recently, the daycare has been closed a lot because a lot of the staff have been sick. I’m just working on the farm so I can take Charlie with me if I have to, but it’s a lot harder. It’s another kid to carry and keep quiet.” - Anna Crowe, Codrington VIC

Similarly to essential shift workers, farming can involve long days and weekends across many weeks, such as at harvest, followed by more inactive periods. Access to flexible early learning, with options such as shared care amongst families, would unlock the productivity of farming parents and families.

This is even more important when the farmers’ partners are also essential shift workers, such as for Matthew Howell, an agronomist whose partner is a nurse. *“Nursing shifts start early, at 7:00am, and afternoon shifts don’t finish until 9:00pm. This means we need care outside of regular hours, especially when I’m away for work, which happens semi-regularly.” - Matthew Howell, Meningie SA*

Our farming families have been hit hardest in recent years. Inability to attract staff, soaring input costs, the lowest red meat prices we’ve seen in decades, drought and now government intervention into our sheep export trade. We need early learning access because we need to work.” - Kirsty Starling, Kingston SE SA

“We manage 8000 goats and about 500 cattle mustering four times a year, managing feeds and moving the cattle between paddocks when required. My husband is paid a salary to work the farm, however, with the workload and long days I often help him during the week when I can. It adds up to about two days of work spread across the week once I’ve finished homeschooling my son.” - Corissa Jackson, Cunnamulla QLD



Wayne, Kingston SE SA

I've been a single father for the last eight years, raising my three kids on my own here in Kingston, South Australia. My youngest was just 11 months old when I took on full responsibility for them, with very little help from family. Living in the country, it's been incredibly challenging, especially when the nearest childcare service was 145 kms away. I had no choice but to leave my job and career to take care of my kids full time.

For five to six years, I was out of work, trying to balance everything on my own. When the kids finally reached school age, they were away during school hours, but without any outside school hours care (OSHC) available, managing my job as a rock lobster fisherman became even more difficult. My job requires me to start at 3am and work until 2pm, which makes juggling everything pretty tough. I do get some help now from a teacher and an elderly neighbour, but that's only been for the last three years.

I really wish there were more OSHC services, not just in Kingston but in other towns like Beachport or Robe too. It would make such a difference for the workforce, especially for single parents like me, who find it incredibly hard to manage everything. I see the impact this lack of support has on parents' mental health — many of us feel stuck and isolated, and it's not good in the long run. To help cope, I joined a gym, and, luckily, the owner lets us bring our kids along, which has been a lifesaver and gives me a bit of a break and a sense of community.

The strain on extended family

In the absence of ECEC, extended family members, so often grandmothers, are being called upon to look after children. Many families commented that it was a privilege to not only have the support of relatives, but to also foster close relationships between their children and extended family. However, such arrangements can come with their downsides, as it places a considerable strain on the "babysitting" kin, who often upend their own lives to provide care.

Dr Catherine Holmes and a team of First Nations community-based researchers refer to this practice as "kin-care" which "encapsulates the rich and extensive network of kin-relatives who care for children across broad socio-spatial contexts"⁵⁶

"I have run my mother-in-law ragged, who works part time and then is trying to help by babysitting when she isn't working. Her health isn't the best and this is putting a big strain on her." - **Lucy Humphries, Wee Waa NSW**

"My son is three years old. When he was born, I registered him on every childcare waiting list in town. I was very lucky that my mother wasn't working and looked after him during the day so me and my partner could work."

"When my son was one, my parents moved to a town one hour away from me, so that me and my partner could continue to work."

"My son would spend four nights a week with my parents, away from us." - **Breana Bessell, Broken Hill NSW**

Today's grandparents, referred to as "the sandwich generation" by Kirsten Coates (see page 42) are facing caring responsibilities at both ends: with their own elderly parents and their grandchildren. A number of grandparents shared that, while they cherished their time with their grandchildren, it did not come without sacrifices.

"My husband was working full time until he retired in November 2019 just after our grandson was born. He now runs our business single handed as I have cared for our grandson 8.30 till 5.30 Monday to Friday since May 2021 with the exception of their annual leave, not for the want of trying to obtain a childcare position so that I may return to some form of part-time employment."

"Having no additional income ourselves, husband is too young for a pension, we have had to draw on our mortgage redraw several times just to make ends meet which will inevitably impact our retirement and travel plans not to mention the three years of absent super contributions."

"There are no government payments for caregivers (whether a parent, grandparent or relative) picking up where these services lack. It is a void that needs to be addressed." - **Narrelle Meatheringham, Broken Hill NSW**

"I think age is an issue, I'm quite an old grandparent. So it means I'm not going to... drive an 80-km drive home in the dark. Generational stretching is probably more common and it means that as grandparents you get really tired. The grandkids come and stay for the weekend, and you want to be an active grandparent, but it's exhausting." - **Jill, Wangaratta VIC**

"Due to the birth of my newest grandchild in 2024 I ceased working and retired seven years early from my full-time teaching position to provide daily care for my third and newest grandchild. There is already a major teacher shortage. The financial impact of this is that in my old age I will have a significantly reduced superannuation amount to support myself through my old age. Though I do have the privilege and opportunity to care and bond with my grandchild/ren."

"I have needed to be fully 'kitted out'... which has meant purchasing a car seat, pram, bottles, sterilising unit and the like." - **Melanie, Wodonga VIC**

Hannah Neumayer and Kirsten Coates, VIC

Hannah Neumayer, Wodonga

We signed up for daycare when my 18-month-old daughter was still very much in the womb, which we had been warned to do. It's a pretty full-on thing signing up your unborn child to daycare; it feels quite daunting having to think about that stuff when you're in your first trimester.

Even then, we didn't get a spot until she was a year old, so almost two years later.

We needed three days of care. We couldn't get it in the one daycare, so had to accept two daycares. Monday in one, Tuesday in another, and Friday in the first again. That wouldn't have been very good for her at all at such a young age.

We got lucky, as when we mentioned this arrangement at the first daycare they took pity on us and gave us another day. We're very grateful that we got it, and that it was at our preferred daycare. Some of the daycares around here are pretty dismal. A lot are located on dual-lane major roads, the outside area is fake grass, some can be really sad places.

We rely on my mum, her grandma, to do one day a week. That's been a huge commitment from them, and we had to have a lot of serious discussions. Mum very generously understood it's a commitment for the whole year, they can't just pull up stumps and go on holiday last minute.

I don't know what we would do if we didn't live near family. I still work four days a week, and I look after her one day. I love the day off and the time with her, but I also really love my work and now I earn less, that's a fifth of my wage. But getting an extra day in daycare is so hard so I don't know how we'd get it, or ever get full-time care.

The options are really limited and you're forced to work around what the daycare can give you. You make your whole lives work around that, your mum's life, your work, your wage, it really changes your life.

I work at Wodonga City Council as a town planner. I'm lucky that my workplace is flexible. My husband is a high school teacher and can't just take Wednesdays off like me, he doesn't have a say in when his classes are scheduled. So that burden has fallen on me to take off that day of care. It's again the woman taking the pay cut for years, potentially, because my husband can't do that. I haven't had that option to go back full time.

All those financial implications add up. Every Wednesday I'm not getting super, and I didn't get it on maternity leave. I've been very surprised. I'd thought, *It's 2024, we're all equal*, but it is still disadvantaged for women. We see the care falling a lot to women. It's not just the time you take off when you have the baby, it adds up over the years.

I'm 20 weeks pregnant, and I signed up the new baby to daycare this morning. I am really excited to have another baby. They'll be less than two years apart but one of the reasons I wanted it close together is because I want to get back into the workforce, I want my life back. The sooner I have another baby the sooner I can get back to work and progress my career.

It's wild to put my baby's name down this early, even though we don't need care for potentially a year and a half. I was trying to do all the maths, *When would she start? 2026...*

My husband doesn't have to make the same decisions as me, partly due to his field of work (being less flexible) and partly due to the fact that birthing women need more time off to literally keep the baby alive. We never thought it would be this gendered, but society makes you fall into these roles.

It's different for different people, but you often have babies at a time in your life when you're settled, permanent and have got good at your job. I'm an expert in something and I could advance and get good positions, but it's 'oops, I have to pause my career' while I watch my husband keep going.

We're at the one, good daycare with three days, so I feel we're actually the lucky ones. There's definitely far worse stories out there.



Kirsten Coates, Yackandandah

My daughter Hannah has gone back to work four days a week but could only get daycare three days, so we have an arrangement where I do the fourth day. At the end of last year she could only get two days so I looked after my granddaughter two days a week.

I live 20 mins away and I pick up my granddaughter, look after her and take her home again so Hannah can go to work a bit earlier. I make really good use of the activities that are available in Indigo Shire that I can tap into to support my looking after her. The library has storytime, and there's a toy library.

We have another daughter in Melbourne who also has a young child. She has daycare in the city, but you feel that push and pull to be fair and give everyone equal support. I also have a 95-year-old mother who I provide occasional care for, so I travel a lot between them all. They call us the "sandwich generation", as we are between older parents and grandchildren, and do a lot of caring.

I have a friend who has five grandchildren who all live locally and an elderly mother who she looks after. There's a lot of caring in the community that goes unacknowledged.

I love every minute of it. I'm in a really fortunate position that I don't have to work and so there's not a financial burden. I know other grandparents that are still working and looking after their grandkids. I'm really glad that I am retired and don't have work commitments.

It is not a burden, it is a real joy. The benefit of having a great relationship with your grandchild is priceless. It comes with a cost but also an incredible payment. The cost is our freedom; if we do anything we have to do it between Friday and Wednesday. My husband and I recently retired, and I did think we'd travel and go away for long periods at a time but that hasn't happened. That doesn't mean we won't in the future.

Early childhood workforce

"I am an experienced and dedicated early childhood teacher who is currently managing a large early learning service in regional Victoria. Workforce challenges have characterised our initial three years of operation since January 2021. Lack of quality educators, burnout and turnover of educators has made it exceptionally difficult for us to train and work towards the quality early learning that our children so richly deserve. Low pay, burnout and lack of community respect are some of the most often cited reasons for leaving the industry given by otherwise passionate and dedicated educators, upon their resignation to work in other industries where they feel that they are remunerated more effectively." - **Belinda Quinn, Bendigo VIC**

The early childhood workforce is essential for sustainable access to high-quality ECEC in the regions. Many regional and rural centres are currently operating at reduced capacity due to staff shortages. "There is no question that staffing constraints continue to impact on the ability of ECEC providers to offer places to all families who need it."⁵⁷

'Early Childhood Teachers' and 'Child Carers' are facing skills shortages, with longer training pathways and low retention rates being associated with the shortages.⁵⁸ The current attrition of early childhood workers appears to be having an impact on all ECEC services, including long daycare, preschool/ kindergarten, family daycare, in home care, mobile early learning services and OSHC.^{59 60}

In a recent survey conducted by the United Workers Union, 62% of educators stated they planned to leave the sector within three years.⁶¹ At a time when demand for ECEC services is high, Australia is in desperate need of an influx of early education staff, rather than the current decline.

"I think childcare availability has got slightly better the last year since COVID finished. But the main problem is they can't get staff. They can't run at full capacity because they don't have enough staff." - **Anna Crowe, Codrington VIC**

"If you support your centres, your educators, and your leaders within early childhood, you ultimately create an opportunity to increase the number of centres, you increase the number of positions you can offer families, you increase the amount of mothers who can go back to work, and you save our sector."

"If no action gets taken, or there is too much attention on the wrong areas, then you push our sector further into the ground and ultimately risk losing more staff. Then who will look after the politician's child? The doctor's child? The teacher's child? Who will look after your child?" - **Abbey Brown, Goonellabah NSW**

While incredibly valuable and rewarding work, being an early childhood educator can be isolating and overwhelming, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas.

Staff are overloaded with tasks and responsibilities;⁶² given little opportunity for respite,⁶³ and are often without support in and outside the workplace - all while caring for and educating our littlest people. This is leading to high levels of burnout. In their exit interviews, educators list burnout as one of the top three reasons for leaving.⁶⁴

"As it is now, the staff don't take their lunch breaks. They have lunch, but don't leave the centre as there's no time for that. They've been trying to get someone to come on two hours a day to cover lunches and do some relief work." - **Dannielle Stevenson, Quilpie QLD**

"We pay our educators far above the award rate, but it's not just about that. The minimum ratios are not sustainable for educators, they get burnout when they're running around all day putting out fires rather than being educators, because there's not enough staff on the floor. They need supportive workplaces." - **Katherine Wilson, Blayney NSW**

Many educators shared that they fear leaving the sector as this would cause further strain to other staff or leave the community without a service. Often, early learning services and their educators are the sole support network for regional, rural and remote families. As Sylvia, CEO at Nintirri Centre stated, "We are the only provider in our small town, and the waitlist is long." The pressure to continue to serve the local community has a cumulative effect on staff who are already dealing with burnout, low satisfaction with their role and a poor work-life balance.

Paradoxically, some educators who are also parents struggle to remain in the early childhood sector because of the need for care for their children. In some cases, educators were unable to work because there were no available early learning spots for their own children.

"Unfortunately, many people interested in our vacant positions will need childcare for their own children, that we can't provide, to take on a position. This only happened last fortnight for our mobile children's service when we had to turn away a prospective employee last week because of that." - **Amanda Bell, Bourke NSW**

"When I decided to return to work (early childhood educator), I applied at all four centres and had interviews and they all wanted me on board. I was lucky to find a centre that was able to accommodate both myself and my two children. I worked five days a week 9:30-5:30. I found it difficult trying to work whilst having my children attend the same centre, especially my youngest at the time who was only 11 months and we shared the same yard. It was hard and big days for us all." - **Jessica, Horsham VIC**

The shrinking early childhood sector has a direct impact on the quality of services in the regions. "Well-trained educators with high levels of professional wellbeing are intrinsic to quality interactions with children. ... Actual turnover rates are estimated to be 30-50 per cent, with the highest rates in remote areas."⁶⁶ Remote services have a higher percentage of unqualified educators covered by Children's Services Award level 1 and 2.⁶⁷



"It takes three years to train a quality educator. Centres actively poach educators from other centres - as they have to - but then the quality drops in these centres who lose staff as they have to retrain new inexperienced educators." - **Katherine Wilson, Blayney NSW**

The pressures on educators also have an impact on the quality of the service delivery. "There is well-established evidence that teacher burnout is detrimental to children's education", indicating that, with the high level of burnout experienced by staff in regional, rural and remote Australia, this is affecting children's educational outcomes in these areas. As a report by UNESCO states, "More needs to be done to ensure children get well-trained teachers who have the skillset to create safe, healthy and stimulating environments to instil foundational skills in children from the earliest ages."⁶⁸ Tanya Greenwood, who runs a Mobile Early Childhood and Parenting Support Program in Fingal Tasmania, shared that there are "impacts on child wellbeing as they are not able to access a quality early learning environment".

The reduced quality available at some services, alongside the reduced access to ECEC, means families can be devoid of choice and unable to utilise a service which best supports the needs of their children. "[I]n both regional and remote areas... there tend to be fewer high-quality services for families to choose from."⁶⁹

"Both my children attend a large centre from a big corporation, the quality of service has nosedived from late last year, my three-year-old's classroom has lost seven educators in the past six months, and my preschooler lost all his educators in the same week in April. It took months to find a room leader, and once again he's losing all his educators in the same week."

"The situation is so bad even the Director has left. After speaking to former staff the consensus is the same, too many children in one room, not enough one on one time with the children to actually do their jobs to the standards required, so... burnout, lack of progression, etc." - **Monica Martinez, Oak Flats NSW**

"The development and strengthening of the local First Nations workforce is essential to quality, culturally responsive ECEC. For instance, in the NT, one third of children are First Nations, yet only one eighth of the education workforce is First Nations. By default, ECEC programs tend to be more Western aligned." - **Dr Catherine Holmes, Research and Evaluation Specialist at Batchelor Institute**

"You take whatever you can get, as you have no idea when another spot will be offered. You put them on every possible waitlist so you have more luck getting a spot. You don't even know what the centres are like, or if they will even suit your child."
- **Djemila Maas, Balranald NSW**

"The week before returning to work the service did not feed my baby all day, none of the three supplied bottles, no morning tea, lunch or afternoon tea. When I collected her she was screaming. I had no options for care and had to leave her there until I gained a placement elsewhere." - **Anonymous**

"I have found the care ... has been nowhere near as good as the care we received in Melbourne. And I believe that's due to a lack of staff in our childcare centre. They are constantly advertising for new staff and these vacancies are never being filled." - **Emma Swales, Longlea VIC**

Inability to plan for family's future

When families can't be certain of early learning availability for existing and future children, and struggle to engage in paid work, a knock-on effect is that they can't plan for the future. Unable to forecast their finances or plan for the coming years, this uncertainty is deterring parents from expanding their family.

"Given the difficulty of finding daycare, we've realised that expanding our family isn't an option. It truly takes a village to raise a child, and you don't fully understand that until you're in the thick of it. It can be incredibly isolating." **Amy Cook, Wangaratta VIC**

"Me and my partner have had to put off having another child until 2026. This is so we are in a good financial position in case one of us has to quit our job, due to no available childcare." - **Breana Bessell, Broken Hill NSW**

"The struggle to find care and the amount of phone calls and visits I had to do to get my son a spot at a daycare makes me very hesitant to have a second child... I'm very nervous if we were to have another child that they may not get care. This would be catastrophic financially for us as we really need two incomes to be able to comfortably live." - **Annika Telfer, Central Coast NSW**

"My income is a third of what it used to be. My partner Andrew and I have halted having a family, we can't jam two kids into our two-bedroom house." - **Rachael Lane, Lismore NSW**

"I am considering dropping a day of work and have postponed having another child, I can't bear thinking of what babies must go through with the ever-changing staff." - **Monica Martinez, Oak Flats NSW**

Diminished connections and networks

Parenthood can be an isolating experience, and this can be exacerbated in a rural or remote setting where communities are smaller and further removed. Early learning services can provide a portal to support networks for parents, carers and children. Without these connections, families miss out on the opportunity to build a sense of community and belonging where they live, and children have fewer enriched social experiences.

"Being new to the area, we haven't yet built a network of friends, which limits my son's opportunities to interact with others." - **Amy Cook, Wangaratta VIC**

"I had to quit my full-time job at the end of last year as a result of not having adequate childcare for my two children. This has had an impact on our personal finances, my super balance, mental health and also on my husband's work. I continually have to say no to participating in our local community as there is no adequate childcare available." - **Eleanor Falkner, Canowindra NSW**





Liam Caulfield, Austinmer NSW

Put simply, lack of childcare access impacts every aspect of our lives. The ongoing feeling is continuous, deep anxiety. You spend hours calling, emailing and then touring childcare centres, getting placed on waitlists, following up for updates, being told not to expect anything, and so you're left with total uncertainty about whether you will be able to find care for your child and get back to your job as planned.

Our mortgage repayments have gone through the roof in recent times, while taking parental leave has reduced our income, at the same time as a cost of living crisis is squeezing our ability to do any more than meet the bare essentials. So not only are we anxious about when or if we can go back to work and get our child started in childcare, but we also fear the worsening financial stress that would come if we can't find a place for next year.

And even if we can find a place, the likelihood is we will have to accept whatever days we are offered and hope that our employers can be flexible enough to make it work. Then, those places will probably be across multiple locations to make up the days we need, and likely to require a drive of 30 minutes each way — that's two hours each day going back and forth to drop off and pick up a child at daycare, and racing to work an eight-hour day in between.

It impacts our ability to spend time as a family, it adds to the stress of working while parenting young children, it limits our ability to connect with our local community, and genuinely drains your spirit and energy.

We also understand how important it is for children's development and socialising, so there is a feeling of not giving them the best start possible. How did it get to this? We have universal schooling from age four or five, but what exactly is expected of families before that point — do we simply stop working for four or five years, or more if you have more than one child?

When school starts, our local public school will enrol our children, for free, and it's a 90-second drive from our house. But before then, we are paying thousands of dollars a year to run ourselves ragged on a hamster wheel of anxiety, rather than contributing to society through working, and other meaningful ways we could be spending our time. It makes no sense.

The childcare system is totally, utterly broken. It is just as essential as school for children and families, yet the market doesn't function and doesn't meet the demand out there. Childcare should be considered a necessity, not a market. I'd say "it's a joke", but it is far worse and more serious than that.



The cost of working

The cost of ECEC is often not on a regional, rural or remote parent's radar, as they simply do not have access. However, parents in the regions who have managed to access early learning report that fees and associated expenses can be overwhelming. In some cases, where the cost almost matches the now-working parent's take-home pay, the utilisation of ECEC is deemed pointless.

"Not only is it lack of childcare that is having a huge impact on my family, it is the ridiculously high cost of childcare that has a major impact. If you do get your child into a centre you can't afford to work as the cost outweighs what you make or due to being on good wages in the north of WA the government takes more, you barely get CCS and again it doesn't make sense to work."

"I can't afford to send my two school-aged children to after school care, when I can get it, as what I make doesn't equal or surpass the cost. So I am forced, due to my role as an electrical apprentice, to take unpaid leave and lose more money to take care of them before/after school."

*"There is no way to win. Once my apprenticeship is finished I am better off quitting work than continuing with the cost of childcare here." - **Kate, Port Hedland WA***

*"Childcare costs us over \$700 per week and whilst we can cover this at the moment it is a huge financial pressure for women who would like to return to work or have to return to work. It almost makes working irrelevant as all wages go to childcare." - **Skye Prior, Narrawallee NSW***



While reforms to the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) initially resulted in reduced out-of-pocket costs, it has had "a limited effect in placing downward pressure on prices"⁷⁰ as providers continue to increase their fees. Affordable and accessible ECEC would support parents' and carers' workforce participation.

Instead, many families engage nannies, babysitters and governesses. These alternatives often come with an exorbitant price tag, which is not alleviated by any government subsidies.

*"Many people are having to hire babysitters/nannies without any subsidy so they can go back to work but are not financially better off." - **Kate Brow, Bombala NSW***

*"I've had to accept that I'm simply unable to earn money this year; I've taken a huge pay cut since having my daughter. The only reason I'm currently working two days per week is to make sure I don't lose my long service leave and so I can claim maternity leave when we have our next child. We had no choice but to employ a nanny for the two days I work, which is expensive and makes working almost not worthwhile except for maintaining my leave." - **Freya Clement, Woodlands NSW***

*"I would say the major impact on my family has been the financial cost of having to use childcare arrangements that don't qualify for the childcare subsidy." - **Vanessa, Spring Ridge NSW***

Work-life imbalance

Regional, rural and remote parents and carers are struggling to achieve an optimal work-life balance. Inaccessible early learning, including OSHC, is pushing parents to the brink of burnout as they shuffle between work, study, daily chores and caring arrangements.

*"With fuel prices so high, we've had to extend our working days, and it's really taking a toll on us mentally. It's difficult, wondering where I'm going to put my child to feel safe. I even had to defer my studies because of the extra pressure of driving the kids around, and that's not only putting me behind in my education, but it's affecting my whole family." - **Jaelyn Lane, Lismore NSW***

In parts of regional, rural and remote Australia, services can be few and far between. Several families are forced to travel great distances to attend ECEC, as there is nothing closer available. Consequently, their children spend long hours in a car, spend long days in an early learning centre, and parents spend exorbitant amounts on petrol. In their final report into ECEC (December 2023), IPART recommend that the NSW Government support families with the additional costs of ECEC services, including transport.⁷¹

Time-consuming trips in the car mean children miss out on extracurricular activities and social interactions. Many families reported that the stress and solutions they have been forced to adopt in the absence of accessible ECEC has reduced their chances for quality time as a family.

*"When I did go back to work after my son, it was really hard on our family. My husband was working big weeks and I had to take on nights and weekends so we hardly saw each other." - **Breanna Cunneen, Dalby QLD***



"I still have to travel a 172 km-round trip to access daycare for my one year old son." - **Kate Schwager, 2388**

"I find it difficult to attend [preschool] events as there is no reimbursement for travel/accommodation." - **Louise Kohler, Mt Sarah Station SA**



"We have secured a place in Merimbula that meets the hours requested, however, the location is challenging to coordinate pickups and drop-offs around work requirements. My partner and I live and work around Eden so having to drive to Merimbula and then return to Eden is a significant time commitment." - **Anonymous, Eden NSW**

"Because childcare is so far away, the pressure is on myself to complete drop off and pick up. The kids get restless but they are used to having to travel long distances. I have to be prepared with snacks and water for my eldest otherwise the meltdown begins." - **Gemma Gumbleton, Eurimbula NSW**

"Everyday we go to childcare we drive 40 kms up, 40 kms back. And then in the afternoon repeat... that's 160 kms a day for childcare. A lot of time in the car, especially

at the end of the day when you're trying to keep the toddler awake. Lots of \$\$ on fuel also. It's just a lot." - **Tash Harris, Coles Bay TAS**

"Lack of childcare in our area has resulted in my son having to spend long days in the car to Tamworth. From seven months of age every Thursday I'd leave home at 6:45am with my son, drive to Tamworth to access daycare, and typically not get home before 6:30pm. Whilst these sorts of hours are fine for me it took its toll on my son." - **Vanessa, Spring Ridge NSW**

"We currently drive to another town to seek childcare, which is extremely costly in time and travel, with a one-hour round trip twice a day. It makes it hard for me to get much done during the day. I am an emergency responder, and with shift work that can make it even more difficult." - **Josh, rural WA**

As the long distances to available care options add up in time and in cost, parents must often resign themselves to finding alternate ways to work or study instead of making multiple return trips. For example, many parents cited using libraries or cafes for remote work. While manageable, these arrangements are not conducive to optimal working conditions.

"I was travelling an hour to a nearby town one day a week that had a daycare spot and working remotely from cafes so I could complete one day of work a week as a VA [Virtual Assistant]. This was unsustainable in the long run and hard on my little one doing two hours of travel with a big day of daycare." - **Emily Thomas, Deniliquin NSW**

"I currently travel an hour each way to access care in another small Yorke Peninsula town so that I can complete my bachelors degree. This leaves me studying in a public place rain hail or shine as I cannot afford to drive back and forth, let alone the time it takes to do so." - **Rachael, Kadina SA**

"Other friends have to work full time and drive 90 mins (and get a ferry!) to take their kids to childcare and then work in cafes from there." - **Teisha Archer, Bruny Island TAS**

"Now, twice a week, I drive 50 kms – about 40 minutes each way – to Yarrowonga. I am currently studying to become a registered nurse, so I study at the library in Yarrowonga while my son is at daycare, as the driving time and cost would add up if I returned to Wangaratta." - **Amy Cook, Wangaratta VIC**

The extensive travel times render daycare and preschool hours incompatible with working hours. Parents and carers are relegated to working shorter days, or relying on others to transport their children. The long days also have a draining effect on these children.

"8-5:30 isn't a realistic timeframe for anyone, especially if you're driving in 20-30 minutes to drop the kids off. It's quite the challenge to get them in at 8am; if you need to get out on road you're always juggling family and friends to do drop off and pick up for you." - **Alisha Chinner, Lameroo SA**

"Daycare hours have affected me enormously over the years. Currently I am restricted to being able to work morning shifts only when hubby is away. I am casual but blessed my workplace gives me set shifts each week that align with my daycare days. This can still at times be challenging when I am supposed to start work at 6:30am but am required to drop my 10-year-old to before school care at a separate location because my preferred childcare centre no longer offers before/after school care. This often means I can't get to work until 6:45." - **Brooke Pollard, Warwick QLD**

"The only childcare I was able to secure on a regular basis was one day per week ... 30 mins from our farm, the return trip being one hour twice daily. The daycare hours were short, just 9.30am-3pm each Thursday meaning I'd get just 4.5hrs work 10am-2.30pm between drop off and pick up... we had no choice but to take it. Work would need to be done after bedtime." - **Jules, Limerick NSW**

"My husband works as a mechanic in Mt Gambier so he takes the baby at 7:15am and drops him on the way to work, but it's tough getting him out the door that early. After school, I have to drive and pick him up as my husband can't make it in time." - **Chelsea Betheras, Beachport SA**

There are also examples of families using multiple centres because they could not secure the requisite number of days to match their work schedule at one centre. This disrupts the flow and routine for children in addition to creating longer days with multiple drop offs and pick ups.

"I know people who drop their kids to three different centres as they can't get a full five-day week at one centre, but they work full-time. So they have to travel around." - **Clare McCabe, Merrill NSW**

Bec Famularo, who moved to Beachport SA with her husband, had no access to ECEC. She found a workaround by enrolling her children in an early learning centre in Mount Gambier (85 kms away) where she was already working, and now lives between the two towns so she can work while her children are in care.

"It's actually worked out cheaper and more time efficient for me to rent a tiny unit in Mount Gambier, than travel back and forth three-four times a week. Ben's new job is also in Mount Gambier, with very early starts and sometimes late finishes so we all stay in the unit a couple of times a week. We go between living in Mt Gambier and Beachport." - **Bec Famularo, Beachport/Mt Gambier SA**

Parents, such as Rachael Lane and Breanna Cunneen, take on night shifts so that they can care for their children during the day when no ECEC is available. This is an exhausting feat and unsustainable as a longer-term solution.

"For the moment I work nights without full-time care for Sadie. I'm sure I don't need to tell you or any mum/dad what a tough gig parenting is. But can you imagine running a household and raising a small human when you work till midnight 4-5 nights a week, you don't unwind and get into bed until 2am and then up again around 6.30am? Oh boy is it rough. Don't even get me started on the effect it has on my relationship with my partner." - **Rachael Lane, Lismore NSW**

"Being a nurse you have to do a certain amount of night shifts especially when you're permanent. For months I would have to do one-two nights a week, come home and look after my three kids under three and not sleep, fortnightly I could call the daycares begging to get them in even if it was for a few hours for one day to let me sleep after nights. Halfway through my grad year being full-time I wanted to give up 'cause I was so exhausted." - **Breanna Cunneen, Dalby QLD**



As highlighted in many of the stories in *Choiceless* (2023) and in new stories in this report, in many areas across Australia volunteer working groups have formed in an attempt to establish an early learning service. This places a significant burden on these volunteers who expend hundreds, if not thousands, of unpaid hours dealing with different levels of government and complex approvals processes. If successful, which is not always the case, they often take on personal responsibility for the service, which comes with personal legal and financial risk. This is on top of an already stressful situation, with the lack of ECEC.

"As a not-for-profit organisation we have a volunteer management committee for the organisation. As a volunteer management committee member you are also the Approved Provider for the preschool and playgroup services. The Approved Provider is personally liable for the entire operation of the organisation. This structure works well again for the private providers as they are personally profiting by running these services, but this expectation is crippling not-for-profit providers. Trying to get people to volunteer on these committees is getting increasingly difficult. Parents do not want to put themselves in personally liable situations. I personally have had to be interviewed by the Department of Education. But without an Approved Provider our organisation isn't allowed to physically operate. Private providers aren't interested in providing services to the more remote areas of NSW due to the ebb and flow of enrollments. Mobile preschool and playgroup services are vital for small communities and they will not continue to survive if the government continues to lump them into the same category as private providers." - **Georgina Simson, Premer NSW**

Krystal Leffler, Lismore NSW

I had my daughter in September 2021; during my pregnancy and the nine years prior I had been working as a childcare educator. A couple of months before she turned one I put my daughter on multiple childcare centres' waitlists for the Lismore/Goonellabah area, as well as family daycares anywhere a half hour radius from Goonellabah. We were told by childcare centres we were looking at spots being available 2026 (the year before my daughter will attend primary school) with 160+ families on the lists before us.

Many centres I contacted said they would get back to me through email or phone, but never returned calls or sent out information to get on their waitlists. They have so many other families waiting that they don't need the business or know they won't have any spots available so why waste all our time.

During this time our mortgage was about to come out of low fixed rates and double. We wouldn't be able to afford this on one wage and would face homelessness so I had to look at changing from an educator, the only career I have ever known, to something that I could work around my partner's and mother's work hours so we could balance caring for my daughter. I started applying for everything and luckily got a job in a fast food restaurant and a job at a hotel/conference centre (which unfortunately I could only work at one day a week while my mum was off work). I often worked double shifts on that day after working late the night before (much of the time until midnight) to make ends meet, getting as little three hours' sleep a night with a young child at home who was waking through the night or early in the morning.

I would love to return to my role as an educator but, due to the demands of the role, low pay, unpaid take home work, difficulty in finding full time care, and the fact that the shortage of educators in the industry (due to many of the same reasons I have) make start and finish times uncertain and days inflexible with no staff to cover shifts - being a childcare educator is no longer a family-friendly role.

Late last year I expanded my search for childcare as I was picking up more days working due to needing more money to pay the bills. I was one of the lucky ones with family support who I relied on to watch my daughter while I worked - my mum one day a week, and I shared care of our children with my stepister so we could both work so we wouldn't lose our houses. She is located at Casino so it did involve two hours' travel a day, often with myself travelling to her as she has an older son so we need to be around for before and after school care also.

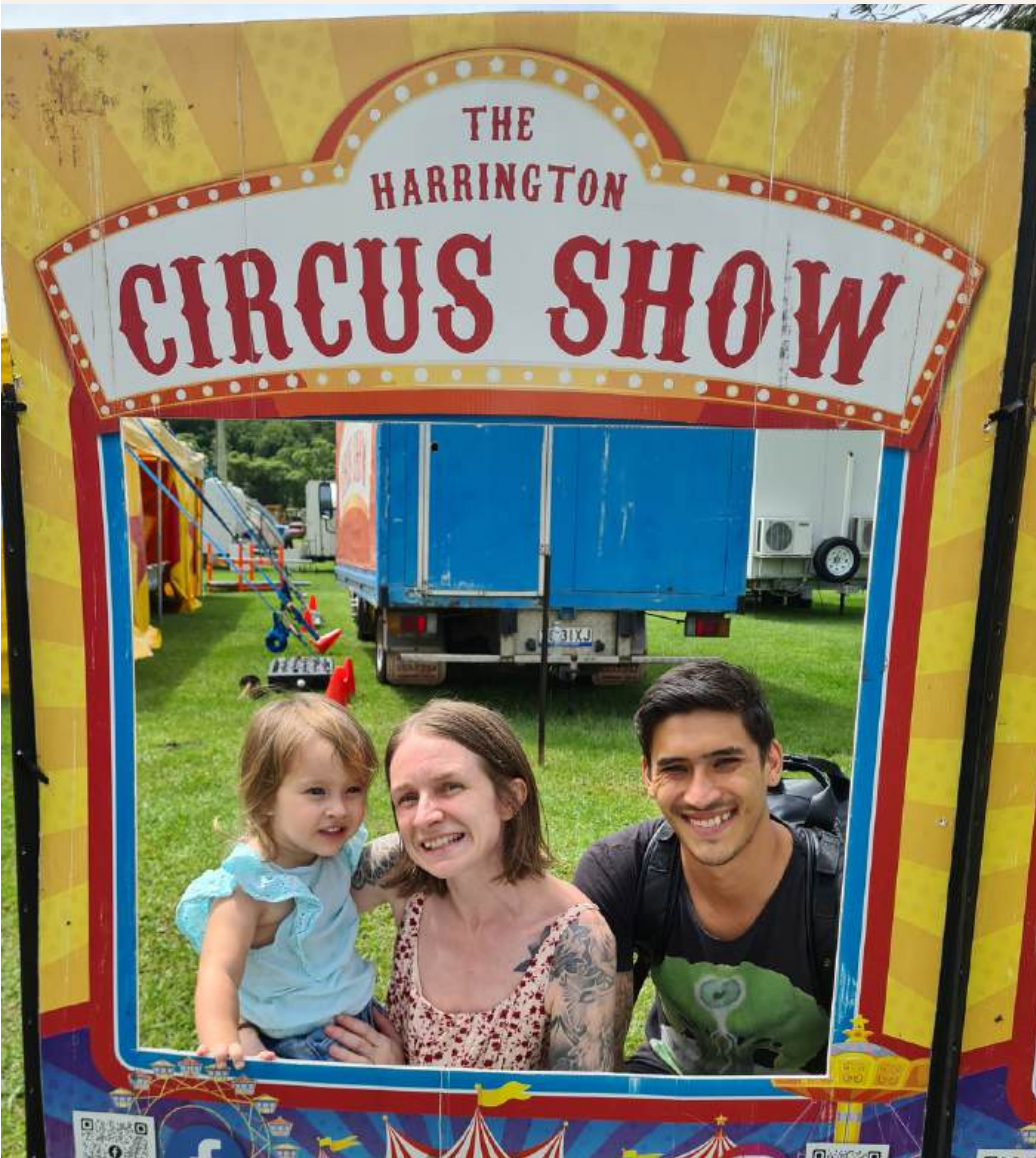
I was finally offered a spot two days a week at a centre in Ballina in February with still no word from any of the many centres I am on waitlists for in the Goonellabah/Lismore area almost two years on.

This centre has been wonderful and my daughter has settled well but it means two hours of driving a day. This takes its toll with petrol prices and a lack of sleep for me as I often work late nights and double shifts through the week as I pick up casual hours. It also makes my life balance of chores, family time and doing any extracurricular activities (swimming lessons, playgroups and gymnastics classes) difficult as we spend a large chunk of our time driving. I am tired all the time from very little time in my day for sleep.

I also stress about what to do if we get a spot in a centre closer to home - my daughter has built a sense of belonging and connections and friendships with her peers and educators. I also worry if I don't move her - if or when we finally get a spot - that when she moves onto primary school she will have no connections or friendships with children in our community which would help her during the transition into school.

She is developing a sense of community but not in the community where we actually live; many of the friends she makes are going to go to school in Ballina which makes me worry my daughter will feel lost and lonely when she has no one she knows at school, as we have no time left in our week to make connections in other ways.

My partner and I desperately want to have another child but are hesitant as I would need to return to work at least 25 hours a week straight after maternity leave to pay the mortgage and ever growing bills/expenses of life due to inflation of everything. With the shortage of care available we aren't sure if we'll ever be able to have another child if something doesn't change. This leaves us feeling heartbroken to think we might never be able to have another or give our daughter the sibling she has been asking us for.



Poorer mental health of families

“One day it broke me. I couldn’t stop crying over it.” - Angie Dwyer, Casino NSW

The scarcity of ECEC options available for regional, rural and remote families is causing poorer mental health outcomes in parents and carers. Faced with the stresses of searching and waiting for early learning spots, making alternative arrangements, and juggling caring responsibilities with paid work is having an adverse impact and leading to burnout.

Throughout our collection of stories for this report and *Choiceless* (2023), several parents shared that ECEC access was necessary for respite and, by extension, improved mental health. A number of parents reported that limited ECEC options meant they had little opportunity for rest and downtime.

“When you live in the outback you usually don’t have family here for support. Without daycare, the activities and distractions of city life, and with your partner working long hours there is little respite. The prospect of no childcare for who knows how long gets you down. I personally experienced depression and a loss of identity.” - Anonymous, Rural WA

“[B]y the time 5pm rolls over I am completely shattered, just dusted by that day.” - Alisha Chinner, Lameroo SA

“I really wanted the twins to start at around six-seven months of age because it had been so good for our eldest to be in that environment and for me to have a break. So I had three days at home with just the twins and then two days with all the kids, and it was exhausting. I very much struggled with postnatal anxiety and had pretty severe postnatal depression, and it just goes to show that layer of support is so important for people who don’t have family around.” - Karyn Roe, Wodonga VIC

Without early learning services, families are forced to find makeshift solutions, for example, job sharing, working nights and weekends, forgoing career opportunities, relying on extended family, and hiring babysitters and nannies. These alternative arrangements can be “stressful and costly”⁷² for families. Many parents lamented the absence of quality family time because these alternatives sapped their time and energy.

“There’s a strain on your relationship when you always have your kids with you and you both work from home... We lack the time to be adults and have time together where we can talk about all the stuff going on in life, we are owner-building our house, running a farm, and planning for our eldest going to high school and boarding next year. We don’t have those deep conversations because we have no one looking after the kids to create the space and environment to.” - Teisha Archer, Bruny Island TAS

“We were instantly sent into stress mode when hearing about the childcare crisis in the region.” - Anon, Beechworth VIC

“I’m a registered nurse and separated from my ex-husband who also works full time. It is so difficult to find childcare. We are running all over town dropping our children at different locations and having multiple people help with our daughter, it’s very stressful trying to find care.” - Jess Janphitsamitra, Kingaroy QLD

Research demonstrates that paid work can improve an employee's wellbeing.⁷³ Combined with other impacts outlined in this report, including financial strain, and reduced paid employment, particularly for mothers, it is unsurprising that being "female, un-partnered, not in paid work and having lower education and family income were related to poorer parent mental health".⁷⁴

"It impacted my ability to return to work, in turn affected us financially and more importantly my mental health - I was desperate to get back to work and simply couldn't as the wait was two years for a spot in childcare." - **Meggan Kenna, Alice Springs NT**

Further, the ongoing anxiety and effort of searching for early learning vacancies has had a negative impact on parents' and carers' mental health. Trying to find an early learning spot while living in a childcare desert can be incredibly time-consuming and deflating. Many regional, rural and remote parents and carers find themselves calling, emailing and visiting services for hundreds of hours across months and even years, sometimes to no avail.

"The work required to apply for 20 centres, the work required to vet those 20 centres, the work required to call each centre every month to check on the status of those waitlists, the stress and uncertainty of not knowing if and when we will get care." - **Belinda Jackson, Austinmer NSW**



When seeking an early learning spot, families place their child's name on a waitlist. It is not uncommon in the regions for two or more years to pass before they attain a position, if ever. A slew of mothers have shared that, in order to increase their likelihood of securing a spot, the local early learning centres knew of their pregnancy before relatives or friends did. The uncertainty of knowing if and when their child can enrol in a service, and the number of days they may be given, is doubly stressful as it affects parents' and carers' ability to return to paid work.

"Waitlists in Orange are in the 100s for nursery spots. It becomes easier to receive care as children get older due to ratios and larger class sizes." - **Kayla Henley, Orange NSW**

"We are always at full capacity with a long list of families waiting for casual days until they can attain full-time care." - **Brogen Norman, Goondiwindi QLD**

"Our waitlist for 0-2 is so substantial that often by the time positions become available, the children are 2-3 years old, after being on the waitlist since early in pregnancy." - **Lee, Taree NSW**

"The centre commented, 'How old is your son?'"
"Three, four months."
"Oh... When do you want him to start?"
"In a few months."
We ended up with a wait time of 2.5 years." - **Djemila Maas, Balranald NSW**



"I told people I was pregnant on the first of February 2023 and everyone said, 'Put his name down on childcare waitlists now!' I put his name down at every daycare in Swan Hill in February 2023 - six centres in total. I was five months pregnant."

"When my son was born, I contacted all the centres. I kept calling, emailing, messaging. As of August 2024, I still do not have a spot. I've been told some people don't get into childcare for the first two years of their baby's life." - **Leah Ann, Swan Hill VIC**

The lack of transparency behind waitlists contributed to many parents' stress; some families seemed to "jump the queue", while others remained on a waitlist at the same centre, with no explanation given for these decisions.

It is worth noting that managing the waitlist is a difficult endeavour for early learning centres, particularly when they have a high number of children. Carol Murray Children's Centre in Bordertown SA, has 147 children on their waitlist and children wait on average 535 days to be enrolled.

"The waiting list jumps around. One of the main jobs of our part-time office staff is the waiting list and she spends lots of time forward planning. It didn't used to be like that."

"It's always a talking point at the local playgroups; who's got care, how far they are on the list. It's never simple how the waiting list progresses, and no one jumps the queue. Some families might get offered a day and don't accept so they go lower down the list." - **Suzie and Rikilee, Carol Murray Children's Centre, Bordertown SA**

Parents and carers are being pushed to the limit by trying to juggle caring for their children with paid work, an often unsustainable task. The stress and exasperation of searching for care while enduring tough, makeshift solutions in the interim is contributing to burnout in many parents.

"The high demand means that families often find themselves in difficult situations. For instance, some families have one child at our centre and another child at a different centre 30 kms away. In Beechworth, one family is expecting a new baby, but despite being on the waiting list, there is no available space for the child. This situation is not only inconvenient but also raises serious concerns about the mental health of parents, particularly those with partners who work away from home. In one case, a mother who was pregnant reached out for special support due to the stress of not securing a place for her child." - **Mandy, Beechworth VIC**

"I work full time in the grain industry. My expectations at work, for what I had to do, and be on road, were stressful. My employer at the time wasn't accepting. I really struggled having to juggle work and Crawford. She was a walk in the park, but I still got really bad glandular fever and was in bed for two weeks because I stressed myself out so much." - **Alisha Chinner, Lameroo SA**

"[T]he stress of returning to work with no childcare options has rocked me tremendously. I have ALWAYS been a girl who loved a plan: a plan for work, holidays, fun! I planned my return to work and had a rough idea of how it may look, but having no childcare for my youngest truly turned that on its head! I spiralled so badly into this hole of stress, I could not see how I was ever going to make this transition back to work happen! I found myself in a GP clinic sobbing hysterically about how stressed I was and was referred to a psychologist for a chat! I had NEVER had a mental health care plan before and to have one over the stress of returning to work without daycare, it just astounds me that this was the most pressing issue for me!" - **Holle O'Donnell, Broken Hill NSW**



Families are exhausting their paid leave reserves to care for their children when ECEC is unattainable, or when children are too sick to attend ECEC. Parents and carers are left with insufficient leave to use for themselves: for sicknesses, holidays or respite.

"We both work full time, and have no childcare when daycare is sick/on leave or preschool is on holiday. We patch together care with grandparents and annual leave. My husband is a sole trader so if he's not working he's not earning... And I'm lucky to have some long service leave I'm burning through to cover it. Our nine-year-old has ADHD and so we have a very structured schedule to cope. Disruption costs us all money, time and peace." - Kate, Coffs Harbour NSW

"I work remotely and travel to Melbourne occasionally when required, though this takes a lot of forward planning with finding available carers. In some cases, my husband has taken carers leave." - Emma Avery, Wangaratta VIC

A parent is at their best when they are well supported. The mental health of parents and carers can affect the mental health of the children in their lives⁷⁵ Thriving families occur when they are supported to strike the work-life-family balance that best suits them, and ECEC access is an integral component for achieving this. Almost 60% of parents with poorer mental health have sought help from ECEC and school staff compared to 43% of parents with better mental health,⁷⁶ demonstrating an added benefit of ECEC access as a support point for parents.

"If you want to support a child, you must also support their family."

Stephanie Kemp, Tom Price WA

The impact it has on my family is that it has become a strain on my own mental health. Not being able to help provide for my family and to have that time away from my children has impacted me in a way that I did not expect. It has also impacted my youngest child because she desperately wants to go to daycare or school as she calls it. Being in that learning environment has really helped her thrive while working on her social skills to be able to interact with people her age. At the moment we have only a casual booking so we are only able to get a spot in daycare rarely which has really put a struggle on my family's routine and has impacted my ability to have a regular income.

Having a lack of childcare has really impacted the community in a negative way. Everyone in our town has little to no family support because we are so rural so there are many families who need to rely on daycare services. People who have gotten jobs in our town such as school teachers and other important roles in our community have had to cancel moving to town because they couldn't get childcare so they were unable to work. Because of this the youth of this town suffer because they don't have access to the learning experience they deserve.

Karlyn Gibson, Lismore NSW

My story is not unique, but it underscores the profound impact that a lack of childcare availability can have on families, particularly those with additional challenges.

In 2018, my first child was born and, as I was approaching my return to work, I had the (now-appreciated) privilege of selecting from several daycare centres in Lismore. I was able to tour the facilities, speak with the directors, and meet the staff that were going to be caring for my baby. This variety allowed me to choose a facility where I felt comfortable and safe, which was crucial for my peace of mind as I returned to work. Knowing my child was in capable hands, I was able to balance my professional responsibilities and family life effectively.

In 2021, I welcomed my second child, who required additional medical attention for the first 10-12 months of his life. During this time, I relied heavily on increasing daycare for my eldest. Thankfully, the daycare centre was supportive and accommodating, providing much-needed stability for my oldest child during a challenging period.

This wouldn't have been a possibility today, with the demand for childcare in the Northern Rivers region. I honestly hate to imagine what impact this would have had on our family if it were the case.

In February 2022, just six weeks before I was scheduled to return to work after my maternity leave, a devastating flood forced the closure of our daycare facility, leaving us without childcare. To this day, that centre remains closed, as do many others that were flood-affected in our community, a stark reminder of the fragility of our childcare infrastructure.

In desperation, I contacted nearly every flood-free centre in our area and, after many calls, was able to secure care for both of my children for three days a week in May 2022. Initially, the new daycare seemed great, but I soon began to develop deep concerns regarding the practices employed by the centre. I witnessed several troubling incidents where the centre used outdated and shame-based disciplinary methods, which harm a child's self-esteem but also hinder their overall development.

Children should be nurtured, and my oldest child's self-worth and confidence were undermined, yet to uphold my job and my financial responsibilities, I had to continue sending my children to this facility. Words cannot describe the pain and distress this caused.

I put my children on waiting lists for three other local centres. I saw overwhelmed centre directors with waiting lists over 150 families long, unable to keep up with the administration of such demand, and failing to keep track of my place on the list.

My oldest started primary school in 2024, and my youngest was offered a place at an alternative centre for two days a week. I started my own business but required more than two days a week of care. My current centre has over 180 families on the waitlist.



I am autistic and ADHD, and I have very low capacity at the moment, necessitating additional support with childcare. I applied for in-home care and was notified of a successful application on February 15, however, I have yet to find an educator to fulfil that position. I am still waiting for additional days or an educator, and my capacity is dwindling, not increasing.

I had my youngest on the waitlist to attend preschool when he turned three, starting in term three this year. This was supposed to ease some of the care pressure. However, the preschool informed me they cannot take any children turning three this year due to their lowered capacity. Again, a fail-safe option I had been clinging to all year has fallen through, leaving me wondering if I can make it through the year mentally, emotionally and financially.

I am deeply concerned by the lack of childcare availability in our area. It not only impacts the local economy but also leaves many families, particularly mothers, unsupported and overlooked.

I have missed out on much-needed support during the early years of motherhood. I am not alone in this experience, and the lack of availability of childcare is exacerbating these deficits.

This is an urgent call to action.

Compounding impacts

“Lack of childcare impacts on EVERYTHING!” - Holle O'Donnell, Broken Hill

All of the impacts described in Parts 1 and 2 of this report have a cumulative effect on regional, rural and remote communities. This throws parents and carers into a feedback loop: a perpetual cycle of stress, uncertainty and a reduced quality of life.

“Lack of access to childcare has significant impacts on me, my children, my partner, and our region. Personally, it creates a struggle to find a flexible job that accommodates unpredictable childcare needs, often resulting in financial difficulties due to the absence of a dual income. The constant search for babysitters or carers to look after children during work commitments adds stress and uncertainty.” - Darcie Holmes-Smith, Coonamble NSW

“It's not just the childcare that we juggle, it's the fuel costs, the time, the extra effort to, quite simply, work. Add to that the weeks when the daycare bugs hit or school holidays approach and that throws everything into an additional spin.” - Jules, Limerick NSW

“The workforce in rural areas is facing challenges. It's not just childcare, it's not just health, it's the whole workforce.”

If the Federal Government's goal of universal access is to be achieved, any policy reform, refinement and design must take these barriers into consideration, including easy transportation to and from the service. As well as being available and accessible, early learning services should be culturally-safe, high-quality, inclusive and affordable. Holistic reform that takes a child-centred approach is the way forward.

“There are cafes that are shutting their doors due to no staff, there's a housing shortage, there are no rentals in many rural towns. How can a worker on minimum wage afford to live there when the rental market is so competitive?” - Telia Simpson, Toowoomba QLD

For those who can access ECEC, there are also costs associated with early learning provision beyond the daily fees, as parents often have to supply extras. As Alisha Chinner from Lameroo in SA shared, “It's \$142.50 a day for 8am-5:30pm. We have to supply all our own food and bedding, they only supply nappies that give your poor child a rash.”

Regional, rural and remote areas often experience crises such as droughts, floods and bushfires. These events alone take a toll on families and communities, but also have a compounding effect when early learning centres temporarily or permanently close as a result.

“I live in Lismore. Our town and many surrounding us were rocked by the 2022 floods. As a result no daycare centre that was affected by the floods has reopened.” - Rachael Lane, Lismore NSW

There are many families who may encounter barriers when accessing ECEC no matter where they live. This can include families with children with disability and/or additional needs; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families; culturally and linguistically diverse families; single parent families; families with twins, triplets or more children; and lower socioeconomic families. Thus, these cohorts are faced with additional struggles when seeking ECEC in regional, rural and remote Australia. “[T]here is a lack of inclusive and culturally safe care, particularly for children with disability or additional needs, children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal children.”⁷⁸

“We never expected to have twins, and the financial impact of this is big enough. Despite research indicating that twins cost five times more than a singleton, Centrelink do not consider twins a multiple birth, so we have had no additional assistance with all the extra costs. Now we are faced with the very real possibility of me being unable to return to work.” - Sarah Hewett, Narrabri NSW

Rhi, Cunnamulla QLD

Our family had been living in a remote NT community in the NT since my eldest daughter was six months old. My husband and I were both working full time, but there was no childcare at all, and so we were juggling the care of our daughter for two years. It was so hard. I remember saying to my husband, “I can't do this any more, we need to change this up”, as we were both so wrecked.

We love the remote lifestyle. There's a certain type of people who live in these communities, and they become your family and look out for you. Our young kids feel safe and confident, everyone knows who you are, and they greet you in the shops. A lot is easier, but a lot is also harder.

My sister had been living in Cunnamulla for 10 years and was pregnant with her first baby. As I was pregnant with my second daughter, we decided to move there for a year while my sister and I took our maternity leave together.

We really loved being in Cunnamulla, and one of the first things we did here was suss out the childcare options. It felt like we'd have the best of both worlds: family nearby, and a childcare centre. I spoke to the centre manager and was told both my girls would have full-time care in 2024, so I could accept a teaching role at the school... My sister was also planning to return to a teaching role at the school, and my husband works on the Council.

Then, a few days before Christmas we got an email saying the centre wouldn't care for kids under two at all. So myself, my sister and another teacher who all had kids under two did not know what to do.

My sister decided not to go back to work and instead care for our three kids, so we're paying her to care for our two girls. It's the best case scenario for us... My sister was financially impacted by not returning to work, even though she was excited to look after the kids after working her guts out as a teacher for ten years, but it's not a long-term option. We're paying her almost four times the cost that we would have paid for daycare, as we don't have the CCS when paying my sister. But we are grateful to have this option as otherwise I wouldn't have been able to work.

The daycare can't always open as they are struggling to find staff. Sometimes people rock up to the childcare on Monday morning and are turned away as the centre doesn't have capacity, so it's pretty stressful for the parents.

One of the teaching aides at school has a child in daycare. She picked him up on a Friday afternoon and wasn't told anything, then received a message via the app saying the centre would be shut for a month - giving her family two days' notice to find a solution for a month of no childcare.

The other teacher that had a child moved from Cunnamulla so she could get care for her child. The school is short staffed but has managed to secure someone to fill my sister's position. He moved here from Brisbane and has young kids. He isn't sure if he can stay here long term. It's really hard for people coming to the community where there are good career opportunities but the reality is not the greatest for keeping people with young kids here.

The Department of Education is trying to help the school by hiring a teacher that can work across the kindy and the school so hopefully that will happen next term. We're just waiting to see.



PART 3

One size fits none

Australia's early education system has failed to deliver adequate supply for families in the regions. The current market settings are designed to encourage supply in areas where there is increased demand, generally urban and higher socioeconomic locations, leaving regional, rural, remote and lower socioeconomic communities behind.

"The current siloed ECEC funding and policy environment contributes to inequities and exacerbates vulnerability for rural children, families and communities. Approaches that work well in larger metropolitan and regional settings often do not fit in small rural and remote communities."⁷⁹

A 'one size fits all' approach will never meet the varying needs across the nation. No two communities in regional, rural or remote Australia are the same, as evidenced by the differences in composition and demographics, from regional townships to remote stations. While the impacts of ECEC inaccessibility are similar across the board, each community has varying challenges, and opportunities, which must be considered when implementing local solutions.

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA) advocates for tailored ECEC models in rural and remote areas. Their members "continue to raise concerns about the inappropriateness of current delivery models for geographically isolated families and difficulties associated with accessing child care and education in rural and remote areas. Specialised model/s need to be established for rural and remote families; programs designed to address the unique disadvantages and needs associated with caring for and educating children in geographically isolated locations."⁸⁰

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's (ACCC) Childcare Inquiry found that "no one size fits all" - a single approach to regulation is unlikely to deliver government objectives across all localised childcare markets."⁸¹ Rather, a mix of interventions is required.

Governments should take a holistic approach, and design bespoke services which will promote positive family experiences and deliver optimal early childhood outcomes. Many locations would benefit from wraparound services, where an early learning centre includes allied health services and other supports for families. Using early learning centres as a hub for the delivery of additional services would afford many families easier access to the support and health care they need, without having to travel great distances. The configuration of each "hub" would depend on the specific needs of the community.

This is of great importance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

"The research is clear - a one-size-fits-all approach to early childhood education and care is not effective. The 'mainstreaming' agendas of past policy eras have not been successful in building strong, empowering futures for First Nations children and families in Australia... Early childhood education and care must be holistic - offering localised, place-based approaches that wrap around the child, their family and the wider community." - **Dr Catherine Holmes, Research and Evaluation Specialist at Batchelor Institute**

"[A] child-centred model is likely to broaden beyond ECEC and include a suite of child development actors and activities. These would create a significant opportunity for early identification and intervention in a child's life."⁸²

"Our vision is a community hub: a boutique county-styled daycare service that delivers a warm and welcoming environment for children and their families. We understand how to run a rural early learning service that benefits the community - as we know our community. We won't just shut at 6pm, we will provide workshops, events and supports for families and other locals that bring them together and provide assistance." - **Josh, rural WA**

The pursuit of universal early education must include collaboration with the communities it sets out to serve. Place-based initiatives - "where people and agencies collaborate to address agreed issues within a defined geographic location"⁸³ - will work more effectively if developed and implemented in partnership with families, to ensure best outcomes for their children.⁸⁴

"We need an array of different thinkers to come up with solutions for rural childcare access. These thinkers have to be drawn from the increasingly big pool of families and communities directly affected." - **Courtney Jones, Hopetoun VIC**

The distinct characteristics of each community means a collaborative approach may look different in each location. In some areas, co-design may work well, in other areas innovative ways of communicating and working with the community may be necessary. It is important to meet the community where they are at.

If community consultation is poorly executed, it can further contribute to families' burnout and result in reduced engagement from the community.

Effective communication and meaningful collaboration will engage and empower families. Co-designed service delivery will set Australia on the path to universal access.

"Bruny Island is a state government trial site for three-year-old kinder, which hasn't started yet. We are two years into the four-year trial period, and it won't start for at least another six months. It's disappointing for everyone who has been involved in the consultation process and were looking forward to the 15 hours of care, as this is what we need."

"It's been a really draining and difficult process for the community. We've all given up hope but I'm so desperate for any sort of care that I keep turning up to the meetings to hold them accountable..."

"This just makes me think we'll just never get anything. They'll just put off renovations while trying to work out what to do, and then my kids will be too old for it and who knows if it will ever happen." - **Teisha Archer, Bruny Island TAS**



Wattle Range Council, SA

Wattle Range is a regional Council based in South Australia's picturesque Limestone Coast. It supports a population of approximately 12,000 residents across 13 townships - the largest being Millicent with a population of approximately 5,000 people.

There are 10 primary schools, three secondary schools and four childcare centres operating within the Council boundaries. Two of the childcare centres operate out of the Beachport and Kangaroo Inn Schools one day per week via a mobile childcare service, one is run out of the Penola Primary School five days per week and there is one larger Council-run childcare centre in Millicent that was established in the 1970s by Gladys Smith (OAM) - Australia's second female Mayor.

Gladys was a childcare pioneer, who established the aptly named Gladys Smith Early Learning Centre in the middle of Millicent's Housing Trust estate over 50 years ago to support the growing number of single mothers after divorce was legalised in Australia.

The centre has flourished over the years with accreditation ratings routinely achieving an "Exceeding" standard. The centre is accredited to accommodate up to 74 children, but its capacity is currently restricted to only 60 places because of a regional (and nation-wide) shortage of suitably qualified staff.

It has a waitlist of over 100 children that have nowhere else to go within a 50 km radius. To accommodate this waitlist, a new, larger facility will need to be built, but the primary limiting factor is the critical and widening skills gap of available childcare staff.

Council is working with both TAFE SA and Uni SA in nearby Mt Gambier to stimulate enrolments in Cert III, Diploma and Bachelor-qualified childcare and early learning education training. Only a handful of regional students are enrolling in these training streams every year, despite the extremely high demand for these skills within both the education and childcare sectors.

Council is also working through an Enterprise Bargaining process with its staff and has offered a substantial salary increase for Bachelor-qualified childcare educators in order to attract more people to enter the sector and upskill through these training pathways. Unfortunately, it is expected that it will take several years before these pay increases bear fruit because of the length of these training pathways.

We are also exploring options to pool resources with the neighbouring mobile childcare service to maximise staff availability across both entities and take pressure off the system at a regional level.

We are also holding high level discussions with potential partners on the concept of developing a joint child/aged care centre in the medium to long term future. It is hoped that this model could achieve economies of scale in areas such as facilities management, utility costs, catering, laundry and cleaning services as well as providing significant health and wellbeing benefits to customers at both ends of the age spectrum.

Unfortunately, those benefits will never be realised if we can't source suitably qualified staff to work there.



PART 4

A world where families and regions flourish

When done right, early childhood education and care is a game changer for families.

Access to high-quality, inclusive and culturally-safe ECEC sets children up for life, and enables parents and carers to strike a work-life balance that best suits their family. This is the policy reform that regional, rural and remote families deserve.

There are existing early learning services which are well suited to the communities they serve. However, they often sit outside of available funding criteria and struggle to expand, let alone remain open. With a holistic, universal approach, all levels of government can work in coordination to appropriately fund these services.

*“As a mobile service we are vital to small rural and remote communities as we are the only access these families have to early childhood education. Mobile early learning works with the fluctuating number of young children. We have parents continuously asking us to provide more hours but we cannot as we aren’t funded to provide anymore than 15 hours of early education hours a week.” - **Georgina Simson, Premier NSW***

“Rural communities need:

- 1. Funding for infrastructure*
- 2. Suitable governance structures to support early learning centres where market failure has occurred*
- 3. Support to attract and retain qualified early childhood professionals*

*“There are countless economic studies, childcare reviews, royal commissions and the list goes on. We don’t need more evidence. What we need is action.” - **Kirsty Starling, Kingston SE SA***

*“What I would like to see is for government-run services to take over from private providers or at least for providers to be required to meet demand.” - **Jessica, Suggan Buggan VIC***

CCOWS, Robe SA

The Child Care on Wheels Service (CCOWS) provides childcare in Robe, and a mobile childcare service to Beachport and Kangaroo Inn. We share a space in Robe with a kindergarten service. The kindergarten is run in a room across five days every fortnight and childcare is in that space on the other days. When the kindy is on, the adjoining RSL is used to run the childcare through a permanent agreement with the RSL.

The staff have to take big mats, trolleys and equipment across the spaces. We try to purchase stuff that's easy to move around. Some of the staff are ageing or have physical setbacks, so we have to select staff who can manage it.

With our mobile service, we have lots of equipment that gets packed into a ute and taken out to Beachport and Kangaroo Inn. It can be such heavy equipment that needs to be moved and long days, so we have to be careful to not put too much on our staff.

A purpose-built centre in Robe would allow us to look at offering more care to families. It would also allow us to build on site storage so that the Robe staff are not travelling to the storage shed to change over equipment, as we currently have our car and storage offsite, a five-minute drive away.

The waitlist at Robe has 45 children; 27 at Beachport; and 19 at Kangaroo Inn. Some families are across more than one waitlist.

I have families contact us every week, "When can my child get in?" At times depending on availability, I may not be able to offer care until the child is two. I find it really hard to have these conversations because I have to say "Sorry, no." When asked if care will be available the following year I am unable to promise if care will be available then either.

If people are lucky to have family, that's often who they have to rely on for care. But older people are still in the workforce, so having the grandparents babysit isn't as accessible as before.

When I first moved here we had no family and so even though my background is in administration, I had to clean weekends and evenings as we could not find care and my husband had to keep his job. There are other stories like that; people who are more highly qualified who work elsewhere in hospitality or cleaning.



It's the cost of living; people can't afford to live.

It would be amazing to have funding and offer more spaces. We have been approached to offer more care on Monday and Tuesday in Beachport but we would need the staff to be able to consider this as a viable option.

Our funding comes through the CCCF, which tops up our income above parent fees and the Child Care Subsidy. With more funding, we could offer more days to Beachport and Kangaroo Inn, however, we'd need more staff.

We put an ad out again last week; we're casting the net wide to get qualified people and people in training to do their Cert III.

Housing is reasonably priced, but there just isn't very much available. So it's hard trying to get someone into the area.

We do okay, we have an awesome team and good support from the council. We're very lucky that way, but there's a need for more spots. The major issue is staff.

- Dominique Turner



Where regional, rural and remote areas require new, purpose-built facilities, the delivery of new infrastructure must be cost-effective and efficient. Templates and plans for new buildings need to be readily available, and construction can be undertaken within a timely process, so communities aren't waiting years or decades for a new facility.

In rural NSW, a local Uniting Church Minister recognised the need for ECEC in his community, where nothing was available. He has proposed the establishment of a service in the church hall, which could be made fit-for-purpose, but has unfortunately encountered roadblocks in the development of this plan.

“Capital has been a huge hold up. We've been waiting for enough capital funding while watching construction costs go up. We know we will make the costs back from rent eventually, however we need the initial capital so we can open a service.

“Another issue is that the centre will not be big enough for some providers to step in. For example, one provider commented that because they pay above award wages they need a centre with 70 places to make it viable to run.” - Daniel Mossfield, Crookwell NSW

The onus of early learning service provision should not rest on the shoulders of community members. It is the responsibility of Australia's governments to ensure that our youngest generations receive access to high-quality, inclusive, appropriate care, and that parents and carers can maintain a work-life balance in the face of the rising cost of living.

“If a system is not producing the desired outcomes, the conditions of the system need to be changed.”⁸⁵

Universal early education is a long term vision; reform will not be achieved overnight. Critical to the success of early learning reform is the implementation of measured, considered and iterative actions.

“A universal ECEC system should be viewed as a fundamental goal for the future Australian economy. Achieving the superior quality and economic benefits of the Nordic systems cannot be done instantly, of course. But our ECEC policies should be reoriented and expanded, with a universal, publicly-delivered, high-quality, and affordable system akin to the Nordic benchmark as its end goal. That will require more substantial investments in ECEC funding, and its reallocation toward the not-for-profit and public facilities which deliver the best quality, and the largest economic benefits.”⁸⁶



In May of this year, The Parenthood launched a joint statement that outlined six steps towards universal ECEC access for the regions, backed by a coalition of over 50 organisations:

1. Implement strong public management of the ECEC system in collaboration with state and territory governments

The market cannot and will not solve the problem of equitable access in the regions,⁸⁷ which is made evident by the stark absence of ECEC services across many parts of regional, rural and remote Australia. It is the responsibility of governments to ensure service provision where the market will not provide. The Federal Government should work with State and Territory governments, as well as local governments, to manage, monitor, regulate, intervene in and shape the ECEC system to meet the objective of universal access.

The ACCC Childcare Inquiry's final report calls for governments to consider such a role, particularly in what it calls 'unserved' and 'underserved' communities.⁸⁸ The responsibilities would include to “monitor, regulate and shape childcare markets to ensure they deliver government objectives.”⁸⁹ The Productivity Commission's interim report on ECEC stated, “A stewardship model – where the Australian, state and territory governments better coordinate their roles in the ECEC system and share accountability for sector outcomes – should be implemented to address some of the challenges observed in the market, coordinate a more cohesive policy response and steer the sector towards universal access.”⁹⁰

Other recent reports into ECEC have recommended that governments consider stewardship. Both the IPART review of ECEC and the South Australian Royal Commission into ECEC recommended that their State Governments intervene in underserved markets and implement a system stewardship role. This would include working together with the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and relevant departments “to develop a coordinated, harmonised and simplified policy and funding approach to early childhood education and care.”⁹² The CPD has proposed a vision for universal ECEC where governments take on system stewardship, and the Federal Government for a national entitlement for all young children to access at least three days of free or low-cost ECEC per week.

The case for system stewardship is strong. As stewards of the ECEC system, governments should deliver a suite of measures, supports and interventions to establish and/or maintain early learning and outside school hours services and infrastructure in underserved regional, rural and remote areas. Similar to the role governments play in delivering primary and high school education, this would enable all children some form of access to ECEC.

“System stewardship is a holistic approach to governance. It acknowledges the complex and adaptive nature of developing policy and delivering human services in a systems context. At its core, it involves a steward or collection of stewards steering all system participants, including service providers and users, towards high-quality, long-term outcomes.”⁹¹

2. Offer a range of supply-side subsidies for ECEC providers in rural and remote areas

The Child Care Subsidy (CCS), which is a demand-side subsidy, is ineffective as a funding model for smaller rural and remote areas, where demand is insufficient to support a financially viable service and can shift significantly each year. Through CCS funding, there are simply not enough families and children in many areas to make it feasible for ECEC providers to operate.

Funding and grant opportunities do exist to serve regional communities, however, they are evidently insufficient given the continued need for ECEC in the regions. The Community Child Care Fund (CCCF) is too limited in scope and funding to adequately improve accessibility,⁹³ even with recent increases to the funding pool. “The CCCF needs to be radically overhauled... we recommend a supply-side payment that fully covers operational costs for high-quality providers, with funding distribution informed by evidence about community need as part of the multi-layered financing and policy approach for equity and inclusion.”⁹⁴

Direct, ongoing government funding through supply-side subsidies would protect the sustainability of rural and remote services when demand is low or fluctuates.

This approach supports and encourages providers to deliver services in other rural and remote communities, knowing they’ll receive funding regardless of enrolment numbers. Both the ACCC and Productivity Commission have recommended the Federal Government expand supply-side funding in “thin markets” (e.g. rural and remote communities);^{95,96} where demand is low.

The CPD has outlined a new funding model for the ECEC system in their Growing Together report where services would receive base funding to cover the costs of ECEC provision, and additional funding for ‘child-based differences’ and ‘cost-driven differences’.⁹⁷ Levels of funding could be contingent on conditions such as quality, affordability and staff wages, thus ensuring best outcomes for children.

The Federal Government should offer a mix of supply side options in partnership with the states and territories. This could include demand-oriented subsidies (on a ‘per child’ basis); block funding such as grants or payments for capital or operating expenses; and supports for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to be co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



3. Invest in quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early years services in rural and remote areas

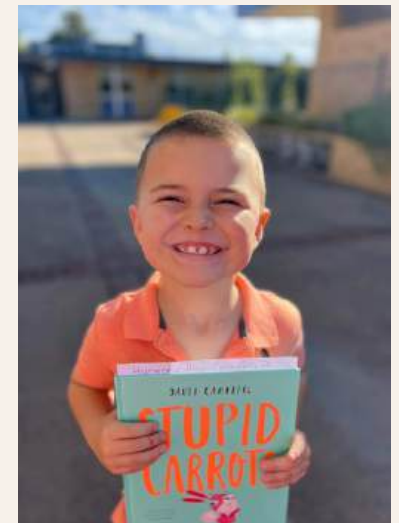
A high proportion of remote communities are composed of First Nations families, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accounting for 44% of all children in remote areas,⁹⁸ making tailored, community-led solutions for First Nations families especially important.

The Federal Government should provide a sustainable funding model to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) that are delivering early years services in rural and remote Australia. This model should value culture, ensure all ACCOs are well-resourced, and include integrated, wraparound services such as allied health. It is critical we expand the ACCO early years sector to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families can access services when and how they need.⁹⁹ The CPD recommends that ACCOs “may require additional government support to establish and operate, and consideration should also be given to integration with other services and funding streams (from various levels of government) to minimise duplication and confusion, so it is easy for families to access services”.¹⁰⁰

SNAICC, the national non-government peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, has recommended that the “Australian Government should commit to leading the design and implementation of a national, systemic and sustainable approach to funding ACCO-led integrated early years services, partnering with states and territories and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with a focus on ensuring equitable access and coverage across the country.”¹⁰¹ The funding should provide for all core features of an integrated, sustainable service, with built-in flexibility to account for changing community needs and inflation.¹⁰²

The Productivity Commission has recognised that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are under-represented in ECEC services because mainstream providers are not always available and affordable, or they may not offer culturally safe environments... ACCOs can struggle to source adequate funding to deliver tailored programs that meet community priorities.”¹⁰³ Their draft report on ECEC supports a sustainable funding model for ACCOs, and recommends that all ECEC services receive publicly-funded professional development for staff and better support to improve their cultural capability.¹⁰⁴

SNAICC’s report *Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services Final Report (2024)* sets out seven recommendations for a new funding model to ensure universal access to ACCOs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Such a funding model should “provide long-term certainty for sustainable service provision alongside flexibility to adjust funding regularly to account for changes in community needs and costs of inflation over time.”¹⁰⁵



4. Implement a regional, rural and remote national workforce strategy including culturally safe training for First Nations educators

A workforce strategy tailored to regional, rural and remote areas is imperative to safeguard the early childhood sector - which is under pressure from workforce shortages - and to facilitate its growth. Quality early childhood education and care starts with quality early childhood educators and teachers.

The Federal Government's announcement in August 2024 to increase early childhood educators' wages by 15% is a welcome initiative. A pay rise for the aged care sector, a similarly feminised and historically underpaid workforce, resulted in reduced vacancies: "...in the year after the Fair Work Commission announced a 15% wage increase in November 2022, vacancies for aged and disability carers fell 13.3%, while vacancies for child carers rose 13.6%. Clearly wages make a huge difference."¹⁰⁶

However, while a pay rise will certainly incentivise educators to join and remain in the workforce, further initiatives are required to curb the challenges facing early education staff in the regions. Professional development, relocation and locality incentives, and professional support and training will create positive workplace experiences for staff. New and experienced educators alike can benefit from mentoring and support.¹⁰⁷ There is "a need to recognise, support and strengthen educators' wellbeing and professional growth"¹⁰⁸ Initiatives such as these will lead to higher employee satisfaction and reduced rates of burnout.

"There are lots of things that require attention within our sector, however, the main worries that need to be addressed immediately are the recognition we receive; ensuring that working conditions and management uphold positive, supportive and safe environments; ensuring the operation hours are utilised by families that need them the most to reduce the need of staff at these times; and then of course the pay." - **Abbey Brown, Goonellabah NSW**



"Improving wages are important, but so is respecting the early childhood profession and building it up positively in the media. There needs to be marketing campaigns which show how important the profession is, and high schools and universities should also promote this." - **Katherine Wilson, Blayney NSW**

"We have a good relationship with the high school and have taken on numerous school-based trainees, with predominantly positive outcomes. With a solid and supportive RTO in place which supports school-based and adult trainees we have been able to fully staff our 96-place centre. Traineeships are an investment of time, resources and energy which can become an added pressure point during times of low staffing. RTOs can help centres to alleviate ... pressures by progressing trainees along their qualification in a positive manner." - **Sylvia, Nintirri Centre CEO, Tom Price WA**

"[W]e need to make early childhood education a desirable career choice. You can build the centres, but you need to fill them. It needs to be a good career choice for kids in schools. The starting point is educating new educators for these daycare kids." - **Anna Crowe, Codrington VIC**

The relocation of educators to the regions comes with unique challenges, including affordable housing, which can be costly. Staff who bring their families also need support so that their partners and/or children can settle into the community and gain a sense of belonging. "Additional barriers exist to attracting staff to regional and remote areas, including digital access and literacy, availability of housing and employment opportunities in the town for partners of early childhood education and care workers."¹⁰⁹

"Ironically, educators with young children are unable to work because they cannot find care for their children. 'We have had people apply for jobs but, because we cannot fit their children, we cannot hire them as they do not have anywhere for their children to go.'" - **Brogen Norman, Goondiwindi QLD**

"The main drama is housing. Rentals are hard to find in town. We've been lucky enough that the council gave us two houses so we could employ educators and house them. We've been advertising for 12 months for another staff member. But if we find someone we will have the problem of finding another house for them." - **Danielle Stevenson, Quilpie QLD**

"People would tell me to advertise educator roles and I'd say, 'Why? There's no housing. And the educator wage is not something you'd move for.'" - **Penny Cook, Keith SA**

Building up the local workforce is also key. It is a logical approach to train qualified educators who live in the vicinity and likely have established roots in the community. This would support workforce retention.

A regional, rural and remote workforce strategy should also include education and training models and pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in collaboration with First Nations communities. This will support ACCOs to train local First Nations people on country.



5. Improve family daycare and in home care provision

In home care (IHC) and family daycare (FDC) play a key role in ECEC accessibility in the regions, where there are no other available services. This applies in particular to smaller rural and remote areas, as centre-based delivery would be inadequate and irrelevant.

Currently, the IHC system falls short for rural and remote families, with a reduction in services and educators coupled with a rise in expenses. In home care is a drain on a family's finances.

"Although I am very thankful for in home care, the amount I am paying means I have to work weekends to make it all worth it. I am paying three times as much for 15.5 hours' of in home care per week than I was paying for 24 hours of family daycare per week." - Angie Dwyer, Casino NSW

The ACCC recommended that the "Australian Government should design policy options to better meet the needs of children and households for whom in home care services are intended to serve"¹⁰ Flexibility within the system would especially benefit agricultural families, who have a need for ongoing care provided by people who understand farm and property life, and would provide more access for families with twins, triplets or more children.



Measures to support the expansion of the FDC sector in regional, rural and remote areas, including a dedicated funding program and innovative approaches that better leverage the capabilities of family daycare, would greatly benefit families in these areas, particularly where demand is low or variable.

FDC also has the advantage of delivering non-standard hours care where appropriate. "An FDC educator can also offer out of core hours care, overnight and weekend care. This flexibility affords families who work shift work or on weekends access to quality regulated care for their children."¹¹

"FDCA [Family Day Care Australia] members who offer non-standard hours care tell us their service is highly valued in their communities and meets the needs of a range of families, in particular shift workers from a range of industries"¹²

However, the sector is in decline. Barriers facing FDC services currently include the set up costs, insufficient enrollment numbers, financial and housing instability, the lack of a work-life balance, administrative burden and the absence of employee entitlements¹³ "[T]he Australian Government should invest in measures to increase viability and promote growth for those services willing and able to operate in [rural areas]."¹⁴

A dual-educator FDC model could prove useful for some small communities. A fit-for-purpose house or venue is divided for two FDC services which operate independently of each other, but can embark on joint activities if beneficial for the children. This solves multiple issues as FDC educators are not solely responsible for the set up costs and administrative burden of the service, and there are higher enrollment rates for local families. It is important that state and territory regulatory bodies work with these services to advance solutions for regional, rural and remote communities.

"Family daycare has its benefits especially when there is no other childcare option available as the main childcare in town is continuously at capacity. However, the downside to family daycare is that there is one educator, this causes issues when they are unable to work due to sickness or leave as they are then forced to close the centre leaving the children without daycare. This is especially challenging when there are no other options." - Emily Bowden, Bourke NSW



Photo credit: Brigid Arnott

6. Provide interim solutions

Long-term solutions to deliver universal ECEC access will take consideration and time. Yet families and communities are struggling now.

"I've already applied for childcare for our second child, who is now five months old, but there's an 18-month waitlist from when I put his name down. It would be wonderful if we could get him into childcare earlier." - Emma, Bordertown SA

Shorter-term solutions will provide a stopgap for families while effective, longer-term solutions are rolled out. We urge the Government to consider a suite of interim solutions, such as more flexible in home care, support for rural and remote nannies and governesses, expanded family day care, playgroups, and mobile early learning services.

The Government should also consider abolishing the activity test, and implementing a national agreement on universal three- and four-year-old preschool.

Makayla Nowlan, Yamba NSW

I am living in Yamba NSW and am a single mum to a 19-month-old. I have been lucky enough to secure one day of care for my daughter each week.

When I was enquiring in the area, I rang 12 childcare services and this is the only day I have been able to get. Two of the daycares I rang told me that there were 100 people on the list before me and one other service said they were still working on their list from the end of 2022.

This has caused a lot of stress.

I am a registered nurse and teacher of nursing, and working is really important to me not only financially but also for my mental health.

The daycare service that I was able to obtain one day for is open 7am-5pm so I have been unable to work in a role where I am skilled and needed because the shifts begin at 7am.

As a result I have obtained a job that is 61 kms away and allows me to start work at 8am. My daughter's daycare service has agreed to stay open 20 minutes later for me to get home and pick her up which again causes stress rushing to drive home.

Needless to say, one day a week of work does not cover the cost of living. At the moment I am lucky I have savings; once that runs out I'm not sure.

My mental health continues to suffer as I feel like I'm not able to contribute to society and use my skills that make me feel accomplished.



Sarah R, Goondiwindi QLD

The impact of the lack of childcare access has been really hard on our family. I am currently on 12 months maternity leave and am expected to go back October 2024 but I won't be able to due to the lack of childcare and being the main carer for our eight-month-old. I am also meant to be studying a Cert IV in Education Support (which is required for my job) but I am struggling to complete it due to not having reliable childcare.

Like everyone else we have been finding it hard to keep up with bills and having to go without because we can't afford it. I know of an older friend who has had to find work at a fast food chain because they are the only business that offers flexible early morning and late shifts. She can't find anyone to look after her kids during the day and her husband works.

The lack of childcare, balancing work, finances is like a precariously-built tower of cards. One gust and it becomes a struggle to hold everything together and for some it unfortunately means not being able to hold it together at all.



Conclusion

The lack of access to ECEC in regional, rural and remote Australia is a pervasive issue that undermines the wellbeing of children, families and entire communities. As explored in this report, the consequences of ECEC inaccessibility ripple through every aspect of life in the regions, from the financial strain on households to the erosion of community liveability.



Part 1 revealed the significant financial burden that families face when ECEC services are unavailable, leading to reduced workforce participation, particularly among women, and contributing to the decline of local economies.

Part 2 highlighted how the absence of ECEC services exacerbates essential workforce shortages, leads to a host of social and developmental challenges for children, and reduces quality of life for families, ultimately driving some young families away from regional, rural and remote areas.

Part 3 of this report underscored the systemic failures of Australia's ECEC system, which currently operates under a 'one size fits all' approach that does not account for the unique needs of regional, rural and remote communities.

However, there is a path forward.



Part 4 offers a vision for a future where families and communities across Australia have equal access to quality ECEC. Achieving this vision will require bold, targeted actions, including strong public management of the ECEC system, supply-side support for providers in rural and remote areas, and strategic investment in the early childhood workforce.

It is imperative that governments address the challenges faced by families and communities in accessing early learning services. The Parenthood welcomed the recent wage increase for early childhood educators, set to commence in December 2024, which will ease the current strain on the sector.

Yet, it will take more.

The Parenthood is awaiting the final report into ECEC from the Productivity Commission and anticipates that the Federal Government will announce a plan for universal access based on this. All levels of government and all parties must come to the table and take strong action to ensure every single child has access to some form of ECEC.

Our regional, rural and remote children, families and communities must not be left behind.

"All we are asking for is the same access our urban friends have. Access to early learning opportunities. Why are our children less important? Why don't rural women deserve an opportunity to return to the workforce? Early learning and care is no longer considered a privilege, but is an essential service. Rural communities deserve this service." - Kirsty Starling, Kingston SE SA

Want to read more?

For the purposes of brevity, we have not included all stories in this report, however, every single account will be available in full on The Parenthood's website by the end of 2024. They each send a powerful message of the inequities and distress caused by limited ECEC; we thus encourage readers to visit our website when the stories are available.

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