

Attn: Hon. Julia Gillard AC

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

I write to the Royal Commission to express my concerns in relation to the complexities of accessing early childhood education and care (ECEC) and Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) in the Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu Peninsula and Kangaroo Island Region.

Access to ECEC and OSHC services in regional and remote locations can be limiting, extremely challenging and for many families non-existent. The difficulties we have faced accessing these services in this region are shared experiences amongst many regional communities in South Australia.

A general lack of affordable ECEC and OSHC services in the region has a direct impact on the economic performance of the region.

Beyond economic benefits, the provision of additional affordable ECEC and OSHC services will offer numerous advantages for children and families in our region. More children will have access to early education, social experiences, and early intervention health care. This will set better lifelong projections for the children in our community, with research providing evidence of higher education attainment and greater lifelong learning, social and wellbeing outcomes.

In majority of cases due to market failure, regional families are left to find their own solutions to the lack of ECEC services in their communities, with little support from local, state, or federal governments. This is frustrating, considering the current skills shortage across KI and nationally, where a significant portion of the workforce, including skilled workers, are unable to work due to the lack of accessible childcare.

The absence of regulated ECEC services in our region, has led families to seek unregulated care being provided by individuals within our community. This poses significant risks for children, as unregulated care leaves children exposed to many vulnerabilities. It also costs significantly more for families to use unregulated care services.

Other members within our community have also assumed caring roles, including relatives and grandparents. This has subsequently limited their capacity to contribute to the workforce, whether in paid or voluntary roles. The implications of these arrangements influence regional workforce availability and the overall well-being outcomes of the community.

The lack of accessible ECEC services also directly affects family planning and population growth. Some parents in our community have limited the number of children they have in their families, due to the caring arrangements affecting prolonged absences from the workforce and financial disadvantage.

The impact also extends beyond individual families and into the growth and development of regional and remote areas. It becomes a barrier for families considering relocating or already living in our region. If families are not relocating or staying in our regions, it affects the ability of our communities, clubs, businesses, and schools to thrive and flourish.

Current Child care availability in the Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu Peninsula and Kangaroo Island region can be summarised as follows:-

Adelaide Hills	.313 available places per child
Mount Barker	.512 available places per child
Alexandrina	.266 available places per child
Victor Harbor	.351 available places per child
Yankalilla	.282 available places per child
Kangaroo Island	.324 available places per child

A childcare desert is a populated area where there are more than three children per childcare place, or less than 0.333 places per child aged four or under.

This is resulting in delays in return to work and demand being pushed onto other family members to provide childcare services, often for no fee.

It is known that areas that have higher childcare supply have a higher percentage of mothers in the workforce. This has a positive impact on economic activity in these areas and would justify childcare places being further funded in the areas that have a lesser supply.

Access to quality childcare has enormous impacts on the current and future lives of Australians. Yet our research shows that current policy settings mean that where Australians live still plays a significant role in whether they can access this crucial service.

It doesn't have to be like this. Research from Victoria University's Centre of Policy Studies shows that investment in childcare almost pays for itself, largely due to higher workforce participation. Other research highlights how Australia can get the most out of childcare by making it more affordable, reforming parental leave and better linking the early learning sector to the health system.

Australians deserve much better access to childcare and a system that supports families to make the decisions they believe is best for them. Most importantly, children need a system that meets their needs so that they can have the best start in life, regardless of where they live or the income of their parents.

Case Study 1

As a first time Mum finding childcare in Strathalbyn has been challenging, stressful and tough.

Our child is 5 ½ months of age, in the early stages of pregnancy, I had our name down at a childcare in Strathalbyn, at that time there were two childcare Centres operating. Our child was due to start care mid-2023, in the last few months, since the other Centre has closed our names have been removed from the continuing Centre, due to "emergency care" required for children who were going to the now closed Centre. We now must wait until the end of January 2024 for a spot to become available. No matter how organised we were, the circumstances have changed beyond our control, and have left us with no options!

Due to the other Centre closing in Strathalbyn, demand for care has risen and it is now near impossible to get care locally, whether it is an approved Family Day Care, or Child Care service, and travelling outside of Strathalbyn to access care is not sustainable, nor is there the availability.

My husband works 330km away, and often travels further for his work as a shearer, as a family, in the current world we live in, I need to return to work to remain financially stable as a family. But for me to return to work, I need care services for our child, as most of the time, I am solely the responsible parent.

As it stands, we are having to pay a babysitter so I can return to work, but this means we cannot access the Government incentives like subsidies and the cost will outweigh the benefit.

As a first time Mum and in my view, Strathalbyn needs more access to Child Care Services as the demand is only going to increase with the population growth. From what I understand, since the other Centre has closed 60+ families have been affected!

Case Study 2

From the perspective of Strathalbyn resident – finding suitable childcare has been very difficult.

I have two children, one aged 2.5 years and the other 8.5 months. The 2.5-year-old has been in childcare since he was 11 months old and at that time there wasn't an issue getting him in as there was two centres in

town so demand wasn't as high. Since the other centre has closed – demand has skyrocketed and trying to get my 8.5-month-old in has proven impossible.

We have been told we will need to wait until 2024 to get a spot at the same centre my son is at. My husband and I both run our own businesses with no employees, meaning if we don't work, we don't get paid. But we can't work if we can't get childcare. It's a vicious cycle. I work from home, and my husband is a landscaper so works all over the Fleurieu Peninsula, so it doesn't make sense to leave Strathalbyn to access childcare. If we did, we'd spend a minimum for 2 hours a week in transit when we could be working or spending that time with our children.

Further to that – we aren't even impressed with the only centre left open in Strathalbyn. So not only are there no options in terms of availability, but there's no options to vote with your feet if you're unhappy. We must take what's here and deal with it.

It's wonderful the government offer incentives like subsidies, particularly for the second child to have mothers of multiple children return to the workforce. But unless you can access childcare or an approved family day care, these subsidies are invalid. We are currently having to pay a babysitter to assist with our second child so I can return to work, but the cost is outweighing the benefit. However, I need to be able to continue my business, otherwise I face losing both prospective and long-term clients.

In my view, Strathalbyn really needs another one or two centres to fill demand and to be able to offer residents options, particularly as the town's population has increased significantly and is only increasing more thanks to the rapid growth in residential development.

Case Study 3

As a family based in western Kangaroo Island, we have had no access to any form of regulated childcare service or OSHC for our children. The closest childcare and OSHC services are in the main township of Kingscote which is a distance of 75km from our property, and it isn't feasible to undertake a return trip twice a day (300km) to access. The childcare service based in Kingscote, has also been at full capacity for some time and has a long wait list for any vacancies.

The lack of access of these services has directly impacted our family and my career. Due to these constraints, I have been unable to continue working in a professional capacity in the field which I'm qualified, Human Resource Management. At times we call on family and friends to assist with caring for our children. This is the only option we have for childcare. Personally, the consequences for not having access to a childcare service has affected my long term career prospects and due to operating a multi-generation primary production enterprise, we don't have the capacity to relocate.

Many members of our community share the same sentiments as mine, in relation to the lack of childcare available in our region. Several community members formed a working group for our region to try to find solutions to this problem. The group surveyed the community several times and the demand for a childcare service in our region is more than adequate and sustainable. In 2021, the number of families and children who expressed commitment to use the service was 45 families and 76 children. We are concerned moving forward that the lack of provision for childcare services impacts the availability of skilled and non-skilled workers, standard of living, economic and population growth in our region.

Yours faithfully

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