

The Commissioner
Royal Commission into ECEC
GPO Box 11025
Adelaide SA 5001
(RoyalCommissionECEC@sa.gov.au)

15 March 2023

To Whom it May Concern

In the 2022 election the Labor party recognised that improving the Australian childcare system as fundamental economic reform was welcomed. The Labor party policy primarily addressed the funding issues associated with childcare which is appreciated. Unfortunately, in many rural areas of Australia the benefit of the increased childcare subsidies cannot be realized as there is a shortage of childcare places; it is this facet I wish to bring to your attention.

I am writing to you, with the benefit of over 50 years experience in childcare both nationally and internationally, to highlight the ongoing childcare accessibility issues in the hope that you will make early childhood education more accessible for families across South Australia, in the more remote areas and the on the Eyre Peninsula. As highlighted in the Mitchell Institute report *Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare in Australia* dated March 2022, the South Australia electorate of Grey, which covers the Eyre Peninsula, has the worst access to childcare in Australia. In fact there is one child care position available for every 7 eligible children in this area.

Access to childcare is increasingly critical to Australian children, families and the economy especially given the increases in the cost of living and high rates of child vulnerability in rural areas. Using my town of Tumby Bay on the Eyre Peninsula as an example there is a shortage of childcare places to support the community. In Tumby Bay, childcare is provided through limited rural care and preschool rather than through **centre-based childcare**.

Rural care in Tumby Bay was established in 2002 to provide 5 days a week childcare for a small number of children under 5 years of age as the traditional model of **centre-based childcare** was not viable. The preschool operates 2.5 days a week to align with the eligibility of 15 hours of preschool per child. The two organizations operate from a single building with a licensed capacity of 45 children, however **on average** approximately 27 childcare positions per day are offered. The failure to utilize the available capacity is due primarily to organization, although funding and the availability of childcare staff contributes.

The current organization is outdated and there is an urgent requirement to change the provision of childcare in Tumby Bay including the need for **centre-based childcare, which would allow the available building capacity to be more efficiently and effectively utilised given different regulations**. This would also provide local job opportunities for school leavers and those who have completed the Certificate III in Early Childcare.

In 2022 the Australian Bureau of Statistics identified Tumby Bay on the Eyre Peninsula as having the second highest fertility rate in Australia at 3.41 babies per woman. The growth in the region, increased birth rate and the need for women to work to meet increased living costs and worker shortages, have resulted in insufficient childcare places to meet the demand. This adversely affects the economy, female participation in the workforce, children's development and burden of providing care being placed on families, especially grandparents. Given Australia's aging population and on average decreasing fertility rate everything possible should be done to support areas of growth.

The lack of accessibility to childcare results in women being unable to return to the workforce. Mothers are forced to stay at home to look after their children, which often involves leaving professional careers, placing significant financial burdens on families and exacerbating already understaffed local services, such as the medical and teaching profession. In many cases families are working outside the district or leaving the area due to inadequate childcare support.

The current childcare system, which falls jointly under Federal and State funding, does not meet the growing community and workforce needs. An option for a short-term solution while further options are being considered is to collocate the preschool with the existing Tumby Bay school. This provides benefits in that the preschool only operates during the school term, is aligned with school operating hours and allows parents to drop off/pick up

children from one venue at peak times. This is a common practice in city areas including Adelaide. It would allow the current Rural Care/Preschool building to achieve optimum utilisation, without a major funding impost.

The community of Tumby Bay has recently formed an “Action Group” in an attempt to resolve the problem and has written to the Federal Minister for Early Childhood Education, Dr Anne Aly MP, for assistance. The Minister urged us to bring the matter to your attention; to that end I have attached papers detailing the situation in Tumby Bay – these papers have been sent to the Federal Member for Grey, and the State Minister for Education.

As can be seen from the attachments, funding is not the only problem. It is the lack of childcare places brought about by an inflexible and out-dated system; a problem that should be relatively easily fixed given cooperation and free thinking by the parties involved. It is also a problem that is mirrored in other areas of the Eyre Peninsula.

I am bringing this to your attention in the hope that it will give you a more “in depth” understanding of a widespread problem in rural area childcare provision and may assist in the resolution of the problem in our community. It is a “now” problem!

Nancy Stewart, OAM

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Attachment: Shortage of Childcare on Eyre Peninsula

SHORTAGE OF CHILD CARE ON EYRE PENINSULA

There is an acute shortage of Child Care on Eyre Peninsula, as detailed in an article in the Advocate Newspaper written by Adam Sheldon titled “No Access: Australia’s worst child care electorate”. I wish to concentrate especially on Tumby Bay.

Whilst in Tumby Bay we have both “Rural Care” and Kindergarten there are insufficient places to meet demand, partially due to funding, but mainly due to organisation. This is resulting in:

- The inability of many in our community to work in our economy
- Many local businesses are unable to find required staff
- Grandparents / older carers dropping out of society to mind children
- Parents moving out of the Tumby Area to gain child care and employment
- The loss of expenditure in our area as parents who work outside our district, spend during their work breaks

The aim of this paper is to outline a simple and quick solution to this problem for our area; possibly a solution that could be used in other areas of the Eyre Peninsula.

Currently the number of child care places in Tumby is severely restricted by the housing of both the Rural Care and the Kindergarten operating from the same building. Both Organisations are licenced by the Department for Education (DfE) and operate from a single building with a licenced capacity of 45 children; however this target is not being met on a daily basis for the following reasons:

- The Kindergarten, which only operates for 2^{1/2} days a week from 9 – 3 during school terms, is limited to 30 positions per day
- Rural Care, which can operate 5 days a week from 8 – 6 for 50 weeks a year, is limited to 14 positions a day when Kindergarten is operating and to the building capacity for the other 2^{1/2} days of the week.

Child care for less than a full week has no attraction and is less than useful for working families. Perhaps this is why a number of positions in Rural Care remain unfilled and the optimal use of existing facilities is far from achieved, despite a desperate need for child care.

A Possible Solution:

Separate the venues for Rural Care and Kindergarten. That is, have separate campuses for each type of care, thus ensuring that 5 day a week care is available for those requiring it

Discussion – Kindergarten:

As stated earlier both organisations are licenced by DfE, but Kindergarten is the care that immediately precedes entry into school at Reception level. Currently each afternoon a bus is sent from the school to the Kindergarten to pick up children and transport back to the school so that they can catch their area school buses. The reverse applies each morning. The area where the children are loaded/unloaded is on the roadway and is dangerous for young children at this very busy time of day; it is also inconvenient during inclement weather.

If this facet of child care was relocated adjacent to the junior school area of Tumby Bay Area School (TBAS) for its 2^{1/2} days of operation per week then the difficulties outlined above would be solved. Also the Kindergarten aligns completely with the school timings (9 to 3) and only operates during school terms

Discussion – Rural Care:

If Rural Care operated from a dedicated building for its operation of 50 weeks from 8 to 6 it would exponentially increase the capability of providing the much needed child care in our District. The current area from which it operates would be ideal for the operation of this facet of child care and would ensure that the facility is used to its optimum capacity

Discussion – General:

Such an approach may seem radical, but considering the lack of progress in solving the problem of inadequate child care in our District over the past 20 plus years, it does provide a quick, easy and logical solution. It is time that we approached this problem head on, rather than letting it drift to yet another “talk fest”.

Is this approach really radical? It is already being applied in a number of areas in Adelaide where the Kindergarten has been co-located with the school. A few examples of this are at Hampstead, Blair Athol, Prospect, Wandana, Northfield and West Lakes Shore.

A further restriction that is often not fully appreciated of living in rural areas is the lack of public and support services, such as public transport, medical services and a very limited labour pool to draw from. These concerns are further detailed in Annex B and are exacerbated by the current very high cost of living.

Conclusion

Child care is needed for community health, but, it must meet community needs; NOT just fit into the very restricted current program of 2^{1/2} days a week and, it MUST be available widely on a 5 day a week basis. The concept outlined above achieves this requirement.

(N.E. Stewart)

Footnote:

Nancy Stewart has been involved in child care for over 50 years, both nationally and internationally.

She was a Director of a 90 place Kindergarten in Canberra (ACT), a Validator for the National Accreditation Council and has been awarded an OAM for working with children

Addendum

As an addendum to the problem of child care; the community has attempted to find an interim solution by the creation of a “Song and Play Group” at the Tumbly Bay Uniting Church. This group has been established for children aged 1 to 4 years and their parents/carers. The parents/carers who use this group have all commented on how it is benefitting them and their children.

It further verifies the need for additional child care support in our community.

Appendices:

Annex A: Kindergarten and Rural Care Numbers May 2022

Annex B: Restrictions of Remote and Rural Living

Kindergarten and Rural Care Numbers – May 2022

| DAY | KINDERGARTEN | | RURAL CARE | | TOTAL | LICENCE | SHORT FALL |
|------|--------------|--------|------------|-------|-------|---------|------------|
| | a | b | a | b | c | d | e |
| MON | Nil | | 18 | 8 – 6 | 18 | 45 | 27 |
| TUES | 20 | 9 – 3 | 14 | 8 – 6 | 34 | 45 | 11 |
| WED | 20 | 12 - 3 | 14 | 8 – 6 | 34 | 45 | 11* |
| THUR | 20 | 9 - 3 | 14 | 8 – 6 | 34 | 45 | 11 |
| FRI | Nil | | 14 | 8 - 6 | 14 | 45 | 31 |

LEGEND:

1. a Denotes number of children currently using the service
2. b Denotes time that the service is available for use
3. c Denotes total number of children using both services
4. d Denotes total number of children licenced for the premises
5. e Denotes underutilisation of the facility
6. * Denotes half day. Total shortfall is really 31 for the morning session.

NOTES:

1. Because Kindergarten only operates during school terms, that is 40 weeks per year, and Rural Care operates for 50 weeks per year, under utilisation rate is even greater
2. Bookings to date for 2023 for Kindergarten are 25.

Restrictions of Remote and Rural Living

Shown below are a number of restrictions that are not necessarily fully appreciated by those servicing rural and remote communities.

1. Medical Services: The difficulty in gaining doctors and nurses to serve in rural communities has been widely publicised. What has not been enunciated are the reasons. The following reasons have been given by medical staff for not working in our community:
 - a. A doctor from Queensland was recruited to practice in Tumby Bay District. On reviewing the ability to gain child care, he refused the employ.
 - b. Nurses are being employed from agencies in Adelaide on a “fly in – fly out” basis as a number of local nurses cannot gain child care. In one instance a nurse is able to work 2 days a week because her mother in law drives from Cleve to Tumby, a distance of 100Km each way, to mind the children.
2. Limited Labour Pool: Almost all businesses in our district are suffering from limited local labour. Again this has been widely publicised, but the root cause has not been publicised. Here are some examples
 - a. A mother drives her child to Port Lincoln for child care on work days so that she can work at the local Chemist shop. The care is not available in the district.
 - b. A number of young mothers wish to return to work, but have not been able to gain local child care. This has been verified in the local “Song and Play Group” and is the reason that it was started.
 - c. Medically a number of mothers need “a break” from child minding. There are meant to be positions available to cater for these medical requirements and emergencies. In our area they are not!
3. Employers, in most cases, need their employees to be available on a 5 day a week basis, not a half day or 2 ½ day basis to fit in with the current program. This is not meeting the requirement and so the total program is underutilised, not because of a lack of requirement, but because of a lack of suitability for the need.
4. It is also necessary to consider the long distances traversed in the country and the lack of public transport in having child care available on a half day basis. It is impractical and therefore underutilised.
5. Finally the additional cost of both fuel and food in the country effects the utilisation of the service as it is currently structured and located.