



Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Submission May 2023



“Working with our Rural & Coastal Communities”

Lower Eyre Council



Site context

The Lower Eyre Council is largely a rural community, interspaced with small country and coastal towns on Lower Eyre Peninsula. Lower Eyre Council encompasses an area of 4,754 square kilometres with 709 kms of coastline. The resident population is 5,910. Agriculture, aquaculture and tourism are the largest economic drivers.

Cummins is a rural town located in the middle of Lower Eyre Peninsula. It has a township population of 748 (ABS QuickStats 2021), however services surrounding communities including Coffin Bay, Wangary, Coultas, Wanilla, Edillilie, Yallunda Flat, Cockaleechee, Yeelanna, Karkoo, Kapinnie and Mount Hope. This means Cummins provides service to a catchment of approximately 2500 people.

Cummins has a co-located Department for Education school-based Preschool and long-day care Rural Care service, situated on the Cummins Area School campus which provides education and care services from birth to Year 12. Current site enrolments are stable at around 440 each year.

Rural Care is open for 50 weeks of the year (the service can close for up to three weeks over the Christmas and New Year period in consultation with families). Rural Care is also approved on a termly basis to provide after school care for preschool and school aged children from 3-6pm on Tuesday and Thursday.

The Preschool and Rural Care building has an overall site capacity of 44 children. Site capacity is determined by the physical nature of the facility.

Children who turn 4-years-old (prior to May 1st in the current year) attend Preschool as one group for two full days every Tuesday and Thursday and every Wednesday morning from 8.45-10.45am. This year will see the introduction of mid-year intake for Preschool with children turning 4-years-old from 1st May to 31st October being eligible to start preschool at the start of Term 3. Mid-year intake will not be introduced for those children transitioning from Preschool to Junior Primary until mid-2024.

Current Preschool enrolments are 22 students with a further 14 students potentially starting in Term 3 as part of the first mid-year intake. With a combined Preschool enrolment of 36 students, this potentially leaves only 8 places for Rural Care to not exceed the overall site capacity for the second half of this year.



ABS Quickstats

Rural Care operates under a two or three-worker model depending on the number of children in care. Numbers in care are dependent on;

- Site capacity restrictions
- Age of children in care
- Staffing availability and capacity

Legislative requirements set staffing ratios for Rural Care depending on the age of the children in care.

Age of child	Educator to child ratio
Birth to 24 months	1:4
24 months to less than 36 months	1:5
36 months up to and including preschool	1:11
School age (after school care)	1:15

Current Department for Education policy does not allow for any extension of the Rural Care service beyond a maximum three-worker model, regardless of site capacity or demand.

The Cummins site also hosts a playgroup program which operates each Monday morning for two hours during term time. An Early Childcare Worker facilitates this program and children attend with their parent/carer.

It must be noted that the Cummins Rural Care service was initially established, and then further extended, using community grants through the Cummins District Community Bank. More than \$338,000 has been provided to Rural Care through these community grants in the past 23 years. Lower Eyre Council also provided \$28,000 to establish Rural Care and has provided an additional small grant for preschool playground upgrades.(Note Appendix B - Background)

There is one family day care provider in Coffin Bay, however there are no other family day care providers outside of Port Lincoln. Port Lincoln is over 65km from Cummins and 45km from Coffin Bay and is the only other regional centre where long-day care can be accessed.

For any family working in the northern communities within the Council boundary, accessing care in Port Lincoln is not feasible. As Cummins is the predominant service and educational centre for these communities, it makes sense for additional expansion of child care services in this location and further review of demand in Coffin Bay.

Demand

Cummins has outstripped the existing Rural Care Service with 46 families currently looking for childcare. Some of these families have more than one child requiring care, and some have been on the wait list for more than two years.

This data is based on those families who have completed enrolment applications to the centre or are on a waiting list for placement.

The most significant pressure point is care for children under two years of age, primarily due to tighter educator-to-child ratios and demand for care at the end of traditional 12-month parental leave periods.

Cummins Rural Care Demand - March 2023										
Age	Monday care	Monday waitlist	Tuesday care	Tuesday waitlist	Wednesday care	Wednesday waitlist	Thursday care	Thursday waitlist	Friday care	Friday waitlist
Under 2	1	31	3	34	4	37	1	43	1	39
2-3	5	6	1	13	3	14	3	10	3	11
3-5	12	2	8	13	12	14	10	13	10	11
After school	n/a		10	3	n/a		10		n/a	

Three-worker model operates on Monday and Wednesday. Two-worker model operates on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday.
Rural Care currently has 46 families looking for care.

Cummins Preschool enrolments - 2023

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday*	Thursday	Friday
Term 1/2		22	22	22	
Term 3/4**		36	36	36	

**First mid-year intake to Preschool. Mid-year intake for Foundation at School will not occur until 2024.

*Each child is entitled to 15hrs of preschool each week. Full-day sessions run on Tuesday and Thursday and a two-hour morning session each Wednesday

NB - Site is also used for Playgroup program on Monday morning for two hours during school terms.

It must be noted this table includes some requests from families who have placed their child on waiting lists for multiple days when only needing part-time care (ie they have flexibility with the days they work and are happy with whatever day they can access).

It does however reinforce the findings of the 2022 Childcare Deserts and Oases: How accessible is childcare in Australia report by the Victoria University¹ which stated there were 0.008 places per child on Eyre Peninsula.

Community consultation feedback in 2022 as part of the development of the Cummins Township Master Plan for Lower Eyre Council (currently in draft) reinforced the need for additional care places in Cummins and surrounding communities as it was constraining employment opportunities. The draft Master Plan also acknowledged that it was likely to be difficult to attract a private sector operator given the economies of scale to underpin investment and that they would likely seek a predominance of full fee-paying placements.

Community Impact

Access to care is creating significant community angst and frustration and families are coming under increasing pressure. The impact on the ability for parents to return to work after having children, study, or access respite care are well documented and create significant barriers for families juggling the need or desire to return to work, work additional days or join the workforce for the first time.

Cummins and the surrounding communities are facing a workforce shortage with current positions available in the following areas;

- Rural agribusiness and agriculture
- Food and hospitality staff
- Health
- Administrative staff

While some of these opportunities could be filled by local people with relevant qualifications or skills who are unable to fill workforce gaps because of childcare issues, some require specialised skills not available within the community. The lack of childcare is an additional barrier to recruitment of professional or specialised staff for a rural community where isolation is already seen as a negative. This has been specifically experienced as part of recruitment for health and education.

Historically many parents relied on extended family networks or grandparents to assist with care, however with people tending to work longer, retire later, or having moved into communities to take advantage of workforce opportunities, these networks are often not available.

Barriers

Complexities around childcare access include;

- Site capacity – Cummins Preschool enrolments take precedence over Rural Care and after-school care placements. Limit of 44 children on site at any one time.
- South Australian Department for Education policy - Rural Care is limited to a three-worker model regardless of site capacity. Willingness to expand this model by the Department for Education would provide greater flexibility but is not supported by the Department at this time. In addition, the Department has also indicated that if a private service was developed in Cummins that Rural Care would be phased out. The three-worker model currently operates in Cummins on Monday and Wednesday and a two-worker model on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday.
- Infrastructure – This sets the site capacity. Cummins Preschool and Rural Care is not sufficiently large enough to allow a three-worker model (or larger) on all days of operation. The Preschool and Rural Care building would need to be extended to increase site capacity if the three-worker model was extended, or if a private service was able to operate from the existing Rural Care site, providing an integrated service.
- Staff availability – There is a staff shortage which reduces the resilience of the Cummins service. Fridays currently only operates on a two-worker model due to staff shortages. Staff are required to be working toward or hold an approved certificate level qualification as a minimum standard, with at least 50% of staff working towards or holding an approved diploma level qualification or higher.
- Priority of access – Tiers of priority access mean many families may not receive care, or could potentially be bumped from their care place, because new enrolments have a higher priority. (Current priority access is given to children who are at serious risk of abuse or neglect, or a child of a sole parent, or parents who both satisfy activity tests for paid employment. Additional placement priorities are in place where demand exceeds availability). This becomes a significant issue when the site is already at capacity. The need for priority of access policy is acknowledged to give staff and families transparency around placement, however expansion of the service will reduce this pressure point.
- Pay rate – Differing awards mean pay rates within Rural Care are higher than the private sector. This means any transition to a commercial or not-for-profit model is also less attractive to existing staff.

- Private service attraction – The Cummins Childcare Working Group has previously approached private providers in Port Lincoln to assess interest in expanding services in Cummins. One provider had registered interest, however with no available facilities in Cummins, construction lead times and costs to establish a new, stand-alone service, it was felt this was not achievable at the time.
- Family Day Care – This model of private in-home care has been operating for some time, however there are limited providers in the Lower Eyre Council area and no licenced providers in Cummins. While there is room to advocate and support more Family Day Care providers, this model is unlikely to meet the current childcare shortfall. It may however be helpful for smaller communities such as Coffin Bay, Wangary or Poonindie.
- After school care – Cummins currently provides this on two afternoons per week. Staff for after school care are included under the Department's three-worker model which means that when after-school care is being offered, only two workers can be caring for children under school age.

Options

1. Expansion of three-worker model

Throughout the past four years the Department for Education has maintained that expansion of childcare services beyond the Rural Care three-worker policy was a community issue, there was no flexibility to extend this policy where communities were experiencing high levels of demand, and if a private service was attracted to Cummins, Rural Care would be phased out.

This approach has also hampered the delivery of after school care as staff providing this service were considered part of the three-worker model. As a result, the site had to make a choice between delivery of additional long-day care places, or providing after-school care on a limited basis to fit within the Rural Care policy.

Willingness to expand the three-worker model to allow additional staff and care places in those sites where existing infrastructure and overall site capacity allows, would provide an immediate solution and support communities where private providers have shown little or no interest in establishing new services.

Cummins Preschool and Rural Care has reached its site capacity, however this change to the Rural Care staffing model would provide flexibility, context and framework for staffing models. It is acknowledged that capital investment would be required in Cummins to increase site capacity, however this could potentially be achieved through Federal Government grant investment.

2. Integrated service provision

The Cummins Childcare Working Group has sought in-principle approval from the Minister for Education to allow a private provider to have access to the existing Rural Care site to provide long-day care through an integrated service (using a private or not-for-profit service provider) with a co-located public preschool service.

Again, infrastructure and site capacity restrictions remain a barrier with investment required for capital upgrades.

The working party is still waiting for a response to this request. Transparent policy development which creates clear guidance on how to create and manage integrated services may facilitate the provision of long-day care in regional communities.

3. Commercial/private service

Private service attraction to regional areas is difficult with the cost of establishing a new stand-alone private service a barrier to development. Access to suitable sites in Cummins is also difficult with limited land or premises available for this type of commercial development.

Department for Education has indicated it will phase out Rural Care if an alternate service was provided. Rural Care is a valued service which a high level of community support.

While a private service would be welcomed, on-going financial viability remains a challenge for any business and fee structures may make the cost of care unpalatable for some families. If the private service failed Cummins could be left with no child care service as Rural Care would have been phased out.

4. Not-for-profit service

This could be achieved by establishing a community-based and owned service, however without access to the current Rural Care site for possible expansion, the costs associated with developing a Greenfields site remain problematic. Grant funding is an option to offset these costs, however land purchase is generally prohibited, and requirements for co-contributions is a challenge. It is also reliant on community members to be part of a management board to support the governance of the site.

It must be noted that the community has already raised \$338,000 to establish the existing Rural Care facility on Department for Education land. It would be a difficult request to ask the community to walk away from this level of investment to establish a new facility on a new site.

Conclusion

Flexibility by the Department for Education to widen the three-worker model would be an immediate step in the right direction to support additional long day care or after school care places. Alternatively integrated services would be an option but still requires rural communities to attract a private provider where this has already proven to be difficult, or to establish their own not-for-profit groups which comes with financial risk that many communities maybe unwilling or unable to take up.

Regardless of governance models, investment in infrastructure remains a key stumbling block and needs to be reflected in State and Federal Government funding programs and guidelines.

Grant applications through options such as the Federal Government's Community Child Care Fund are problematic as this grant can only be provided to entities approved to administer Child Care Subsidy on behalf of families. In Cummins this is Rural Care, however the service is already working within the three-worker policy with little flexibility to accommodate the additional 46 families requiring care.

Appendix - A Cummins Child Care Working Group

The Working Group was established in 2018 to advocate for a solution to the childcare issue in Cummins and its surrounding communities.

This committee includes parents, Cummins Area School principal, Lower Eyre Council Mayor, Lower Eyre Council Economic and Community Development Officer, Cummins and District Enterprise Committee project officer and chair, and the Cummins District Community Bank Board chair. The Working Group is a sub-committee of the not-for-profit community group Cummins and District Enterprise Committee. This group has assessed demand for childcare services and has been in negotiation with the Department for Education on options to expand services in Cummins without success.

Key steps taken include;

- 2018/2019 – Cummins Rural Care included in a 3-worker model pilot program on non-preschool days in response to demand. This model remains in place.
- April 2019 – Parents surveyed to assess demand for care. The numbers of children requiring long-day care ranged from 21 at the lowest to 32 at the peak. This did not include those children who needed after school care which has a peak demand of 27 on Tuesday afternoon. Long day care demand sits in line with birth rates and Preschool enrolments over the past few years. Demand has since grown.
- Assessment of integrated service options - Site visit to Port Lincoln Community Childcare Service, discussions with Kingston and Jamestown communities.
- State Government launches Early Years Review which delayed further discussion with the Department for Education until outcome of the review was known.
- 2019 - Submission to PIRSA's Regional Development Strategy Discussion Paper by the Cummins Childcare Working Group. Child Care demand July 2019 tabled below.

Childcare Demand:

Age	Monday in care	Monday wait list	Tuesday in care	Tuesday wait list	Wednesday in care	Wednesday wait list	Thursday in care	Thursday wait list	Friday in care	Friday wait list
Under 2	4	7	2	11	2	9	3	11	5	7
2-3	5	3	4	3	2	3	5	5	3	3
3-5	6	1	3	4	5	-	1	4	7	7
After school	7	-	10	17	10	5	10	5	7	-
Projected total long-day care	26		27		21		29		32	

*** Please note that this demand grid includes the 3-worker model on Monday and Friday. Approximately 6 children will fall back onto the waiting list as of the end of this term.

- 2019 – Correspondence with Member for Flinders Peter Treloar and Member for Grey Rowan Ramsey and Executive Director of Early Years and Child Development advocating for support and expansion of care services in Cummins.
- October 2021 – Correspondence received from a private provider interested in establishing a service in Cummins. Working Group liaised with provider on demand.

- June 2021 – Lower Eyre Council wrote to Minister for Innovation and Skills Davis Pisoni advocating for assistance with training and staff recruitment. Opportunities were available for people wishing to study and enter childcare for the first time, but limited support for those already employed in the public sector (ie current Rural Care employees) to upskill from certificate to diploma level.
- November 2021 – Acting Manager Child Care Services Office for the Early Years advised the Department for Education would be open to considering the use of the existing Rural Care facilities by a private provider but that next step was to meet with potential non-government childcare providers to discuss service options.
- 2022 – Meetings with Department for Education early years team. Advised the Department would not consider a Rural Care model larger than the existing three-worker program. Acknowledged the complexities of the issue but no solution provided. Encouraged to seek a private provider to start a childcare service in Cummins, however if a private service did start Rural Care would be phased out.
 - Working Group contacted private providers in Port Lincoln. One registered interest in establishing a service in Cummins. Three Working Group members had a site visit and meeting with the owner in March 2022. With no available facilities in Cummins, construction lead times and costs to establish a new, stand-alone service, and concerns about NQIS ratings it was felt this was not the preferred option. Advised Principal Program Officer – Child Care Services of reservations in June 2022 and sought support to identify alternate community childcare models for Cummins.
- July 2022 – Lower Eyre Council wrote to Minister for Education, Training and Skills Blair Boyer seeking to expand childcare services in Cummins.
- July 2022 – Working Group meet with Sabrina de Rosa and Laura Francis from the State Government's Childcare Team in the Office for Early Years. The Working Party and Lower Eyre Council subsequently made a request through the Department to the Minister for Education, Training and Skills to gain in-principle support for access to the current Rural Care site to establish an expanded integrated service, possibly using a private provider. This request acknowledged any expansion would require an extension to the Rural Care building to gain additional site capacity, but that in-principle support for an integrated service was important to allow an assessment of all options to expand childcare services in Cummins. The Working Group is still waiting for a response to the request.

Appendix B - Background

2005 – Cummins and District Enterprise Committee surveyed families to identify demand for childcare.

2006 - Consultant Helen Ware employed to facilitate the establishment of a child care service. Consultancy funded by Community and District Community Bank grant of \$13,300.

Minister for Education and Children's Services Jane Lomax Smith advised that the Cummins Child Parent Centre was under 'active consideration' as a site for a Rural Care service with the final decision dependent on the building meeting regulatory standards.

Department of Education and Child Service was unable to provide financial support for capital improvements, with the Cummins community required to fund the estimated \$37,000 for extensions and upgrades.

Rural Care service would provide for four full-time places and three after-school places. Consultant advised that Family Day Care would still be needed to supplement Rural Care.

November 2006 – Cummins and District Enterprise Committee received \$37,000 from the Cummins and District Community Bank to upgrade the Cummins Child Parent Centre to incorporate a Rural Care Service.

2007 – Issues with licensing standards and building demands for co-located Preschool resulted in delays and re-scoping of building plans with cost-blow outs. Option to stage construction. Stage One – Nappy change area and bathroom. Stage Two – activity room.

2008 – Department of Education and Children's Services provides \$50,000 to capital works program. Lower Eyre Council provided \$28,000.

2009 – Cummins Rural Care established with nappy change/toilet area and small activity room.

2011 – Cummins District Community Bank funds \$8622 for plans for Rural Care Extension as demand for service grows.

2012 – Cummins District Community Bank provides additional \$110,200 grant for Rural Care Extensions which included extension to activity play area, new sleep room, office, storeroom and kitchenette.

2014 – Rural Care extensions completed.

2018 – Cummins Childcare Working Group established