

Att: Hon. Julia Gillard AC

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

via email to RoyalCommissionECEC@sa.gov.au

23Rd March 2023

Written Submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Dear Commissioner Gillard and Commission Staff,

We write to the Royal Commission to express our thoughts and experiences of early childhood education and care in our local region – the Southern Yorke Peninsula.

Our group is pleased that so many of the complexities, lack of access and disadvantage faced by regional communities across South Australia have the opportunity to be heard and inform solutions moving forward. In our experience, many of the most basic supports that should be available to young children and their families simply do not exist in our region. This greatly impacts developmental outcomes and intergenerational life trajectories for our local community.

The Yorke Peninsula (YP) Council area is vast, with a population of around 11,800 spread over 5,800km square. There are 42 townships spread across our council area, with key services such as Centrelink and major hospitals up to two hour's drive away for the most isolated of our communities. Approximately 480 children under the age of 5 reside in our region. At present, there are no long day care centres anywhere in our council region. Two small Department for Education Rural Care services exist, co-located with preschools, at Yorketown (14 Rural Care enrolment spaces per day) and Maitland (4 Rural Care enrolment spaces per day). One family day care service exists at Yorketown (though this provider is due to retire), and a handful of nannies provide private services.

Our group came together in 2020 in frustration and despair, after attempting to manage working from home and various other arrangements to maintain our professions while raising young children. Our group consists of Amy Honner (Speech Pathologist), Anna Phasey (Learning Together Educator and Entrepreneur), Katie Hughes (Social Worker) and Nadia Slade (Small Business Owner). All of us hold expertise and qualifications that allow us to contribute to our local communities, however the complete lack of childcare accessibility in our region made the return to any form of work extremely difficult. Each of us have relocated to the YP, a common scenario in our community, therefore do not have extended family support.

Amy, Katie and Anna in particular work with young families in our region, namely those most disadvantaged, and see time and time again families falling through the cracks with no access to services that could build their capacity to support their children's development. The local Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS) has always operated with two to three nurses in our region, but for the last 12 months one CaFHS nurse has attempted to cover the whole YP Council region working 0.7FTE. In 2022 wait times for a CaFHS appointment

blew out to almost 3 months. It is important to note within the YP Council area there are no paediatricians, lactation consultants, specialist nurses etc permanently based on the YP that can fill the gaps when essential services such as CaFHS are not readily available. Even more importantly, the vital mother's groups that CaFHS facilitated in the past no longer exist. These crucial informal networks often positively support maternal mental health and provide opportunities to grow community particularly for those women who have moved to the region and do not have family support nearby.

Over the course of 2020 and 2021, we released two surveys to capture data relating to community need for childcare. We had many anecdotal stories, including our own, but needed solid data as to the extent of the need in our region. We were inundated with responses from over 170 families (please see attachment 1: SYP 2020 Child Care Results). Over 190 children in our region at that time were identified as requiring care, but only 31.7% of those children were able to access formal care options – and in many instances not the amount of days/hours families needed.

Armed with this information, we honestly did not know where to turn next. We spoke with the Department for Education, Private Providers, Family Day Care and our local council – however no singular entity is responsible or accountable for the provision of this essential service. Each organisation was very willing to pass on details of other organisations that may be able to help, but we found ourselves in the hamster wheel feeling as though we were pushing mud uphill with no one willing to facilitate conversation that may lead to a solution. What we quickly realised was that no changes to increase of capacity of Rural Care services in our region were going to be on the table, yet private providers and local council felt we did not have the numbers to support a business case for the establishment of a purpose-built centre and service.

We felt differently - that we did have the number of enrolments required to support the establishment of a service *if* a suitable site from which to run a service was available. In our first survey, Minlaton was identified as the preferred location for most families if a childcare centre were to be established. With encouragement from our local State MP Fraser Ellis, we released a secondary survey to gather specific data on enrolment interest if a long day care was established at Minlaton.

Local families were quick to show their support with robust data providing unquestionable evidence that there was a strong local need and desire for long day care at Minlaton. To meet the reported need over 80 enrolment places would be required each day. The number of children requiring care was far beyond the capacity of our local council to manage a council-run service, yet any private provider would be taking a risk to set up business in our region without a facility from which to operate their service. The data from our second survey in 2021, along with numerous letters of support from families, community members, businesses and organisations provided the evidence which allowed our local Council to apply for grants to build a centre. Our findings were validated upon the release of the Mitchell Institute's *Childcare Deserts* report (2022) – our region is one of the worst for accessible child care in Australia. We were elated when our local council were successful in gaining funding to build a childcare centre in Minlaton through the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery grants program in February 2022. This grant was awarded only after our region experienced an incredibly frightening and destructive fire in 2019.

Watching the project develop has been so rewarding. Construction of the centre began this year, and our group has provided support through Selection Panel input and ongoing consulting with the successful private provider - Yorke Peninsula Learning and Care. The past three years have involved *hundreds, if not thousands of voluntary hours* from each of us, and we wish to highlight to the Royal Commission that it has only been since our youngest children began preschool and school, that each of us felt we had the capacity and persistence to proceed with advocating for increased childcare options for our community. We will not personally benefit from the childcare service we have been advocating so strongly for.

Our journey has been relatively short. While at times we all wanted to give up and felt as though we were banging our heads against brick walls, we also acknowledge that this project has progressed quickly with the incredible support of our council. We feel immensely saddened for those communities still advocating and working their way along this journey with no result in sight. We are in contact with many of these groups, some parents have been volunteering more than eight years advocating for their regions. Examples include townships of Chrystal Brook, Ardrossan, Port Broughton, Tumby Bay and Orroroo. Holding the hopes and emotions of a region's caregivers struggling daily with no supports is not an easy task. We also acknowledge that our specific skill sets allowed us to engage and collaborate with our community to develop the data and evidence base essential to the success of this project.

As part of the grants application process, YP Council commissioned a Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA). The CBA demonstrated that for every \$1 spent on the Southern Yorke Peninsula Community childcare project, over \$50 would return to community. The consultant who developed the CBA, along with local Regional Development Australia (RDA) staff, very rarely see a CBA with such solid return numbers.

Aside from the incredible financial boost this project will give our region, we are excited to see the changes for our wider community. Children attending quality early learning and care that supports their social, emotional, and physical needs. Early detection and intervention for children and families requiring support. Support for parents in the early years, including facilities from which to run parenting education and support programs. Nurses who no longer need to come home from night shift only to care for their toddler and pre-schooler when they should be sleeping. Teachers, Doctors, Lawyers and other essential members of our community who will now have the choice to contribute to the workforce if they wish. The capacity for our community to volunteer to support essential services such as our local CFS, SES and Ambulance. Caregivers who will have the chance to pursue learning and study opportunities. Grandparents who can now stay in the workforce as they are no longer required to care for their grandchildren weekly. Flourishing small business and entrepreneurial business pursuits that will add vibrancy to our region with a more flexible workforce.

These positive flow-on effects (and many more that remain unmentioned) are deserved by **all** regional communities. We implore the Royal Commission to strongly consider how our regional and rural communities can be better supported in the early years - starting with equitable access to quality learning and care.

Thank you for taking the time to read our submission. We look forward to representing our project and wider regional South Australian communities at the Royal Commission hearing on the 14th April.

Warmest regards,



Katie Hughes,

Amy Honner & Anna Phasey, on behalf of the Southern Yorke Peninsula Childcare Feasibility Group