

Attn: Hon. Julia Gillard AC

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

### **Challenges in Rural South Australia**

A geographic location and postcode should not be a determinant to access early learning.

But it is.

Imagine for a moment that you are one of many women living in rural South Australia. You might be a nurse and work in the local hospital, perhaps manage a primary production business with your husband or maybe even a Brand Manager for a small local winery. You love living in the country, the lifestyle, the people, the opportunity. It's a great place to raise a young family. When the time is right you choose to start your own family and take some time off work to care for your newborn baby for a while. You know you want to return to work in the future. You love your job, you have worked hard through university, built up your experience and you want to continue to offer professional skills to support your employer, your business and your community.

You know your combined work and home commitments are challenging but you are an important asset to the health, wellbeing and prosperity of your local community and want to contribute. But unfortunately there is no available access to a long daycare service within your town and for some women, you do not have an immediate and available family support network in the local area. But you need to go back to work or you may lose your qualifications or even worse a job that you love. So, what would you do? What did we do?

As rural women re-entering the workforce after having children it was an enormous and frustrating challenge due to the lack of accessibility of formal childcare options in Kingston. Travelling a 100km round trip to another town daily to access care, working limited or restricted hours and calling on local family and friends to care for the children were, and are a few of the common strategies we utilised. We have also frequently resorted to grandparents driving a 650km round trip to support our return to employment when no local options were available. This challenge remains for families, particularly women in rural, regional, and remote areas, and such strategies continue to be used by local families today, not through freedom of choice but because of necessity.

Inaccessibility to universal, regular long day care and OSHC services have a cascading effect throughout many South Australian small communities and have wide ranging impacts. It disadvantages the individuals, particularly women, who cannot return to the workforce. Their families who cannot access additional income to support their financial needs. The businesses, schools, hospitals, government departments and myriad of other workplaces that lose valued skilled and experienced employees. The sporting and community groups who can't find volunteers or participants as people have moved on because of a lack of available services. The towns and communities whose economic growth is restricted because businesses cannot fill vacant positions as there is no available workforce.

Most importantly, lack of accessibility impacts vulnerable children in our community who do not have a recognition of equity in adequate early learning opportunities to provide the support they need to thrive, tackle challenges and give them the best possible start in their first 1000 days.

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Kingston SE 5275 is a regional coastal town and area of approximately 2300 residents located in the Limestone Coast of South Australia, 300km from Adelaide. The shortage of accessible childcare services within our town has had significant and ongoing impacts on the developmental vulnerabilities of children, the health and wellbeing of families and prosperity of businesses in the Kingston area for over 40 years.

Kingston SE currently has an Early Learning Centre which originated as a Kindergarten established on community donated land, located in a residential part of town. It is a shared site run by the Department for Education that includes Kindergarten and Rural Care - a model of long day care available throughout limited towns in regional SA.

The Early Learning Centre has a total site capacity of 45 children with no possibility of expansion due to land size and the current governance structure prioritises children utilising the Pre-School (Kindergarten) service with respect to the number of children accessing the centre at any one time. It is not a purpose-built facility for childcare and there is no availability of OSHC services at this site, or anywhere else in Kingston for primary school aged children.

Many families in our community have experienced the anguish of excessive wait list times to access any early years education for their children. It is commonplace to put an unborn baby's name on the list and frequently still not be able to access care for them until they are 2-3 years of age. This is unacceptable and needs to be addressed.

We are a passionate group of community members, volunteers, skilled workers, and mothers with lived experience, who have been advocating for increased access to childcare services in Kingston SE 5275 since 2017. Sparked from a fortunate conversation between two determined but frustrated Kingston mothers, the ideology for change has since expanded into our group's advocacy for greater rural South Australia.

We have been in continuous and ongoing discussion throughout this time with the Department for Education as the sole provider of the only early years service within Kingston as to how we can proactively work together to find better solutions to increase access to care.

Through our persistent advocacy from 2017 to 2019, the Rural Care service increased from providing for 4 children 5 days a week, to a maximum of 18 children 3 days per week. But it is not enough to meet the accessibility demands of families and children in our town now and cannot fulfill a high-quality early years system that is fit for the future in its current governance model and location.

In 2019 we approached the Kingston District Council (KDC) for support in addressing the issue, which resulted in the formation of the Kingston Early Learning and Childcare Services Working Group (KELCS) as an informal working group of Council. The purpose of KELCS is to investigate short and long-term solutions to solve access to childcare and early education opportunities in the Kingston area.

We surveyed our community in 2019 & 2021. We have heard the tales and anecdotes of frustration and of skilled people and families leaving town. These surveys highlighted the far reaching economic and social impacts on the community due to the lack of accessibility to childcare. 88 surveys were completed and of those 83% of the respondents said lack of care impacted their ability to take up work or study. 93% of respondents would access childcare and Out of Hours School Care (OHSC) if it were more readily available.

We have lived through our own challenge of accessibility to early learning to the point our children have now moved through the early years system.

We have had discussions with every level of government and many government agencies across Local, State & Federal. We have engaged with other South Australian communities who face the same

challenge of accessibility and equality. Cummins SA challenge of accessibility is so parallel to Kingston's despite our distance of over 900km, it is uncanny.

KELCS has determined that the most effective and desirable long-term solution for the Kingston community is to establish a purpose-built Early Learning Centre incorporating Pre-School (Kindergarten) and a childcare centre on the site of the Kingston Community School.

The benefits of the creation of an all-encompassing Early Learning Centre on site at the school are far reaching. For our community they include:

- efficiency gains through sharing of infrastructure, equipment, resources, facilities and staff
- early integration into the school and community facilities with a reduction of kindergarten to primary school transition issues
- opportunity for increased exposure and collaboration with/to critical allied health and parenting services
- a single drop point for parents
- equitable social, emotional, and educational outcomes for children through increased accessibility to quality early learning and care
- opportunity for OSHC services

To achieve the goal of accessibility to early learning in rural locations we believe there are three critical areas of necessity that must be addressed.

- The provision of funding for the design and construction of the infrastructure (the facility)
- Attraction of a long day childcare service provider and implementation of a collaborative governance structure for the new centre; and
- recruitment and retention of qualified childcare staff to deliver early learning outcomes

KELCS and KDC have been actively working to attract funding to establish a new childcare centre. Following the devastating bushfire event at Keilira in 2019/20, KDC applied for Black Summer Bushfire funding to build an early years facility but was unsuccessful in its application. We were devastated.

KDC has limited resources with significant budgetary limitations including a forecast \$1m operational deficit in 2022-2023, massive coastal erosion and infrastructure issues, a small ratepayer base (\$4.5m this year) and therefore has no financial capacity to fund a project of this size and cost.

The pursuit of other avenues of funding has been relentless, culminating in KDC being given a bipartisan pre-election commitment of \$1.8m to assist with the capital build of a new childcare centre at Kingston. We wish to highlight to the Royal Commission that our community is fortunate to have been promised the amount of \$1.8 million in 2022 through Federal Government funding to deliver the vision of a fit for purpose early years facility in Kingston. This money has not been received to date and we are acutely aware that this will not be nearly enough to deliver the necessary shared infrastructure to complete the project and deliver the solution.

Many regional, rural, and remote communities such as Kingston are currently faced with a similar scenario with no funding to develop, renovate or obtain the critical and necessary infrastructure, resulting in a significant barrier to accessibility of early learning. The Federal Government has a key role to play to help deliver financial outcomes for small communities.

We understand the governance of a childcare service is a complex undertaking for rural, regional, and remote communities such as Kingston. These towns are typically varied in population, size and demographics, have unique idiosyncrasies, but rightfully we all deserve equity in social and educational outcomes for children and families within their communities.

Thin markets have failed to attract private providers to small regional towns such as Kingston as the profitability of smaller childcare centres is not sufficient to attract large commercial operators. Rural and regional communities are forced to find alternative ways to address this market failure. Some communities operate centres through a not-for-profit governing board which is run by passionate and dedicated volunteer community members. The burden of responsibility and risk for volunteers operating in a complex and regulatory environment such as childcare provision is enormous. Small communities are already facing volunteer fatigue or are under resourced and such an option is simply not viable for many communities. Ours is no exception.

In some areas the local Council has stepped in to become a childcare service provider in the absence of all other options. In some fortunate communities the provider is the Department for Education through a Rural Care service, or an Integrated model of service. There is not enough consistency, transparency or understanding as to the models of care that are operational and available through the Department for Education in South Australia with respect to Long Day Care or childcare services currently. It is not equitable that some communities in smaller towns have an ability to access a Rural Care service, whereas others are denied the same opportunity without explanation.

The governance of childcare services in regional, rural, and remote South Australia needs to be strategically addressed in a united, universal approach by the Department for Education and the State Government to reduce the significant barrier to accessibility of early learning.

The nation-wide shortage of available and qualified childcare staff has a significant effect on rural and regional towns like Kingston. Cost and accessibility to undertake the required training, accessibility to local early learning services, affordable housing and a vast wage differential across the childcare industry all impact on the ability for small towns to attract staff.

If there were opportunities to upskill our local people in a local setting, particularly women who already live within our community, would that not be a great outcome and future solution for small communities, families and for those interested in a career within early education?

We have advocated strongly that the issue of accessibility is as great as affordability within regional areas. We have been roadblocked, stalled, passed from department to department, wasted too much time and have been driven to quitting as we searched for information, answers and common allies over the last six years. Our own children have outgrown the early years system but we are morally invested in finding new innovative solutions to solve the problem of accessibility which is all too common in South Australia.

We thank the Royal Commission for hearing our voice. We want to work together to deliver greater outcomes and achieve better early learning opportunities for all children and families in regional South Australian communities.

A geographic location and postcode is often a determinant to access early learning.

But it doesn't have to be.

Kind regards

Kristen Wilks, Kirsty Starling & Fiona Rasheed